

# *The Muezzin's Daughter*

By  
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## DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfilment / partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of MASTER OF ARTS , in the Graduate Programme in

..... ENGLISH ..... , University of KwaZulu-Natal,  
South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. I confirm that an external editor ~~was~~ was not used (delete whichever is applicable) and that my Supervisor was informed of the identity and details of my editor. It is being submitted for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS (ENGLISH) in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Science, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

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Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Editor

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## Glossary

Abaya	: Loose fitting cloak
Achaar	: Spicy pickle
Alhumdullilah	: Praise be to God
Aloo fry	: Indian dish consisting of fried potatoes with masalas
Ameen	: So be it
Apra waaras	: Our kind/type
Assalamualaykum	: Arabic greeting that means "Peace be unto you"
Astagfirullah	: God forgive me, but also used as an expression of disapproval
Ayat	: Verse
Azaan	: Call to prayer five times daily by the muezzin in the mosque
Bakri Eid	: Also known as Eid-ul-Adha, a festival where Muslims sacrifice an animal in the tradition of Prophet Ibraheem
Bhajias	: A fried fritter with various fillings
Biryani	: Indian rice dish made with lentils and meat or vegetables
Bismillahi-rahmani-raheem	: In the name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, Most Merciful
Burqa	: Long head covering
Dhana jeeru	: Crushed coriander and cumin seeds
Dhol	: Indian dish made of lentils and spices
Dua	: Prayer
Dunya	: World
Esha	: The last prayer of the day for Muslims, performed at night
Fajr	: The first prayer of the day for Muslims, performed before sunrise
Hedroo	: refers to someone whose ancestors hail from Hyderabad, India
Hijab	: Head covering for Muslim women
Iftaar	: Breaking of the fast
Insha Allah	: If God Wills
Istikhara	: Islamic prayer for guidance
Ithikaaf	: Worship of Allah in the mosque for the last third of Ramadan
Janaazah	: Funeral
Jazakallah	: May Allah grant you goodness
Jummah prayer	: Obligatory congregational Friday prayer for men at the mosque
Kaarias	: Black people
Karni	: Black girl
Kajoor	: Dates
Kaliya	: Indian dish made with meat or vegetable and thick gravy
Kuri kitchri	: Indian dish consisting of a curry (kuri) made of coriander, yoghurt and spices, and eaten with yellow rice (kitchri)
Kurta	: A loose, long or short, dress that men wear
Ladu	: Indian sweetmeat that is orange in colour
Lahnee	: Boss
Maaf	: Forgive
Maghrib	: Fourth prayer of the day, performed at sunset
Masha Allah	: As God has willed
Maulana	: Muslim priest
Mauth	: Death
Methi bhaji	: Fenugreek leaves

Musallah	: Prayer mat
Namaaz	: Prayer
Nikah	: Muslim marriage contract
Papad	: Thin, crispy Indian wafer, also known as papadum
Sabr	: To have patience and to persevere
Salaam	: Informal term for greetings
Samoosa	: Triangular-shaped pastry filled with various fillings and fried in deep oil
Shahadah	: Declaration of faith
Sharam	: Modesty
Soji	: Indian sweet dish made of durum wheat
Sukhmuk	: Indian mix of fennel seeds and sweets, usually given at weddings
Surah Yaseen	: Thirty-sixth chapter of the Quran
Tahajjud	: Pre-dawn prayer
Talim	: Teachings of Islam, usually a weekly group meeting for women where they learn about various topics in Islam
Taqdir	: Destiny as ordained by Allah
Tarawih	: Additional nightly prayers during the month of Ramadan
Tarkaari	: Curry
Tasbeeh	: Prayer beads
Thawba	: Repentance
Topi	: Prayer cap
Umrah	: Pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah that can be taken at any time of the year
Wa'alaykum salaam	: And upon you be peace
Zohr	: Second prayer of the day, performed after midday

## Prologue

It was around half past ten when Imraan received the life-changing phone call. He was treating fifty-seven-year-old Florence Masundo. She had been on ARV's for the past six years and if he hadn't seen her file, he would never have known she was HIV positive. Boisterous and talkative, she was one of the very few patients who enjoyed her visits to the hospital. Imraan was making a telephonic booking for her at Grey's Hospital in 'Maritzburg for a benign tumour to be removed from her breast.

While the phone played *Bittersweet Symphony* into his ear, Florence regaled him with stories of her six children. In the middle of hearing about sixteen-year-old Nonhlanhla's academic accolades, someone finally answered his call. When the booking was confirmed, he told Florence. "Make sure you come early to the hospital on the twenty second because the transport to Grey's leaves before sunrise. Okay?"

He scribbled the date on her white card and made some notes in her file. She sat patiently on the chair across from him in the small consulting room. A leaky tap dripped every few seconds no matter how hard Imraan tried to fasten the faucet. Posters in English and Zulu about hygiene were plastered across the walls.

When his cell phone rang, he glanced apologetically at Florence and answered the call. She didn't seem to mind. His expression changed moments later and the colour drained from his face.

"Aweh! Are you awwright doktah?" Florence asked when he ended the call.

Imraan shook his head. "Someone very close to me has just passed away."

## PART ONE

*You who are in love with your intellect, deeming yourself superior to worshippers  
of form,  
That (intellect) is a beam of (Universal) Intellect (cast) on your sense-perception;  
regard it as borrowed gold on your copper.*

Jalaluddin Rumi

## One

The road to Thembelani was a tortuous one, punctuated with potholes and loose stones. Imraan had only heard about towns like Eshowe and Melmoth from others, most of whom were family members who did business in areas like these: the winding roads, the lush green hills harbouring sugar cane, the barefoot children running alongside the busy roads, and the men who peed on the side of the roads.

The standard green board with white writing read: Thembelani 68 km. Imraan sighed. His patience had worn thin in the past two hours. There were drivers that didn't overtake the heavy trucks when they could, overloaded vehicles that were definitely not roadworthy travelling way below the speed limit, and cattle that grazed beside the road and suddenly decided to mosey about in front of the cars. He cursed and muttered to his mother's dismay.

He pushed the accelerator harder until the speedometer hit one sixty.

"Ya Allah! What's wrong with you?" Farida shrieked when she glanced at the speedometer from the passenger seat.

"This dessert is going to topple! Don't drive like a madman! You want to kill us?"

Imraan looked at his mother in surprise. It was only one sixty for goodness sakes. Thank God she didn't accompany him to work every morning.

"Aren't we late for lunch? You said they're waiting for us?"



"Better we arrive alive and a little late! You didn't hear about that accident in Newcastle? Aunt Firoza's brother-in-law's family? Entire family killed!"

Imraan didn't remind her that it wasn't the family's fault the accident happened.

"It was meant to happen. You always tell me that *mauth* is unavoidable."

"Don't get cheeky with me," Farida's eyes widened and her pale cheeks flushed.

It was the first weekend in December and Farida Desai had been planning for the day trip to Thembelani from two weeks before. After numerous phone calls to Shireen Mayet, Farida began her shopping expedition. Dragging her son with her to Musgrave Centre, the Pavilion and Gateway, she shopped like she had never shopped in her life.

Imraan was horrified. "Why are you buying so many things? It's not a wedding!"

"We are meeting the people who are going to take you under their roof for a year! We have to make a good impression!" With that, she deposited two more cases of Ferrero Rocher into the trolley.

That very same morning, his mother had arranged the gifts neatly in the boot of his silver-blue BMW 3 series. A twelve-piece dinner set for Shireen, two Charter Club shirts for Ahmed, a pyjama set for "Old Man Mayet", and a Hugo Boss perfume for Asif Mayet. A separate basket was filled with Lindt, Ferreros and Toblerone and encased with cellophane wrapping.

Imraan felt his stomach flutter. He had been feeling like that since he woke up that morning. In less than four weeks time, he would be boarding with a family that he'd never seen before. What if he didn't like living in the town or with the Mayets? He was twenty-five years old and had never lived on his own. His mother had noticed his disposition but he didn't dare confess his concerns. That would just fortify her mission to find him a wife as quickly as possible.

It was through Facebook that he'd discovered where he was being posted to for community service one October afternoon. One of his best friends from medical school, Shiraz, posted a message on his wall that read: "Dude, we're all going to the bundus! Just check up where Thembelani is on the map..."

Thembelani? He had never even heard of that town. Was it even in KwaZulu-Natal? The first thing he did was tell his mother. A big mistake, he thought in retrospect.

Farida Desai was inconsolable when she heard that her son had been posted to a rural hospital "in the middle of nowhere".

"Who is going to make your fresh rotis for you? What about *tarkaaris*?" she questioned him accusingly. Imraan tried to mollify her and assure her that he would be fine.

"You must come home every weekend! Promise me," she insisted.

If that's what it would take to make his mother feel any better, Imraan decided, he would.

A week later Farida was an evidently happier person. "I spoke to Choti Khala and Fawzia Foi and they told me that there's lots of *apra waaras* in Thembelani. Not only *kaarias* there!" Inevitably Choti Khala, Fawzia Foi, and the rest of his family had "organised" a nice place for him to stay in Thembelani.

"They're rich people, have very big house and the wife entertains nicely. Well-liked lady. We need to make a trip there soon." Farida clearly had no intention of allowing her son, the doctor, to live in any condition other than what he had been accustomed to his entire life.

Eventually they entered the town of Thembelani. The Mayet Mansion, the unofficial name for the house among the residents, was not difficult to find. With its high butter cream walls and silver electronic gates that had "32 on Frans" inscribed in decorative lettering, Imraan could see why the Mayet Mansion was given its name. The expansive green lawn on the outside was punctuated with perfectly round trimmed pink rose bushes. He didn't expect to see houses in Thembelani that resembled upmarket homes in Durban. Imraan pressed the buzzer. Without anyone asking who it was via the intercom, the gates opened.

"What a lovely house!" Farida sucked in her breath sharply.

Shireen Mayet awaited them at the front door. Her husband Ahmed joined her a moment later. They indicated to Imraan where he could park his car even though the tarred yard had enough space to park a dozen cars. His mother was already grinning from ear to ear having just seen the size of the house.

"Ma, this is so embarrassing..." he told her as he offloaded the gifts from the boot.

Ignoring him, Farida adjusted her scarf, tightened her grip on her cream Guess clutch purse, reserved only for special occasions, and straightened the imaginary creases on her beige silk hand-embroidered caftan that her sister had bought on a recent trip to Dubai.

After making four trips to the car to bring all the gifts, Imraan joined his mother in the elaborate lounge where she sat chatting with Shireen, Ahmed, and the "old man", Ahmed's father.

"You have no idea how happy we are to have you here, Imraan. Since Asif left for university this house has become like a morgue," Gulaam Hussain Mayet said. He was a frail-looking man with a medium-length grey beard and scant grey hair.

His son laughed. "Dada has been complaining about Asif's absence even though it's two years since he's been gone."

"What is he studying?" Farida asked.

“Third year pharmacy at Wits next year,” Shireen said. “You know I can’t believe he is in third year already!”

“Time really flies and the children grow up so quickly. I also can’t believe Imraan is doing his community service. It feels like yesterday he was in high school. So is Asif here now?”

“No, he’s on holiday in Cape Town. You know how young boys are...always wanting to go here and there with friends. He told me, ‘Mummy, this holiday I don’t think I’m going to come home. All of us want to go to Cape Town.’ How could I stop him?”

Farida nodded understandingly. “I know exactly what you mean. Imraan’s younger brother Mohsin is in London. He insisted he wanted to work there and I just couldn’t refuse. He’s been there for almost six months now.”

More small chatter followed before lunch was served. If Farida had been impressed with her son’s boarding house an hour earlier, she was now overwhelmed with the hostess’s culinary finesse. The twelve-seater mahogany dining table was laid out for the five of them. *Samoosas*, pies and spring rolls were served as starters. Thereafter *soji* followed. By the time the *biryani* arrived, Imraan and Farida’s appetites were revived just from the pungent smell emanating from the kitchen.

Farida was relieved she had not listened to Imraan’s advice when he had told her she was overdoing it with the gifts for the Mayet family. How embarrassing it would have been if she had not brought so many things.

By two o’ clock Imraan indicated to his mother that they should leave as it was a long drive home. However Shireen would not hear of them leaving so soon, especially since dessert and tea had not been served. Farida was secretly glad for the extended stay as she had not been given a tour of the mansion and was eagerly awaiting one. Inevitably Shireen offered to show her the house, something Farida simply could not refuse.

Upstairs, she tried hard not to gape at the exquisite decor of the four bedrooms, each with an en suite. Shireen indicated which bedroom Imraan would be sleeping in. A large room covered with blue drapes and a queen bed in the centre. A study desk was situated on the left side of the room. A French styled door led to the balcony.

When the grand tour was over, Imraan insisted that they leave immediately for Durban. This time his mother didn’t object. She thanked the Mayet family profusely before they left, muttering good wishes and *dua’s* (*May Allah give all of you long lives filled with happiness. May He grant you success in this world and the Hereafter. May He grant your son success*).

On the trip back to Durban, Farida raved about the Mayets and the gorgeous mansion they owned. "Lucky they didn't ask where Daddy is. How embarrassing that would have been!"

Imraan pretended that he hadn't overheard her conversation with his father earlier that morning where she pleaded with him to accompany them on their trip. His father's response resonated in his mind. *"These types of things are for the women to sort out. Take your mother if you want."* There was no argument between them for once, a rare occurrence in his home.

This brought back memories of his childhood.

~

Imraan sensed that his mother was upset. Just like so many times before, when she would lock herself in her bathroom and weep after an argument with his father. Only this time he knew it was much worse. He was sitting in the spare lounge watching Thundercats, his favourite cartoon, when the argument began. He couldn't hear what was being said, but managed to make sense of what was audible from his parent's bedroom.

He heard his mother yelling, "You need to choose!"

His father was saying something, he was sure of it. He just didn't know what. Then his mother opened the bedroom door and stormed out. She stomped past the spare lounge, her face wet with tears, and her hair unkempt. Imraan heard her banging dishes in the kitchen. She probably didn't even know that he was awake. He was supposed to be napping with his brother.

A few days later at supper, his mother silently served them, not once acknowledging his father. Mohsin sat beside Imraan trying to grab a spoon on the table.

"How come you don't sleep in Mummy's room, Daddy?"

"It's easier to do my work there..." his father muttered, shifting uncomfortably. He turned his attention to Mohsin and moved the spoon out of his son's reach. Ebrahim Desai was a handsome man. He was tall and slim with a wide smile. He was clean shaven and his light brown eyes were iridescent.

"Why don't you tell your son the truth?" his mother spat. Sitting next to Imraan, across from his father, she mashed Mohsin's food so that it was easier for him to eat.

"Farida, not now. Not in front of the children." Ebrahim's voice was firm and commanding. Nothing more was exchanged between his parents throughout supper.

Later that night, when his parents thought that Mohsin and he were asleep, another argument ensued. Imraan got out of his bed in the dark and crawled to the door of the bedroom that he shared with his brother. He crouched on the floor and opened the door slightly.

"Do you think I'm so blurry stupid? I hear about everything that happens. The whole damn *dunya* knows!" his mother yelled.

"I told you it's over! What else do you want from me?" his father shouted in return.

"You know what I want!"

Imraan could feel the tears welling up in his eyes. He may have been only five, but he was old enough to understand when things weren't right in his family. He saw his mother leave her bedroom and go to the lounge. His father did not follow.

Imraan noiselessly left his room, glancing back at Mohsin to make sure he was still asleep. He found his mother sitting curled up on the sofa and crying with her head in her hands. When she noticed him she quickly sniffed back her tears and said brightly, "Are you okay my darling?" She opened her arms and Imraan ran to her. She hugged him with all her might. He buried his face in her nightgown.

"Mummy, are you okay?"

"Off course I am!" The sad look in her greyish-green eyes betrayed her cheerful countenance. "Can't you sleep?"

Imraan shook his head. He lay comfortably in his mother's arms and she squeezed him harder. "You and Daddy had a fight?"

His mother didn't reply. After a long while she said, "One day when you're ready to get married, you must choose a girl that your heart tells you to."

A week later his parents broke the news. "We're moving to Durban." They appeared happier, smiling more often in each other's presence. Imraan was secretly glad that his father no longer slept in the spare room. He knew that whenever his father was in the spare room, his mother was sad. Durban was not far from Pietermaritzburg and Imraan was excited. His Nani and Nana lived there. He would get to see them more often.

## *Two*

Farida Desai vigorously, yet secretly, began her daughter-in-law hunt the day she found out where her son had been posted to do his community service. She began attending all the functions she was invited to. Weddings, parties, dinners, charity events, and she hated to admit it, but she would even attend funerals, with the aim of spotting “the one”. Her mother or sister would accompany her and their approval, sometimes indicated tacitly within a matter of minutes, helped her narrow down her options. She was careful not to stare at the young girls too much. Rokaya had told her in no uncertain terms that staring was “just plain creepy”.

It was at one of those India Fairs that Farida had first spotted Jamila Salot’s daughter, Rubina. She wore a scarf on her head, an anathema to many girls her age, and was dressed decently according to Farida’s scale. No tight top and no figure-hugging pants.

Now as she, Nani, and Imraan sat in the Salot’s lounge, making small talk about the weather, Farida was having doubts about Rubina. Imraan hadn’t seen her yet – she most probably would serve them tea – but Jamila was gushing about how high her daughter’s marks were at university. She was studying for a BCom degree and that could only mean one thing. Rubina was most probably going to become an accountant. A career was definitely not on the cards for her future daughter-in-law. With her son busy at work each day at the hospital, he was going to need a wife who would stay at home and serve him freshly cooked meals. Farida had been secretly glad when things had not worked out between him and Yasmin.

As if on cue, Rubina entered the lounge, carrying the tea tray. Imraan barely glanced at her. Farida eyed her son, willing him to show more interest even if he had to pretend. What would Jamila think of her son? She didn't want word to spread that Imraan was arrogant and rude. She knew he was still upset with her because minutes before they arrived at Jamila's house, she told him the reason for their visit. Imraan had been livid. He'd refused to talk to this girl. Farida knew he was just reacting as any other son would who'd been conned into seeing a marriage prospect, but she didn't expect him to ignore Rubina totally.

Rubina placed the tray on the coffee table and hurried away.

"Have something to drink." Jamila poured tea into the cups, the gentle slosh of the liquid echoing in the awkward silence of the room.

Farida dreaded these moments when she had to make small talk with the prospect's family. She didn't know what else to say.

"So where is Imraan working?" Jamila handed a cup of tea to Farida.

"He's in Durban at the moment but he's starting work in Thembelani in two weeks. He's going to be boarding with the Mayet family," Farida said.

"The Mayets? Hmm...related to the ones from Dundee?"

"I think so. Everybody seems to be related somehow in that part of the world."

When they had finished their tea served with homemade biscuits, which Farida was certain that Rubina had baked in an attempt to display her domestic skills, Jamila turned to Imraan. "You can talk to Rubina now."

He nodded obsequiously and followed her into the dining room.

Imraan had never been on a "*samoosa* run" before. Ironically there were no *samoosas* at this particular meeting but he bided his time until he could leave the house. He was silently fuming at his mother for inveigling him into seeing this girl. He'd wondered why his mother praised him so much earlier that morning, telling Nani how she was going to miss "my obedient son next year". He knew that Nani was in it too for she readily agreed with her daughter. This contrived way of meeting a wife wasn't something that appealed to him. Besides, he wasn't ready. Not that it mattered though because here he was sitting with a prospective wife, pretending to care what she was saying about her plans for her future.

"What about you? What are your plans?" Rubina fidgeted with the embroidery on the tablecloth.

"I'm moving to Thembelani soon. I have to work there for the next twelve months." Imraan decided that she wasn't a bad prospect. She was decent looking and intelligent. He could have had a worse "first time *samoosa* run" like some of his friends had.

"And what do you plan on doing after that?"

"I haven't thought about it. It's too far ahead for me to decide."

More silence.

"Uhm...is there anything you would like to ask me?"

Imraan shook his head and Rubina's eyes widened. Her cheeks reddened moments later and he realised that he'd embarrassed her. He hadn't asked her anything besides the perfunctory "how are you?"

"Are you even interested in getting married?"

He was startled by her directness but appreciated it. "Honestly? Not right now. But my mother thinks I should go and see girls so I'm just doing it to make her happy."

Rubina scrunched her nose distastefully. "Oh, you're one of those types? Then why do you come here and waste everyone's time? It isn't fair."

She had raised her voice a little and within seconds her mother appeared. "Do you two need more time?" She wore a nervous grin on her face and her eyes darted back and forth from her daughter to Imraan.

"No Ma. We're actually done here." Rubina cast a disappointed look at Imraan before leaving the room in a huff.

"What did you tell Rubina? Her mother looked very upset," Farida demanded in the car.

"I was just being honest with her."

"What honest? What you tell her?" Nani asked anxiously.

"I told her I'm not interested in getting married right now and the only reason I came was because my mother wanted me too."

"How could you say that?" Farida shrieked. "Do you know what stories Jamila will tell everyone now? Ma, ask him why he did that."

"You mustn't say like that. She a good girl. Your mother only trying to help you, my *poyro*," Nani said.

"But I don't want to get married now. Maybe when I finish my community service and come back to Durban."



“Why wait so long? If you get married now, you won’t have to rely on other people to do everything for you,” Farida said.

Imraan sighed. Was that even a reason to get married?

~

Durban did wonders for his mother and father. Since they had moved, there were barely any fights. Imraan’s mother was hardly ever at home. If she wasn’t shopping with Choti Khala and her friends, then she would be visiting one of the ladies from her group of friends that met one afternoon a week at their house for tea. His father would surprise his mother every so often with a weekend away. Imraan and Mohsin would be dropped off at his Nani’s house whenever this happened.

One afternoon when he had returned from school he found the ladies in the lounge. All of them were very smartly dressed and beautiful with their make-up neatly applied. Sitting on the sofas that his father had imported from Italy, the ladies chatted to each other with a cup of tea and a plate of eats balanced in their hands.

His mother’s friend, Auntie Ruwaida, pinched his cheeks and ruffled his hair, “Such a handsome boy *masha Allah*.” Turning to his mother she said, “Farida, I’m booking him for my Sameeha.” Imraan felt his cheeks flush and Auntie Ruwaida noticed. “Ooh he’s blushing!”

The lounge and dining room in Nani’s house were separated by a wall with an arch. The kitchen was the length of the dining room and lounge combined, and a small window from the kitchen allowed Nani to peep through and scold Imraan and Mohsin when they dared each other to touch the downsized replica of Nana’s 1914 Model T Ford that Gori Nani’s son had brought for him from America years ago. The Model T stood in the sturdy gold and glass cabinet, amongst vases that had *Bismillahi-rahmani-raheem* inscribed across them, and a few fancy boxes and baskets that once-upon-a-time had harboured sweets or *sukhmuk* and was distributed as *sinni* at weddings. Imraan always wondered who Nabeela and Essa were and whether they knew that his Nani kept that mini basket with a tag that read “8<sup>th</sup> July 1989” attached to it with red ribbon. There were many other fancy boxes – Hashim and Ruwaida, Farhana and Bilal, Zubeida and Ashraf. There were others too whose names he couldn’t quite read because of the way they were positioned in the cabinet.

Whenever they slept over at Nani’s house, Imraan and his brother shared Choti Khala’s room. She had a faded blue and grey floral sleeper couch which opened up with ease and the boys loved it. It was lightweight and they would stand it up to enclose themselves within it when they played

amongst themselves. Choti Khala also played games with Imraan and Mohsin. Hide-and-seek, stuck-in-the-mud, poles (using the poles of the washing line outside), blind-man's-bluff, and Monopoly.

On the first night that his parents were gone to Cape Town on a short holiday, Mohsin began crying uncontrollably after supper. He sat on the floor in the large playroom with toy cars scattered around and began balling his fists, hitting the carpet. "I want Mummy and Daddy!"

Nani tried to calm him down, "*Beta*, your Mummy and Daddy are going to come just now...play with Imraan now."

Imraan took a toy car and handed it to Mohsin. "Let's play," he suggested. But Mohsin was not pleased. He cried even louder.

"Taslimal!" Nani called. When Choti Khala didn't appear and Mohsin's wailing only increased, Nani began to mutter to herself. "Where's that girl now? I hope she's not on the phone."

A few seconds later Choti Khala was in the room, comforting Mohsin. "Who wants to play blind-man's-bluff?"

Both Imraan and Mohsin's hands shot up. "Me!" they answered in unison. During their game, when Nani had left the room, the phone rang.

Choti Khala, who was the blind man, quickly removed the scarf from her eyes. "Just wait here okay? Choti Khala is going to see who phoned." She left the room and went downstairs where Imraan heard her and Nani arguing a few moments later.

Nani was shouting, "He not phone you anymore!"

When Choti Khala returned to the playroom, Imraan noticed that her eyes were red and she was sniffing. As soon as she saw her nephews, her mood immediately transformed and she continued with the game as if nothing had happened.

## *Three*

He didn't meet Salma until his first overnight call as community service officer at Thembelani District Hospital.

The hospital was fairly large and housed four hundred and seventy beds. The medical wards were in a shocking condition. About fifty patients shared a ward with barely enough privacy and space for each of them. There was no ultrasound machine, which meant that patients had to be sent to the nearest referral hospital to have an ultrasound done. The nearest hospital was Madadeni, near Newcastle.

In worst case scenarios, when doctors could not treat severe trauma incidents, patients had to be referred to Grey's Hospital in Pietermaritzburg. This was more than three hours away and most of the time the patients did not survive the journey. The ambulance service was not the best and this frustrated the dedicated doctors.

It was a bright, sunny day when Imraan entered the hospital on Monday morning. Dr Fourie, the medical manager, reminded him of one of his lecturers at medical school. Tall, broad shouldered with a silver beard and sparse hair, he had a wide smile, and welcomed Imraan heartily. He showed him which department he would be starting in.

A week ago he was considered an intern. Did it really take two days for an intern to morph into a "CSO" or community service officer? An impressive title for someone who the previous week was treated as though he was below the scum of the earth in the tacit hierarchy of medics. An in-

joke amongst his friends at medical school was that even the cleaners at the hospital were treated better than the interns. They soon discovered how true it was.

Imraan wasn't sure how to handle the sudden elevation of status. It just made him more nervous. Being on call the third day of his new job was not helping his state of anxiety. And the day itself proved to be the worst he'd ever experienced.

Patients still in the festive New Year mood filled the Outpatients Department faster than a torrent of rain filling a hole: drunkards stabbing each other, women being beaten up by their drunken husbands and petty thieves who were caught stealing and given a bashing.

By the time he had finished off suturing the last patient, it was just before dawn. He had not slept the entire night. He hoped that no other patients would come. The last meal he had eaten was lunch at the Mayet Mansion. A solid Friday lunch after Jumma prayer made all the difference to someone who worked as hard as he did. There was no time for supper. At around eight p.m. he bought a packet of Lays, Sweet Thai Chilli, and a can of Creme Soda. He'd barely had five minutes to guzzle that before he was summoned to OPD. And he didn't leave until the wee hours of the morning.

Imraan then headed off to the doctors' room, christened "the shack" years ago by doctors unknown to him or the current staff. He fell asleep instantly on the couch and didn't wake up until four hours later, when he'd heard a sanguine female voice talking on a cell phone outside in the corridor.

When she entered the shack, she glanced at Imraan on the sofa and smiled brightly. She wore an ankle-length red paisley skirt with a white blouse and flat leather sandals. Her hair was covered with a two-toned red scarf.

*"Assalamu alaikum!"* her voice was laced with enthusiasm.

Imraan had barely opened his eyes fully. Before he had a chance to reply she continued, "You must be the new CSO. Welcome! I'm Salma."

She walked towards the rusted metallic lockers and deposited her bag inside one of them, shutting the lock with a loud clang.

*"Wa'alaikum salaam. Thanks."* He rubbed his eyes and glanced at the time. So this was Dr Salma Madlala.

"I've just got back from a long overdue leave. I actually missed this place! So how do you like it here?"

She proceeded to the wooden table at the other end of the shack and switched on the old white Philips kettle. Glancing at the mugs on the table, she made a face.

“Why doesn’t anyone wash these?”

She took the dirty mugs and began washing them in the tiny white sink in the corner of the room. Imraan sat upright now and glanced at the time. Almost nine. He needed to start his ward round.

Salma casually engaged him in a conversation about his experience in Thembelani. Asked about his internship year. Nodded with interest when he mentioned King Edward VIII Hospital. She automatically assumed that he was a graduate from Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine. Imraan was amused. She was probably the only doctor of his generation who had ever referred to the medical school by its full name. To him along with his classmates it was always “Natal” in response to colleagues from other provinces enquiring about his alma mater.

Over a mug of hot tea and marie biscuits sandwiched together with margarine, which Salma had so generously prepared for him, Imraan discovered that she’d studied at MEDUNSA, served as an intern at Baragwanath, did her community service at Thembelani the year before and had decided to stay on afterwards.

She intrigued him from the very moment she walked into the shack. The only other Black Muslims he had ever interacted with were at mobile clinics in rural townships around Durban when he went there with the local Muslim medical group he belonged to. The Black Muslims he had made friends with at varsity were usually from other countries. He wondered whether it would be rude to ask her about her religion. Whether she was born a Muslim, or converted. Not that it mattered but he was just curious.

The ringing telephone interrupted their conversation. Salma answered it.

“Duty calls,” she said when she had hung up.

Imraan’s curiosity was kept at bay. It wasn’t until the following week that he had a chance to find out more about Salma.

~

Choti Khala was always in the mood to play with Imraan and Mohsin when they were at Nani’s, which was most of the time anyway. After school on Fridays, the driver would fetch them and drop them off at Nani’s house and sometimes they would spend the entire weekend there.

However, something was different about Choti Khala recently. She was always quiet and appeared to be in deep thought when they were around. Even when Mohsin begged her to play “catching game”, something she usually agreed to, she would now say she was not in the mood.

It had only been a few months since she had obtained her driver's licence and Choti Khala was thrilled. She would spoil her nephews by taking them out on Friday afternoons. She loved taking them to Mitchell Park to see the animals but now she refused, preferring to lock herself up in her bedroom. Imraan thought that this had something to do with Nani scolding her and banning her from driving her car that one Friday afternoon. Instead of taking Imraan and Mohsin to the park like she usually did, she had taken them to the beach. At the beach, Imraan noticed Choti Khala speaking to a man who happened to pass by and stop when he saw her. They continued to talk for the entire time they spent at the beach.

When they reached home, it was later than usual. Nani wanted to know what the delay was and Choti Khala offered no explanation other than saying she got caught up in traffic.

Later that evening, Nani received a phone call. When she had hung up, she was furious. Imraan and Mohsin were playing with their toys in the lounge when Nani began screaming for Choti Khala to come downstairs. When she finally appeared, Nani was hysterical.

"Taslima, you think I donno what you did today? You went to see him! Didn't you?"

Choti Khala looked away. Nani continued to scold her, "How could you? After everything your father and I told you? Why you don't listen to us? He is not the man for you, do you understand?"

This time, Choti Khala began sobbing. "How can you say that? You don't even know him or his family!"

"And we don't want to know them! *Choep!* Wait until your father comes home. The whole family know about you. You have no *sharam!* They saw you talking to him at the beach!"

Imraan didn't get to find out what happened when Nana returned home. He knew that his Nana was a calmer person, compared to Nani. He hardly ever scolded Choti Khala. In fact, Imraan couldn't recall a time when he had seen Nana scold her.

At breakfast the next morning, there was an uncomfortable silence. Nani was edgy about something. Choti Khala ignored Nani and Nana completely, looking down and eating her cereal. Mohsin was asking questions about where eggs came from and Nana was trying his best to answer them.

Later that morning, when Nani took Imraan and Mohsin for their shower, she told them, "When you two grow up and have to get married –"

"Yuck, we don't want to get married. We hate girls!" Mohsin said, his face scrunching up with distaste.

"They are so irritating!" Imraan added.

Nani laughed, and continued, "Anyway, you must remember what your Nani is telling you. When you grow older and are ready to get married, you must let me or your mother choose. We know which family is best for you. Okay?"

Mohsin nodded whilst making a "quack" sound as he pushed his rubber duck forward in the bathtub.

Imraan was quiet for a moment. Then he asked, "But Nani?"

"Jee?" she turned to him as she drizzled shampoo into her hand.

"How will you or Mummy know best? What if you both are wrong?"

"My *poyro*, we just know. All our parents were not wrong in choosing our partners for us. How can we be wrong?"

## *Four*

Mr Sibuko was an eighty-year-old man who had been waiting in the queue in the Outpatients Department since seven 'o clock in the morning. It was ten 'o clock when Imraan first examined him.

*"Sawubona baba,"* Imraan greeted him, as Mr Sibuko hobbled into the examination room.

He nodded in response and muttered something inaudible. His grey beard filled his round face and his small eyes, tinged with aging rings of blue, appeared watery.

*"Petwa ini?"* Imraan's kitchen Zulu made Salma giggle every time she heard him. On the wooden desk in front of him lay Mr Sibuko's file and he recognised Salma's neat and curvy handwriting immediately. So this was her patient. Mr Sibuko knew it too because Imraan then had to explain to him three times that Dr Madlala was not available and that he was going to treat him. Mr Sibuko appeared crestfallen. He then began muttering in Zulu, on a level too advanced for Imraan to understand. That's when he called one of the nurses to translate for him.

*"He says he'll wait for Dr Madlala even if it's for two more hours."*

Imraan was surprised since this old man probably had to wake up long before sunrise to make it to the hospital. He told the nurse to tell Mr Sibuko that it wasn't possible for him to see Dr Madlala because she was no longer working in this department.

The nurse turned to Imraan, a questioning expression on her face, *"But why not? We can call Dr Madlala and she will come right now."*



And so that was how Imraan came to know about her rapport with certain patients, whom she called her favourites. Most of them were old and widowed and had no real illness but needed to talk to someone once a month. And Salma would be that person. Even if it was to ask them how their children were doing and whether they'd manage to fix the hole in their roof, she would make the time for them.

"In that case, tell Mr Sibuko that Dr Madlala will see him as soon as she can."

~

Salma sat on the single sofa, her legs crossed. She removed the wax wrap from her sandwiches inside her plastic lunch box.

"I don't understand why people have to wax wrap their lunch if they're gonna put it in a lunch box?" Imraan watched her as he sipped from his can of Sprite. It was about two p.m. and the shack was empty.

"To keep it fresh?"

She bit into her sandwich and as an afterthought, her mouth stuffed, she motioned to Imraan, the courtesy offer. Imraan declined. Since internship he hardly ever ate lunch, except on Fridays. There was simply no time. Then the inevitable question came up. All doctors, from the time they're medical students, had a story.

"So why did you choose medicine? You wanted to do it?" Salma asked.

"Not really. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I applied for everything and when I got accepted, I just listened to my father," Imraan said. Then he added, "You know how it is, living the dream of one of your parents."

"So what does your father do?"

"He's an accountant. What about your parents? Are any of them doctors?"

Salma laughed. "Oh no! Hardly the case. My father is the muezzin here and my mother's a housewife."

"Really?" Until now he had always imagined this sophisticated young Black doctor to have hailed from a family that was well-connected. He had guessed she probably had a relative who was exiled during apartheid.

"Why are you so shocked?" Her perfectly nuanced English seemed to justify Imraan's reaction. Red in the face, Imraan said, "I just thought that you'd come from a..."

"A rich educated Black family?" Salma raised her neatly shaped eyebrows.

"No, not like that. I..."

"Middle-class?" By now a hint of a smile played on her lips and she watched Imraan squirm in discomfort.

"Sort of...it just seems that you come from a family of graduates."

"My parents may not be graduates, but trust me they're educated in their own right. You don't need a fancy degree to be considered educated."

"Of course, I wasn't implying that your parents were uneducated," Imraan's blush deepened and he took another gulp of his nearly empty can of Sprite.

The awkwardness of the conversation disappeared when Dr Botha entered the shack. The middle-aged obstetrician nodded at Imraan and Salma in greeting. He switched the kettle on and took a seat on the other end of the three-seater sofa.

That abruptly ended Imraan and Salma's conversation. He wondered to himself if Salma's father was the muezzin of the local mosque in the town or...or what? He realised that he didn't even know where she stayed. Was there a mosque in the township? Did she even stay in the township?

~

When his parents returned on Sunday from Jo'burg, a meeting was held in Nani's house. Imraan and Mohsin were sent upstairs because the "big people" wanted to talk. Imraan knew it had something to do with Choti Khala, who was not speaking to anyone at home.

Supper was over and Imraan could see from upstairs, through the banister, that everyone was seated in the lounge. Mohsin was already fast asleep.

Nani motioned to Choti Khala with a curt nod in her direction, "Taslina wants to marry a *hedroo*. Can you believe it? Talk some sense into her Farida. Why can't she be like you and marry into a respectable family?"

"Taslina, I thought I talked to you about this already," Imraan couldn't see his mother's face clearly but managed to hear her even though she spoke softly.

"How can you all be so narrow-minded?" Choti Khala was angry. She looked at Nani when she said this.

Nana said, "We know what's best for our family, Taslima. We don't have anything in common with these people."

"They're also Muslim!"

Nani turned to Nana and said with regret. "We should never have given her so much of freedom. All this going to university and getting her a car. Look at what she turned out to be."

“Taslina, listen to your parents.” Imraan’s father spoke for the first time now. “Don’t do anything stupid. What will everyone say?”

“Oh you’re a fine one to talk!” Choti Khala snapped.

“How dare you speak like that?” Imraan’s mother was incensed.

At the same moment, Nani added, “Watch your mouth!”

A false apology later, Choti Khala announced, “If I don’t get to marry Riaz, I am not marrying anyone else.” With that, she got up and walked out of the lounge.

Imraan quickly scurried away to the bedroom and jumped into bed, pretending to be asleep next to Mohsin.

## Five

The ladies were laughing heartily when he entered the house, and when they saw him a sudden hush fell over them. Imraan was caught by surprise. He didn't know that Aunt Shireen was having a tea party that afternoon. Nothing had been mentioned at the dinner table the night before or else he would not have come home early from the hospital. He greeted everyone in the room.

Imraan could hear them murmuring. "He's so handsome!"

"Green or grey eyes?"

"He'll be perfect for Sameera. I must tell my *sistin-law*."

Unabashed, the women continued to whisper about him. Imraan could feel the heat rush to his cheeks. Knowing full well that his face resembled a tomato, he quickly left the room.

In the kitchen Aunt Shireen offered him tea with some sweets and savouries. Imraan couldn't refuse.

"Don't worry about the ladies. It's just that they had to see who the latest catch was in Thembelani and before I knew it, all of them were here this afternoon. The only reason they didn't come here in the first week you were here was because most of them were on holiday!"

So she hadn't planned the tea party! But Imraan was impressed by the way the tables were laid out. Ever the efficient hostess, Aunt Shireen took everything in her stride.

It was the last week in January and Imraan still was learning about the town. Newcomers were a joyous occasion for the other residents, who knew each other by first name. Or if not, then they

acquainted themselves with the registration plates of cars. "BUXX-ZN...you know who's that? Mischief's youngest laaitie." And Imraan laughed to himself. Mischief? Who on earth was that? And he didn't have to wonder for too long. In a small town like Thembelani he was bound to meet Mischief.

Each time he came across an unfamiliar Muslim face, they would make an attempt to greet him and find out who he was. Imraan was unaccustomed to such friendliness. Or inquisitiveness as he saw it. In Durban, no one cared.

At the Mayet Mansion, he was getting used to his new routine. Go to work around eight and return home in time for supper and for the evening prayer, when he would accompany Dada and Uncle Ahmed to the mosque. After supper, tea was served in the TV lounge to everyone while Dada watched the news and Uncle Ahmed and Aunty Shireen read the newspaper. Around seven 'o clock inevitably the phone would ring. Aunty Shireen would disappear for most of the evening. As Uncle Ahmed said, "Telkom is responsible for this – all the wives being glued to their phones from seven pm." It was true and Imraan found himself receiving phone calls frequently from his mother too, especially during the first two weeks. Despite his assurances to her that he was fine, Farida had to call each night. By the third week, the phone calls had been reduced to twice a week. This was despite the fact that he had been leaving for Durban on Friday afternoons and returning to Thembelani on Sunday afternoons every weekend since he had started his new post. He was seriously relieved to be on call the coming weekend.

The trips to Durban were becoming tiring as he would set off on Friday afternoons after work. He would drive carefully through the windy roads of the north of the province until he reached the N3. Once he reached the Dokodweni toll plaza, he took advantage of the tarred, smooth road and would accelerate to one hundred and sixty kilometres, sometimes even more, until he reached Durban. On Sunday afternoon, around two, he would leave Durban for Thembelani, ensuring that he reached the Mayet Mansion before sunset.

Imraan browsed through the latest issue of *Thembelani Times* he found lying on the kitchen counter. He had been here almost a month and this was the first time he'd noticed the tabloid. Nothing much happened in the town.

His thoughts wandered to Salma. He'd been so busy that he hadn't had a chance to talk to her in the week. He wondered if Dada would know her family. He was sure of it. There were few people, if none, in the town that Dada didn't know about. He'd been here long enough being one of the pioneer Indians in Thembelani.

Things worsened in the weeks that followed. Almost every second night, Imraan and his family had to go to Nani's house. There were other people there too, such as Nana's sister and her husband as well as other uncles and aunties whom Imraan didn't know very well.

It was the same every time. All of them would assemble in the lounge. Imraan and Mohsin were sent upstairs while the adults talked. Imraan knew it was because of Choti Khala and the man he had seen her talking to on the beach that Friday afternoon.

Imraan snuck out of the room and eavesdropped on most nights, but only after Mohsin fell asleep. If he was awake, he would undoubtedly spy on Imraan and the two would just end up fighting. He was intrigued by the whole incident. He wondered why Choti Khala was making Nani and Nana so upset? Why couldn't she just listen to them? Nani did say that the parents know best for their children so why was she upsetting them. At madrassah they were taught the importance of obeying parents. Allah does not like those who disobey their parents. He loved Choti Khala so much and missed her normal behaviour. Choti Khala was different to other girls he knew. She played games with Mohsin and him. But quite some time had passed since she'd last played with them.

One evening, Imraan sensed that something was seriously wrong. He could hear raised voices from downstairs and eventually Nani began screaming at Choti Khala. He heard Choti Khala burst into tears. Afraid that he might get caught eavesdropping, Imraan rushed into his room. Moments later he heard someone in the next room. It was Choti Khala and he could hear her crying through the wall.

He peeped from the opening in the guest room where he and Mohsin slept when they were at Nani's, and could hear the rest of them saying, "Leave her. Give her some time. Maybe she'll listen now."

Imraan crept out of the room and sneaked up to Choti Khala's bedroom door where he tentatively knocked.

"Go away," he heard a muffled reply.

"Choti Khala?" Imraan tried to whisper but it came out a little louder than he intended. Fortunately no one heard him downstairs.

A few moments later, she opened the door, "Imraan? Aren't you supposed to be sleeping?"

Even though he was seven years old and in class two, Choti Khala still treated him like a child. She carried him in her arms and brought him inside her bedroom, locking the door behind her.

She sat him on the bed and he could see the tears in her eyes. She sniffled and continued to wipe her blotchy red nose with a bunch of soggy tissues.

“What’s wrong my darling? Can’t you sleep?” she finally managed to ask in a steady voice.

“Why don’t you listen to Nani and Nana and not marry that man?”

Choti Khala was taken aback. Her eyes widened in surprise and suddenly she laughed. “You’ve been listening to everything every night, haven’t you?”

Imraan nodded solemnly. He needed to tell her how important it was to listen to her parents or Allah wouldn’t be happy with her.

“You are too young to understand. When you grow older you will realise what this all means.”

“But Allah is unhappy with those children who keep their parents unhappy. Don’t you know that?”

Choti Khala smiled at her nephew and his concern for what was right for her. Before she could reply, he added, “And Nani told Mohsin and I that when we grow older we must allow Mummy to choose who we marry because the parents know best. So you must listen to Nani.”

“Okay, I’ll try. But what happens if Allah is not happy with the parents? What if they don’t know what’s best?”

Imraan’s eyebrows creased into a frown. He didn’t quite understand what Choti Khala meant.

“Don’t worry about me Imraan. I know what I am doing. I hate hurting Nani and Nana but they’re not always right.”

## Six

The cloudy sky obscured the reddish glow of the sun, an indication of the possible showers that would embrace Thembelani by dark. The muezzin melodiously intoned the *azaan* for *Maghrib*. Imraan sat on the garden bench watching the long-tailed birds making a nest.

Chirping merrily, the couple fetched twigs and held them firmly within their beaks before weaving the sticks snugly into their nascent nest. Imraan could feel the goose bumps on his arms when a flurry of cool wind wafted past him. He had been sitting outside in the Mayet Mansion garden for more than an hour, enjoying the delightful view of the lush green grass, resembling a carpet, and the picturesque plants and trees. An ornamental stone fountain stood in the centre and the water tinkled gently throughout the day and night. The birds took advantage of this, and sometimes even the wild cats from neighbouring houses. This was the creation of a landscape architect. A landscape architect! Since he had moved here, Dada reminded him almost every day of the garden's allure.

Imraan reluctantly rose from the garden bench. Stuffing his cold hands into the pockets of his Levi's, he left the garden through the back entrance. This led to a tarred pathway. Trudging along the pathway, the crunch of dried leaves under his Reeboks, he made his way out of the yard through an opened gate, to the mosque across the street.



Supper was served every day after *Maghrib* throughout the year. That was the rule at the Mayet Mansion. A rule that was created specifically for Imraan since he was the first boarder at the house.

In the dining room, Dada was already seated at the neatly laid out table. Four places were set out. The dining table that was handcrafted to seat twelve people looked odd to Imraan at first. Four people eating from a table of that magnitude. Now he had gotten used to it.

“‘*Salaamwalaykum beta!*” Dada looked up from his scraggly Urdu *kitaab* with the crooked title that was most probably printed in India or Pakistan. At eighty-two, Gulaam Hussain Mayet was the life of the Mayet Mansion.

“*Walaykumsalaam*. What are you reading today, Dada?” Imraan took his seat next to Dada.

“*Beta*, I’m reading the words of the great Allama. He was a genius you know,” Dada responded with genuine interest to Imraan’s query.

Imraan laughed. “Again Iqbal? Is there any other that you read?”

Shireen entered the dining room with a bowl of steaming steak curry. “Since I am married Dada has been reading Iqbal. I don’t think he’ll stop any time soon!”

“Shireen, my *beti*. Why do you think I am not senile today? It is this reading of literature, and not just Iqbal, all the great thinkers and poets. Rumi, Jami and Khusro too. You should be thanking your lucky stars I am not senile otherwise you would have to care for me and then you would have no time for your active social life.” He laughed good-naturedly, his pseudo-asthmatic laugh, one that resonated from his core. The first time Imraan heard him laugh his initial thought was “chronic obstructive airway disease, most likely emphysema”. Infected by his laughter, Shireen and Imraan joined in.

Ahmed arrived home halfway through supper. Impeccably dressed in formal black pants with a long-sleeved shirt and shining shoes, he greeted everyone and took his seat at the head of the table.

“These *kaarias* I tell you, they are so bloody thick sometimes!” he complained.

“They don’t understand English, whose fault is that now?” Dada asked.

“Papa, you tell them to do something and they don’t use their brains. They don’t realise that every rule has an exception.”

Shireen passed the plate of rotis to her husband.

“Sometimes in life you just have to accept that things are just the way they are,” Dada said before sipping his water. “Don’t generalise *beta*. If it weren’t for apartheid, we wouldn’t be having this problem.”

"Apartheid? We always have the same argument Papa. You can't blame the past for everything. We also went through apartheid!" Ahmed and Dada began their usual debate about the injustices of the past and the effect they had on the present. Whilst Dada was more sympathetic towards the plight of the disadvantaged communities, Ahmed fiercely believed it was up to each individual to make their life better.

"Asif phoned today," Shireen interrupted, hoping to change the mood at the table.

"How is he? Isn't he supposed to have started the new semester already?" Ahmed asked. "He better pass all his subjects. Otherwise he's just wasting our time and money!"

"He'll pass. He's not a stupid boy, my grandson," Dada interjected.

"He started lectures this week. He said he'll be coming home this weekend too," Shireen said with a wide smile.

"It's about time. We haven't seen that boy for a good few months," Ahmed said as he helped himself to a second round of curry.

Dada added, "Now he can meet Imraan too."

"Speaking about Imraan, there is a possible marriage prospect in line for him," Shireen grinned. Imraan looked up in surprise.

Following the afternoon of the high tea at the Mayet Mansion, a new development occurred. To the embarrassment of Imraan, one of the ladies in Thembelani had "fancied" him for her niece. A possible marriage proposal! Shireen was the mediator and had to talk to Farida over the phone about it. So that's exactly what she did the previous night.

Imraan didn't know what to say. If his mother already knew about this, he probably had no choice in the matter. He would have to meet this girl. Did he even want to get married now? He constantly thought about Yasmin. Three years later and she continued to occupy his mind. Sometimes at work when he was busy, something would remind him of her. Even though he was supposed to still feel anger towards her, he had eventually reached a point where he didn't really care.

Shireen told Imraan that his mother was thrilled when she heard the news of a prospective wife for her son. The family's details were given to her over the phone – father's name and surname, mother's maiden surname, father's occupation, where the family lived, what the girl did, whether she had studied, and how many other siblings she had. Imraan wondered when his mother planned on telling him about this?

Ahmed began sharing his hilarious tales of going to see prospective brides before he married Shireen. Dada reminded him of one incident when they travelled all the way to “Transvaal” to see this girl.

“Ahmed didn’t tell his mother and me that he didn’t like her so we assumed he did. After eating such tasty *samosas* and *bhajias* followed by delicious chicken *biryani* and a variety of desserts, Ahmed didn’t know how to say no. So do you know what he does? He says yes!”

Dada paused to take a few sips of water. “Now we are all excited about this and we set an engagement date. His mother and I still didn’t know anything. Only about two weeks later, when he’s barely slept through the nights, does he tell us he doesn’t want to marry her.”

Here everyone, including Ahmed, laughed.

“I don’t think I ever saw your mother so enraged, Ahmed. She was furious! Why did he agree then and now change his mind? Ahmed says he didn’t know how to say no. The girl’s mother was being so pushy and he didn’t want to hurt her feelings. The engagement date was set for a month’s time and Dadima was trying to think of a way to break the news to the family that our son wasn’t interested. Eventually, do you know what happens? A week later, the girl runs off with the neighbour’s son. Her parents phoned to cancel the engagement and apologised so much that Dadima even felt guilty.”

Shireen and Imraan were in tears from laughing so much.

“So Imraan, there’s a lesson for you,” Dada said. “If you don’t like a girl, don’t say yes. Ahmed just managed to get lucky. Not all men do and they end up marrying someone whom they didn’t want in the first place.”

~

Since the last big family meeting at Nani’s to discuss Choti Khala’s rebellion, as he heard his parents refer to it, things were not getting any better. One night Nani and Nana even had to call the *maulana* to talk to her. Apparently that too made no difference. Nani cried almost every day and Imraan and his family were now there almost each night for supper.

Ebrahim was getting annoyed by the whole incident. One evening he insisted that there was no need to go to Nani’s house. “What difference would it make if we are there every night? Our lives have to continue Farida. Your mother needs to stop overreacting. Taslima will get over that fellow.”

Imraan’s mother had just finished bathing him and was changing him into his pyjamas when his parents began arguing. It had been a long time since he had heard them upset with each other.

“What if it was your sister who had this problem? Would you still be saying this? My mother needs me.”

“It’s inconvenient to cart the kids there every night when they have school the next day. You need to think about that. Go and visit your mother during the day but from now on we are not going there each night. Your sister doesn’t seem to be listening to anyone.”

Farida muttered something under her breath which Ebrahim ignored. When she had finished changing his clothes, she took him to his room where Mohsin was already asleep on one of the beds. Barely half an hour later, after he had been tucked in to sleep, Imraan heard the telephone ringing. About to doze off, he awoke with the metallic shrill.

He heard his mother answer but couldn’t hear what was being said. Before he knew it, his parents hurriedly entered his room.

“I can’t believe she did that! That girl has no brains!” his mother said. She noticed Imraan was awake. “Imraan my darling, get up and come with us. We have to go to Nani’s, okay?” Turning to his father, she said, “You carry Mohsin downstairs.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s causing for all of us. The inconvenience!” his father complained as he lifted Mohsin and carried him out of bed.

“Don’t start now Ebrahim. You know we have to be there. I’ll sleep over with the boys.”

At Nani’s, where Imraan was still trying to figure out what was happening, most of the family were already gathered. Imraan’s mother entered the house and went straight to Nani, who was sobbing uncontrollably in the lounge. Nana sat beside her, rubbing her back, a look of concern etched across his aged face.

By now, sleep had eluded Imraan. There was far too much excitement to want to sleep. Mohsin was put straight to bed upstairs. Then Imraan realised something. Choti Khala was nowhere to be seen.

He looked in the kitchen where one of Nani’s sisters offered him something to eat and he politely refused. Then he searched in the dining room and eventually he went upstairs when he couldn’t find her. She wasn’t in her room either. As he headed back downstairs, he saw one of his mother’s cousins, Zubi Khala, standing in the passage. He went up to her and asked her, “Where is Choti Khala?”

Zubi Khala turned around and cupped Imraan’s face in her hands, “No one knows, sweetheart. That’s what we are trying to find out.” As an afterthought, she added, “Aren’t you supposed to be sleeping? Come I’ll take you to bed.”

"I'm not sleepy. I'll go just now," he replied and scurried away back to the lounge where he sat at one end and watched.

His father was on the phone with someone and everyone was listening intently to what was being said. When he had hung up, he announced, "She left university early today. Aziza said Taslima didn't say where she was going."

Someone in the room suggested they contact "that boy" and ask him where she could be. Until now, no one had mentioned Riaz. Nani wiped her eyes with a bunch of tissues and cleared her throat.

"We must do that. I want to talk to him!" she declared, with a look of renewed anger.

Nana said quietly, "I can phone and find out."

"No! I want to talk to him and ask that boy what he has done to my Taslima. If it wasn't for him, all this wouldn't be happening. He has caused so much of grief in our family and now he wants to ruin her name! *Thawba!*"

Everyone in the room began talking at once and Imraan watched, as he sat on the little stool by the window. He peeped outside and noticed something. Someone else had just arrived. Looking carefully, he realised it was Choti Khala. Even though it was dark and he couldn't see her face, he recognised her car number plate.

He turned around in excitement as someone was dialling a number for Nani on the phone and screamed, "Choti Khala is here!"

All eyes turned to him. "Where?" he heard someone ask and before he knew it, they all rushed outside. Imraan followed them, wriggling his way through the adults.

There she was, entering the house. Before she could greet anyone, shouts of "Where were you?" and "How could you do that?" rained upon her. Choti Khala appeared to be totally confused.

"What is happening? Did something happen to Ma or Papa?"

Imraan's mother was the first to scold her, "Is this the time to come home? Where were you? With him?"

Once she was inside the house and Nani and Nana were relieved that she was at home, Choti Khala finally understood what everyone had thought. Anger seized her immediately. She couldn't believe her family had actually thought that of her.

Then she explained herself. She needed to visit a friend of hers on the South Coast, who happened to force her to stay for supper. Knowing that her parents would be worried, she called

home but Nani was asleep and Nana was at the shop. She asked the maid to pass the message on to her mother when she woke up.

“Call Queen and ask her!” Choti Khala insisted.

Nani admitted that Queen had to leave early that day because she had to go to the clinic. She had forgotten to pass on the message.

“What else was I s’pos to think?” Nani demanded.

“Ma, that’s shocking! Riaz has much more respect than that anyway. I told you, if you all don’t allow me to marry him, I won’t marry anyone else! Do you really want me to be single for the rest of my life?” Saying that, she marched off upstairs to her room.

When she was gone, Nana said to Nani, “It’s time for her to get married now. I don’t want this overreacting ever again. Tell her tomorrow that the boy’s family can come to our home.”

For once, Nani didn’t object. She had to accept what she had been dreading her entire life. Her daughter marrying into an “unsuitable” family.

## Seven

Asif Mayet arrived in Thembelani on Friday evening. Shireen had been preparing for her son's arrival from the day before and everyone seemed to be in great spirits at the Mayet Mansion, especially Dada. The men were in the TV lounge watching the evening news when they heard Shireen shrieking in the kitchen.

Ahmed was asleep on the leather recliner with the newspaper on his lap. He awoke with a start. "What's wrong Shireen?"

"Asif is here!" they heard her yell with delight.

"Isn't he supposed to arrive later?" Dada asked, waking up from his seat.

"That's what he told us. He probably just wanted to surprise us!" Ahmed said as he headed towards the lounge. Imraan and Dada followed him.

Shireen was already outside in the yard, showering her son with hugs and kisses. The medium built Asif, clad in jeans and a tight T-shirt that bared his toned muscular arms, was overjoyed as well. After hugging his father and Dada, he turned to Imraan. "You must be Imraan. 'Salaamwalaykum."

Imraan returned his proffered handshake and greeting. "Pleased to finally meet you."

Once they were all inside and Asif had settled in the lounge, his mother said, "I had a feeling you would be here earlier than usual."

Ahmed brushed her statement off. "Your mother and her feelings! How come you got to leave early? What about your lectures?"

"I was free this afternoon so it worked out perfectly."

Imraan sat on the other end of the lounge, feeling out-of-place, even though the Mayet family gave him absolutely no reason to feel this way. He decided to give his mother a call and excused himself.

Upstairs in his bedroom, Imraan phoned his mother.

"What's wrong Imraan? Did something happen?"

"No, why would you think that?" he could feel the irritation build up inside him. Did his mother think he would only phone her when something was wrong?

"Oh. That's so good. How are you doing? How is everyone?"

He told her that Asif was home and everyone was excited. She told him it would have been so nice if he was also home with his family, instead of spending the weekend in Thembelani. Trying his best to mask his impatience, he explained to her, as he had done three times previously in the week, that he was exhausted from being on call the night before and couldn't manage the drive to Durban.

He also confronted her about the prospective wife that she had contacted, according to Auntie Shireen. He found it very odd that his mother didn't mention it to him at all.

"Ya, you heard about that, didn't you?"

"Off course I did. But I'm not interested right now so I hope you didn't phone that girl's family."

"Don't worry about that, Imraan. I found out about the family. Not our type."

"What do you mean?"

"Shame, the parents are divorced and the older brother recently got divorced. It's difficult to get married into a family like that."

"What's so difficult?"

"You know how it is with divorcées. Too much of baggage. It won't look good for our family."

"Mummy, you need to get over that prejudice. Daddy's sister is divorced. What does it say about our family?"

"But that's different. It wasn't her fault. Everyone knew he was at fault."

"No one knew anything. It's what we want to believe." Sensing that the conversation was going nowhere since his mother rarely changed her perspective on matters like these, Imraan asked about the well-being of the rest of his family.



"They're all fine, *alhumdullilah*. Rokaya is gone to Choti Khala's tonight and Daddy isn't here. The usual story. Very busy at work. I'm so fed up with him."

"So you're alone?"

"Nani is here. We were just talking. We're missing you and Mohsin so much."

Then his mother reminded him about a coming wedding in the family and told him to keep that weekend free so he could come to Durban.

"What wedding?"

"Didn't I tell you about the wedding? It's the one with the fancy invitation. How can you forget?" his mother scolded.

Suddenly he remembered. It was his mother's second cousin's daughter's wedding. The invitation was an indication of the level of grandeur to be expected at the wedding, a silver gift box wrapped with ribbon. Inside, inscribed on glossy board were the details of the reception. Along with the card came a box with three Lindt chocolate balls.

"Oh. Another one of those fancy weddings?"

"It's going to be held at the ICC! We can't miss it. It's the perfect time to find a wife for you. There'll be plenty of girls there. You can pick whoever you want to."

Imraan ignored his mother deliberately.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Hmm..."

"You need to get married. See, you wasted so much of time and now you're in that bundu town and there's no one to care for you!"

"Aunty Shireen is looking after me very nicely. What more do I need?"

"You need to get married. Before the end of this year, I am going to find you a wife if you can't find one yourself."

Imraan laughed to himself. Why was it always the case with his mother? That a wife was the answer to everything?

Downstairs, everyone was enjoying a lavish spread of desserts, along with tea and sweets. Imraan's face lit up when he noticed Aunty Shireen's homemade chocolate cake.

"There you are!" she said when he appeared in the dining room.

Asif engaged him in polite conversation about the town, asking him if he was used to the place and whether he enjoyed working at the hospital. Imraan admitted that he thought it would be worse.

"I love this place. Can't wait to get back. The city life is just so different. When I come home, I just enjoy the serenity here," Asif confessed.

"So is it just one more year left for you to complete your degree?"

Asif avoided the question and instead nodded towards Dada. Then he asked Imraan, "So does my grandfather keep you going around here?"

"Oh yes he does!" Imraan laughed. He didn't know whether Asif had deliberately ignored his question or not. Imraan dismissed it. Asif didn't hear him or he probably needed to take an extra semester to complete his degree, something most students weren't proud of.

The weekend passed quickly. Asif drove Imraan around the outskirts of the town on Saturday afternoon, showing him the important structures and building developments. His family's empire, GHM Wholesalers, which Dada had started more than thirty years ago, was by far the most successful business in Thembelani. Now his father planned to open up a home section of GHM Wholesalers where he would sell furniture. Asif pointed out to Imraan the plot of land where the warehouse was soon going to be built.

Imraan noted everything with interest. "So who is going to run the business when your father retires?"

Asif laughed. "Since I am the only child and only son, I probably will."

"Wouldn't it be difficult if you're going to be a pharmacist?"

"The thing is, I can always give up pharmacy and run the business..." Asif drove through a makeshift driveway to the area of the future warehouse. Heaps of sand and bricks stood on one side. "I can even help my father now but he wouldn't hear of it. I wouldn't mind."

"So you would prefer this to studying?"

"Oh, any day. Basically my father and Dada didn't get a chance to study at university, which is why I'm there."

At the construction site, where Asif parked the car, he pointed out to Imraan exactly what was going to be built. He said the warehouse would be completed within the next few months. Then Asif drove him to the GHM Wholesalers store itself, where Imraan had never been inside but passed every morning on his way to the hospital.

Even though it was Sunday, the gigantic store was very busy. Set out like a chain-store supermarket, the aisles were marked accordingly. Posters advertising the latest in-store specials were plastered across the walls and some were hanging from the lighting above. From groceries to

household items, GHM Wholesalers stocked almost every item you could possibly think of. The staff greeted Asif and spoke to him in Zulu, to which he replied fluently.

Imraan wondered why the store was called GHM Wholesalers if they catered to the public? Asif explained that when Dada first opened the store, it was basically a corner shop cafe that stocked a bit of everything and was called GHM Superette. Over the years, his father began stocking more items and opened it to traders as well as ordinary customers.

He showed Imraan the back of the store where his father was planning to extend a portion to create a section for the furniture. It was actually his idea, Asif explained, to add the furniture section to the store. Whilst in Jo'burg, Asif met a family who were involved in manufacturing furniture and decided it would be very lucrative if GHM Wholesalers began selling furniture. Ahmed had disagreed at first, telling his son that the idea was ridiculous. When Asif persisted, his father finally agreed. That was more than a year ago.

Imraan was impressed with Asif's interest in the family business. Not many people he knew would be so willing to work for their father. Some sons assumed that their fathers would do all the hard work on their own.

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Choti Khala's wedding preparations were now in full swing following the debacle. Swallowing her pride, Nani had to allow Riaz and his family (whose ancestors hailed from Hyderabad in India and whose family's vernacular was Urdu) to come home to officially propose to her daughter.

Imraan had never seen Choti Khala so excited. On the day that Riaz, his parents, his two sisters, and their husbands, were due to come home, Nani was on tenterhooks. She was finally going to meet Riaz, the boy whom she had despised so much simply because he had captured her daughter's heart.

The minute they arrived at the house, Nani rushed forward to greet them. When she saw Riaz for the first time, she was stunned. She later told her sister she thought that "he was a white man, he was so handsome!" Her initial impression of the family changed when she realised how wealthy they were.

Barely three months after the engagement, a grand wedding was held at the Durban City Hall. A thousand people were invited and it was the most extravagant social event of the year in the Durban Muslim community. Choti Khala arrived in style on a horse and cart and the material for her wedding gown was imported from Italy. Photos of the bride and groom appeared in the local newspaper and Nani was thrilled. Her new son-in-law apparently came from a very "well-

connected" family. It no longer mattered to her what language his family spoke because there were more important issues. Such as everyone talking about the *kunchas* Choti Khala received and the gigantic diamond on her wedding ring.

Imraan and Mohsin were to be the page boys at the wedding. Dressed in identical black suits with cream shirts, they took their roles very seriously and ensured they practised their walk into the hall many times before the big day. They were given strict warnings from Nani not to play outside in the sun for a month before the wedding.

This was a tough instruction since it was the beginning of their school holiday. So when Nani wasn't looking, Imraan and Mohsin would sneak outside and play cricket and soccer in the garden. It wasn't long before they were caught. Nani had them march indoors and scolded them. "What did I tell you about getting black faces, eh?"

Imraan, standing next to the lamp in the lounge, switched it on and stuck his face underneath it, "I'm white now, Nani. See!" He grabbed Mohsin and stuck his face underneath it. "We both are! No worries now!"

"Hey don't make me fool now! Go play in your room!" Nani scolded.

Soon after the wedding, when Choti Khala and Uncle Riaz left for their honeymoon in Mauritius, life returned to normal. This was something Imraan was not looking forward to. He was in standard one and was struggling to grasp a new subject at school – Afrikaans. No matter how hard he tried to like the subject and to get an A for it, he wasn't successful. This made him despondent and he was embarrassed at the end of the second term when his report card listed his results for all the subjects as A's except for Afrikaans, which he had passed with a C! This caused his overall position in the class to drop to second, something he was not accustomed to.

Farida noticed the sudden change in Imraan's attitude towards school. When the third term had started, he got sick more often and would insist he couldn't attend school. She knew something was not right and decided to investigate. She visited his form teacher one afternoon when he was attending *madrassah*. Mrs Khan explained to his mother that she felt Imraan's lack of interest in school stemmed from his struggle to grasp the new subject. She suggested that Imraan attend extra lessons for Afrikaans, which would boost his marks and restore his interest in school.

Less than a month later Imraan began receiving Afrikaans tuition during the weekends. At first he resolutely refused. "Isn't tuition only for stupid people?" he demanded of his mother when she first suggested it. Farida calmly explained to her son that there was nothing to be embarrassed about.

## Eight

On their calls together, Imraan and Salma got better acquainted with each other. When they had a few minutes to spare, like all the other doctors, they found momentary respite in the shack. Just to sit back and relax on the couch, away from the busy queues in OPD and casualty. Naturally, a sense of camaraderie developed. They would share private jokes, express their frustration about patients with ludicrous complaints, and gossip about the lazy doctors and useless nurses. Imraan found it comforting to have someone to complain to when he couldn't go back to sleep after being woken up at two a.m. to treat a seventy-three-year-old lady with a haemorrhoid!

When Salma discovered where Imraan was boarding, she seemed impressed. "Aah, the Mayets. Wonderful people." She glanced up from the pile of patient files on her lap, as she sat on the couch in the shack. Imraan was curious. How did she know them? She laughed. Her fine eyebrows rose delicately and she replied after a yawn, "It's a long story. I'll tell you another time." Imraan didn't blame her. It was almost midnight and, like him, she was exhausted.

The following evening Imraan asked Dada after supper if he knew the local muezzin. "In this small town *beta*, you have to know everyone. Even if you don't want to." And then as an afterthought, "So do you know Dr Salma?"

Imraan nodded and asked, "Do you know her and her family well?"

Dada laughed, a wheezy one. "Her family and us go back a long way." His attention turned to the signature jingle of the evening news and Imraan knew it wasn't a good time to talk to Dada.

Halfway through the news bulletin, the *azaan* was heard. Switching the TV off, Dada turned to Imraan. "So do you want to know about the Madlalas?"

"I've met the daughter at the hospital. She told me her father is a muezzin. Do you know him?"

"We all know him, *beta*. Come we'll meet him now when we go to the mosque." Dada said with a smile.

"Salma's father is the muezzin of this mosque?" He attended the mosque for most of his prayers and greeted the muezzin whenever he saw him but never thought for one second that could have been Salma's father.

Later that night Dada explained to Imraan exactly how he knew the Madlalas. "Our friendship dates back to when Ahmed was a teenager," Dada said.

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It was about five years since Dada had moved to Thembelani with his wife and son. There were no other Muslims in the area when he had first arrived but now there about six families. As there was no proper mosque in the town, the men congregated at Dada's house for their Jumma prayer. Friday was a special day for the Muslims of Thembelani. After the prayer at the Mayet house, which was then a modest three-bedroomed home, lunch was served to all the families.

First the men would eat and the ladies would serve them *dhol* and rice with the accompaniments such as *aloo fry*, *papad*, and chicken, along with the salads and *achaar*. The menu alternated each week, sometimes it would be *biryani* and other times *kaliya*.

As the years went by, the number of Muslims steadily increased. So did the need for a mosque. Dada decided to buy a plot of land in the town and have the mosque built there. Within a year the mosque was completed with help from monetary donations by the other Muslims in the town.

With the completion of the mosque, came the need for Islam to be spread amongst the local community. Although it was difficult to interact with the Zulu people, Dada encouraged the families in his community to make an effort. Dada began visiting the townships in the area to educate the locals about Islam. One of these was Philemon Madlala.

Philemon was young and had completed his schooling, but had to work as a labourer on one of the farms to support his family. Dada befriended him because he had a genuine interest in religion. Philemon accepted Islam soon afterwards and a very strong friendship was born.

Dada then offered Philemon, who had changed his name to Bilal after pronouncing his *shahadah*, a job at GHM Superette. Bilal was to pack shelves. Almost every weekend, Bilal was at Dada's house, learning more about Islam. He learnt how to read Arabic so that he could recite the

Qur'an and eventually he learnt how to read *namaaz*. Bilal became a part of Dada's family, befriending Ahmed too, who was just two years younger than him. They would play soccer together in the summer when all the boys of Thembelani would create their teams and play in their own "league".

As the years passed, Bilal continued with his weekend visits to Dada, although not as frequently as before. Dada introduced Bilal to Islamic literature where he read about the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the companions and the history of the spread of Islam. With every discussion and lesson that he and Dada shared, especially on the hot summer afternoons in Dada's study amidst a huge pile of books, Bilal's faith steadily grew. He wanted to further his education and decided to study for a degree through UNISA.

By now, Bilal had married a Zulu woman, Fathima, who was also a convert to Islam. Their first two children, twin boys, had passed away barely four days after being born. Thereafter they were blessed with a daughter, Salma. As Salma grew into a healthy, bubbly toddler, her father worked diligently to obtain his Theology degree through UNISA.

Soon after Salma had started school, Bilal decided to quit his job at GHM Superette. He wanted to serve his community as best as he could. He decided to become the muezzin of the local mosque. When he wasn't calling out the *azaan* five times a day, he was busy spreading the word of God to his community in the township.

Salma became a part of the Mayet family in her early years. When her father came to see Dada, she insisted on accompanying him. As if she were his surrogate granddaughter, Dada enjoyed the company of little Salma and was always rewarding her with sweets. Eventually Salma's mother, Fathima, became an employee at the Mayet Mansion as a domestic worker.

When Salma eventually matriculated, she had her heart set on studying medicine. And she did exactly that. Her father was still the muezzin of the mosque and even though her mother no longer worked at the Mayet Mansion, the friendship between the families was still strong.

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"So that's how you know the Madlalas?" Imraan asked as he listened eagerly to Dada's story. "Are your families still so close?"

"Well I see Bilal every day but I haven't seen Fathima or Salma in a while. When Asif's Dadima passed away, Fathima went through a period of depression. She was very close to her, which is why she stopped working here. She just couldn't handle the thought of Dadima not being around anymore."

Imraan had met Salma's father earlier that evening at the mosque. He was a tall man, with a slim build. His fist-length beard was already greying. He wore a crisp white *kurta* with a white *topi*.

Dada introduced them and Bilal already knew who Imraan was. "Salma has mentioned you're new at the hospital."

They spoke a bit about Thembelani and Dada promised to send a few recent copies of some Islamic magazines that he had just completed reading.

At work the next day, Imraan mentioned to Salma that she had met her father. "I'm sure you know about it already."

"Actually I don't," she said with a smile. Then she explained that she didn't live with her parents. They lived on the mosque property whereas she had her own flat in town. "I do see my parents quite often, but not every day. But I thought you would have met him a long time ago. Don't you go to the mosque quite often?"

"I do, but I didn't know that *he* was your father."

"I told you he was the muezzin," she said with a laugh. Imraan was embarrassed to admit that he thought her father was the muezzin of a mosque in the township, if there was one.

They were sitting in the shack, eating their lunch. Salma began speaking fondly of Dada, telling Imraan about her childhood escapades in the Mayet Mansion. He had no idea she had lived there for a while.

"Oh yes, when my mother started working at the main house we lived in the servant's quarters. That house has some of my best memories." She went on to explain how she would terrorise Asif because he was younger than her and bully him for his toys. Imraan found it hard to believe, but laughed at the stories that made her eyes twinkle with joy as she told them.

Then she told Imraan how much Dada had done personally for her family. He had paid for her education and her mother's hospital bills when she had suffered from a mild stroke recently. Salma spoke with pure love and veneration for Dada.

Imraan didn't know what to say. Dada never mentioned anything about that, he told her.

"Oh, but he would never say anything to anyone. That's the type of man he is! He does all the charity work on the quiet. Even when he took the time to teach my father when was young, he did so with such passion and love that it's something my father cannot forget."

~



It was at Mrs Moosa's house, at the age of nine, that Imraan saw Yasmin for the first time in his life. A bright young girl, Yasmin was very outspoken from the first extra lesson in Afrikaans that he attended. He found her incredibly annoying and wished she would just keep quiet. Fiercely competitive, she would ensure she completed all the exercises first and proudly announce that she was done with her work. She attended a private girls' school in Durban, so being around boys made her a little haughty. Since she claimed she wasn't that bad in Afrikaans, she would leave the class a half hour earlier than the rest. Imraan thought that she was just too embarrassed to admit that she had to come for tuition in the first place, which was why she had to leave early – to make sure the others knew she was different.

One afternoon Yasmin's mother ran a bit late and couldn't fetch her at half past two. So Yasmin had to wait with the rest of the class until three when they were done. In Mrs Moosa's dining room, the six of them sat at the table with their books open, sharing worksheets and completing exercises.

At exactly half past two, Yasmin began packing her stationery into her pink, plastic box-shaped pencil case that was decorated with glittery stickers. Mrs Moosa looked up at Yasmin. "Darling, your mother told me earlier that she'll only be fetching you after three. She's going to be a bit late today."

Her eyebrows furrowed, a look of confusion appeared on her oval-shaped face. "Are you sure? She didn't tell me anything."

Mrs Moosa nodded and told her she might as well join the class and wait until the rest of them could go home. A few of the boys sniggered and this enraged Yasmin. She pretended she didn't hear them. Instead, she removed a book from her bag, took a seat on the sofa across the lounge and began reading.

When Imraan's mother came to fetch him, she saw Yasmin. She smiled at her and Yasmin greeted her politely, flashing a big grin that displayed her neat set of teeth.

In the car, Farida asked her son about the "beautiful, well-mannered girl" in his class. She wanted to know her surname, which school she attended, and where she lived. With irritation, Imraan told his mother whatever he knew and added that she was a goody-two-shoes and none of the others really liked her.

His mother laughed. "Aren't all girls like that?"

Farida was so impressed by Yasmin that she mentioned her to Nani a few days later. Imraan was playing by himself with a ball outside in the yard and he could hear his mother and Nani talk. Even though they were speaking in Gujarati, Imraan could understand what they were saying and

that his mother's praise for Yasmin didn't end. This exasperated Imraan but what made him most angry was when his mother jokingly mentioned to Nani that Yasmin would be the ideal wife for Imraan when they were older. Nani and his mother laughed about it but Imraan didn't take it so lightly. He stormed into the house and scolded his mother.

"I heard what you said. I don't like her and I never will!"

Surprised by his outburst, his mother smiled and with a quick, knowing glance at Nani, she began apologising, "Sorry my darling. Okay, you don't like her."

Imraan stormed up the stairs, his cheeks flushed. Just as he reached the bedroom, he could hear his mother's and Nani's fresh burst of laughter echo through the house.

## Nine

During the long weekend when Human Rights Day was being celebrated across the country, Imraan was forced to attend a wedding. *The* wedding of the year. His mother's second cousin's daughter's wedding.

He knew exactly what to expect from this extravagant affair. A bevy of marriageable girls would be flaunted by their mothers and people like his mother would watch from afar. She would assess them carefully and make mental notes. Then she would subtly enquire which family they came from, what they did and then make a decision, based on her appearance and lineage, as to whether she would be a suitable daughter-in-law. Farida had been honing her skills as a match-maker since Imraan could remember. Now that she had two sons of her own, there was no way she would choose just any girl in Durban for him. It had to be the best. And best in Farida's eyes meant lineage and appearance. Nothing else mattered.

His father wasn't attending the wedding as he was away for the weekend. His mother had fussed and complained the entire week because his father was not going to be around for this important function.

"I told Mummy she's wasting her time begging him to come. When does he *ever* attend any family function?" Rokaya said matter-of-factly as Imraan drove her back home from the shopping mall on Saturday afternoon. At the last minute Rokaya discovered that the pair of heels she intended to wear later that evening for the wedding didn't quite match her outfit. She needed a

new pair and Imraan spent most of his Saturday afternoon following his sister into every second shop at Pavilion until she found something.

When Imraan didn't say anything, his sister continued, "It's not a close family member anyway. It's Mummy's second cousin's daughter!"

"Why is Daddy away this weekend anyway?" Imraan asked.

"Oh, I dunno. To meet some client I suppose."

It was always the same excuse, Imraan thought angrily. Why couldn't his family ever do anything together for once?

When they reached home Imraan asked his mother why his father went to Johannesburg.

"That's exactly what I've been trying to tell you Imraan! Why doesn't anyone ever listen to me? I don't know why he has started this nonsense again. There's no reason for him to work so hard. Going to see clients in the weekend in other cities! If it was so urgent, he could have sent someone younger in the company." She rattled this off, her temper flaring. She didn't even give him a chance to reply. "I've told you before that you need to talk to him. Tell him it's not good for his health to be working so hard."

"Mummy, when does he ever listen to any of his children?" Imraan said with a sigh, immediately regretting that he asked such a question.

"I only have you here now. How can I tell everyone else my problems? Mohsin isn't even around." At moments like these he wished he was living with his brother in London. He'd been gone for almost eight months yet it felt longer. After graduating with his B. Com degree, Mohsin had worked at the accounting firm KPMG for a while before he decided to join some of his friends in London. Initially, his mother was against it. She tried her best to change his mind. She constantly reminded him of the 7/7 bombings. Stubbornness came naturally to Mohsin. The more someone tried to persuade him to do something, the more he persisted. Eventually it came to a point where Mohsin had to ask Choti Khala to intervene and tell his mother that regardless of what she said, he would still be going. Farida could only listen to her sister, who convinced her that it was good for boys to do a bit of travelling before they settled down.

"How is Mohsin doing anyway?" Imraan asked casually, hoping to change his mother's bleak mood.

"He's fine. He phoned the other day. Said he was going to Scotland for the weekend with some friends. You know how much I worry about him? I don't even know who these *friends* of his are!"

"Don't worry about him. There are so many South Africans living abroad now. They're all like one big family," Imraan assured her.

~

Like any traditional Muslim wedding, the men and women were seated separately. As he headed toward the men's section, his mother reminded him, "Look out for any girl that you like. And after supper is served, come to the ladies section and tell me. Okay?"

The *nikah* had been performed earlier in the afternoon at the mosque so the evening's formalities began with speeches by the bride's and groom's close family members. Towards the end of the evening, when the ten-course supper had been served and it was time for tea, Imraan made his way across the hall to the ladies section and searched for his mother. He was tired and wanted to go home.

"There you are! Come here quickly," his mother grabbed his arm when she saw him. "Quickly, turn to your right. See if you like that girl? The pretty one with the blue dress."

His cheeks reddening, Imraan whispered to his mother, "I don't want to see. This is embarrassing. Let's go home."

"Just look at her. I know you'll like her! She's tall and slim and very pretty."

Looking around to see if anyone was staring at him, Imraan casually glanced to the right. He saw a slim girl in a blue dress laughing and talking to two other girls. Her hair was up with curls hanging loosely at the sides of her face. He quickly turned back.

"What do you think?" Farida's eyes shone with excitement.

"She's okay. She's just fair. Nothing else."

"Okay? She's just okay?" Farida sighed. "Boys today are so fussy! You must find your own wife."

~

When the holy month of Ramadan arrived the following April, nine-year-old Imraan kept all thirty fasts for the first time in his life. He had only been allowed to keep "half day fasts" previously because Nani always worried that he wouldn't manage to fast the entire day in Durban's heat and humidity. Imraan spent many days at his Nani's house that Ramadan because his mother became quite ill and had to be in bed for most of the day.

Eid was a huge celebration every year. Preparations for the big day began a week earlier. Kilos of almonds were blanched, dyed, chopped, and slivered. Pistachios were shelled and dyed, confectionaries were baked in large numbers and sweetmeats were carefully made and stacked neatly in Tupperware containers. All this happened during the last few days of Ramadan when

everyone was still fasting. Fasting had never been more challenging for Imraan than during those days and he would watch the clock for *iftaar* time to arrive. Every minute counted. Before the *azaan* could be heard, Imraan would sneak into the kitchen, climb on the counter and remove *ladu* from one of the containers. He would place the sweetmeat on his plate and sit at the table staring at it, waiting for the *azaan*. As soon as the muezzin began calling out *Allahu Akbar*, Imraan would gobble the *kajoor* and then the *ladu* followed immediately. This had everyone aching with laughter.

Eid was extra special to him that year. All his uncles and aunts, apart from his parents and grandparents, showered him with extra *Eidie* in the form of presents and cash. At the grand Eid lunch that Nani prepared annually, his mother, who had recovered from her severe bouts of nausea, made an announcement to the whole family. With his father by her side, his mother announced to the family that she was pregnant.

## *Ten*

On Sunday night Imraan met up with a few of his friends from medical school that he hadn't seen in ages. He was suddenly grateful for the long weekend. It gave him one extra day to just relax. They had coffee at one of their favourite haunts in Musgrave. It was a trendy rendezvous for young couples and friends.

On this warm Durban night, the place was buzzing. Inside the coffee shop couples sat huddled together in the leather booths under the diffused lighting from stylish retro lamps. Outside on the terrace twenty-somethings sat together, their laughter and conversation adding to the vibrancy of the place.

Shiraaz, Naeem and Rehana were already waiting for Imraan when he arrived at the coffee shop. They usually sat on the terrace, but tonight was a busy night and the only available place was a booth inside, amid the couples. Imraan had known the three of them since his first year. By the end of fifth year, Naeem and Rehana had married, which was a surprise to both Imraan and Shiraaz. Naeem was an extrovert who loved going out whilst Rehana was shy and very studious. Their happy marriage made Imraan believe in the notion that opposites attract.

He ordered a filter coffee and began chatting to his friends about the joys and distresses of community service. Shiraaz was working in a small town in Mpumalanga whilst Naeem and Rehana had to settle for another small town near 'Maritzburg. They were just fortunate that they managed to get posts in the same place.

While discussing the lack of equipment in the hospitals and the shocking level of care, or lack of, from the nurses, Imraan and his friends compared each other's hospitals, ranking them. Thembelani was probably the worst, they concurred.

It was just over an hour into their get-together when Rehana gasped. She told Imraan, "Don't turn around. You'll never guess who just entered."

Imraan felt the fine hair on the back of his neck stand. A prickly sensation ran throughout his body. As he was saying Yasmin's name to himself, Rehana whispered, "It's Yasmin." He was so tempted to turn around and look.

Shiraaz whispered, "Who is she with?" Shiraaz sat beside Imraan and couldn't see Yasmin either.

Rehana said in a low voice, "She's with a group of girls we don't know."

Naeem said, "I wonder where her husband is."

Shiraaz whispered very softly, "I don't know if this is true or not. It could just be a rumour though, so I'm not sure if I should even be saying this..."

"Just tell us!" Imraan whispered urgently.

"I heard she's divorced."

"What?" Imraan couldn't believe it.

"Ssh, she's coming here," Rehana whispered without moving her lips.

With his palms sweaty and his heart rate steadily increasing, Imraan couldn't think.

Yasmin was here.

In the coffee shop.

And she might be single again.

A few seconds later, Yasmin appeared at their table and greeted them all with a dazzling smile. She hugged Rehana. "How are all of you?"

When Imraan met her gaze, he was astounded. She looked stunning in a long black skirt that suited her slender frame perfectly, with a metallic blouse and long silver earrings. Her layered hair framed her oval-shaped face and her long eyelashes curled up neatly in her delicately made up face.

She chatted briefly to them, enquiring about where they were working now. Imraan didn't get a chance to talk to her directly. He didn't even make an attempt. He was too confused. He didn't know how to behave normally in her company since that day over three years ago when he found out that she was getting married.



Imraan tried to catch a glimpse of her hand, searching for a wedding ring. Yasmin's hands were folded across her chest so he couldn't notice but when she brushed wisps of hair away from her face, he saw her wedding ring finger. There was no ring! Did that mean something?

Before he could try to figure out her marital status, she was gone.

"That was awkward," Rehana said.

"So you think it's true that she's divorced?" Naeem asked Shiraaz.

"I don't know for sure. I just heard it from one of my mother's friends."

"She had no wedding ring on her finger," Imraan said.

Rehana laughed. "That doesn't mean anything. I barely wear my wedding ring. I'm wearing it now but I wouldn't even think of wearing it to hospital!"

That entire night he was restless, waking up almost every hour. Yasmin was in his thoughts. He didn't know what to feel or think. If she was single again, would she be interested in him? Did he still have feelings for her?

The next morning Farida packed chocolate cake, biscuits and pastries in various Tupperware containers for him, labelling each one. "Don't forget to give it to Auntie Shireen straightaway when you get there." Then she fussed over his clothing, removing everything from his suitcase and repacking it neatly.

Rokaya didn't see the need for this and chided her mother gently. "Mummy, he is going to unpack everything anyway. Why are you wasting time?" she said and laughed.

After lunch, Imraan bade everyone goodbye and set off for the long journey. As he started his car, his mother rushed to the window.

"Don't forget to phone when you reach. Also think about which girl you liked at the wedding and I'll phone you later and we can discuss it."

Imraan's jaw hung open in shock. "What are you talking about? I didn't like any girl at the wedding! I thought I told you that."

"Well we're going to have to take you to see one girl at least. I was thinking of that Patel girl. So you better decide. Drive safely, 'Salaamwalaykum!'" She stepped away from the car and began waving.

Imraan could feel his ears burn with anger. He jabbed the button to close the window. A frown set on his face, he reversed from the driveway and drove off in a hurry.

Exactly three and a half hours later when Imraan arrived in Thembelani, his mother called to find out if he had arrived safely. She asked whether he'd given all the food parcels to Aunt Shireen. "I'll call you later in the week and we'll talk about the girl I mentioned. Think about it in the meantime," his mother said just before hanging up.

The only girl he could think about was Yasmin.

~

Imraan was delighted one afternoon when his father came a little earlier than usual to school to fetch him. The others in his class eyed him with envy. His teacher smiled and whispered "Congratulations" to him as he left the classroom. Imraan wondered what she was talking about. He found out when he saw his father, holding Mohsin's hand, in the corridor. "Mummy got a baby girl. You and Mohsin have a sister!" The boys were delighted.

Having never had a girl in his life, he was thrilled. Farida had had the spare room converted to a nursery filled with furniture and accessories in pink hues. A mural was hand painted by one of her artist friends, the cot imported from Germany, the light fittings from Switzerland, and the linen from France. If only Rokaya knew how lucky she was. Ebrahim's presence at home was conspicuous and he and Farida were in better spirits.

Rokaya was barely a year old when the fights between his parents started again. His father was hardly at home once again, and his mother was constantly sobbing and complaining. When Rokaya would cry for some reason or the other, Farida would reproach her unnecessarily.

Imraan hated it when his mother was in that mood. He made a point of keeping Rokaya out of his mother's way. When she was hungry and his mother was upset, Imraan would go into the kitchen himself and take the Purity jar and feed Rokaya. For the first two years of Rokaya's life, Imraan cared for his sister more than his mother did.

Farida noticed what her son was doing but never bothered to stop him, even on week nights when he was up until ten trying to make his sister sleep. His mother would be sobbing on the phone to Nani.

At night when Imraan was tucked into bed next to Mohsin, who would usually be peacefully asleep, then only would he cry. Heavy, wet tears that soaked his pillowcase, messing the expensive imported linen that adorned all the beds in the house. He would pray to Allah to "Keep my Mummy and Daddy happy like all my friends' families."

One day Rokaya became dehydrated after having diarrhoea and vomiting for three days. Imraan's mother noticed the lack of elasticity in her daughter's skin and rushed her to hospital where she was admitted for the next two nights.

Ebrahim didn't usually phone home when he was away and so now there was no way of letting him know that his daughter was ill. Farida, along with her parents, had to take care of Rokaya.

On the third day, when Rokaya had been discharged, Imraan's father returned home. His mother was livid. Ebrahim entered the house and greeted everyone, looking extremely happy. Nani was at home at the time, cooking for everyone while Imraan's mother sat by Rokaya's side. Farida began screaming at him, accusing him of not caring for his family. She called him names that Imraan had never heard in his life. It was a mix of languages. English and Gujarati. Nani quickly ushered him and Mohsin to their bedroom and shut the door before returning to the lounge.

Placing his ear against the door, he strained to listen to what was being said. Mohsin looked at him curiously.

"What are you doing?"

Imraan ignored him. His parents began to scream at each other now. Imraan could hear quite clearly without having to put his ear against the door. Imraan's mother accused his father of abandoning the family and neglecting his children.

His father tried to defend himself, saying, "How the hell was I supposed to know that something was wrong?"

His mother spat out, "By phoning your family to check up if we're okay! But you never ever do that! I don't even know where you stay when you're in Jo'burg!"

"I stay at a hotel. Phone the company, they make my bookings and organise my travel arrangements!"

Nani tried to intervene. "Calm down now!" Her instruction was ignored as Imraan's parents continued to blame each other.

Mohsin whispered to Imraan, his forehead creased with lines of worry, "Are Mummy and Daddy going to get a divorce?"

Imraan turned sharply to his brother. "Don't say that! You mustn't think like that. All parents fight, okay?"

Mohsin's lower lip trembled and his eyes began to water. Imraan forced a smile. "Let's play some games. Come on! Mummy and Daddy are fine. Just like how we fight sometimes, they fight too."

When the weekend arrived, things were still hostile at home. Imraan and Mohsin sat with their mother in the lounge, playing with Rokaya. She was now babbling and making an attempt to walk on her own, without holding the sides of the couches. His father was in the study busy with some work.

Since the day he returned from Jo'burg and he and Farida had had a huge fight, Ebrahim was at home more than usual. How weird, Imraan thought, that when his father was actually at home for once, he still didn't join the rest of the family.

Rokaya's toys were strewn across the Persian rug in the centre of the lounge. She was now giggling as Imraan guided her as she waddled like a penguin, gripping the tips of his fingers. Slowly he released her fingers and for a few seconds she stood on her own, looking unsteady. Then she moved her foot forward, encouraged by the cheers of support from Imraan, Mohsin and their mother.

"Come baby, come now," Farida cooed. Rokaya jerked forward and lost her balance, landing herself flat on her bum. Everyone laughed.

Imraan heard a car in the driveway and ran to the hallway. Moving the brocaded curtain aside, he spotted Nani and Nana with another man, dressed in a white *kurta*. He had a big beard and wore a *topi* on his head.

"Mummy!" he called out. "Nana and Nani are here with some man that looks like a *maulana*!"

His mother turned to Mohsin, "Quickly go and bring my scarf from the room and go and tell Daddy to come downstairs!"

Imraan was right. Nani and Nana had indeed come with a *maulana*. He and Mohsin were sent upstairs with Rokaya to the nursery where they were given strict instructions to care for their sister whilst their parents were busy with the *maulana* downstairs.

This time, there was no chance of Imraan eavesdropping. The French doors that separated the lounge from the dining room were closed while all the adults talked. For over an hour, they were busy and Imraan wondered why a *maulana* would come to their home? Did something serious happen to Mummy and Daddy? He knew that most people went to see the *maulana* when something was seriously wrong.

Two hours passed and still there was no sign of the adults emerging from the lounge. By now, both Rokaya and Mohsin had fallen asleep in the nursery. Imraan considered sneaking downstairs and hiding in the hallway where he could try and hear what was being said. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than he heard voices. The French doors opened and everyone was talking at once. As he crouched on the nursery floor with the door slightly ajar, he heard his parents happily talking and thanking the *maulana* for his help.

Years later he would still wonder what exactly the *maulana* did to make his parents so happy again.

## **PART TWO**

*The powerful man creates environment; the feeble have to adjust themselves to it.*

Muhammad Iqbal

## *Eleven*

At the mandatory weekly meeting, Imraan could feel the heaviness on his eyelids. He willed them to stay open. The night before he woke at every hour wondering whether Yasmin was the one. He even dreamt about her. She wore a long, red dress with a white scarf, which Imraan found odd because she didn't usually wear one, and she was telling him that he was her soulmate.

It was only when Dr Fourie announced that all the doctors at Thembelani Hospital would be going on a team-building exercise to a game reserve that Imraan's interest was piqued. There were murmurs of approval in the meeting room. The medical manager requested ideas from the staff as to which game reserve they thought would be suitable.

Before anyone could answer, one of the foreign doctors from Nigeria, Dr Edema, asked whether this team-building exercise was compulsory.

Dr Fourie nodded. "For far too long, everyone in this hospital has had a negative attitude. It's time we worked together and forget about the whining."

Imraan knew that this probably had to do with the recent incident where a heavily pregnant mother lost her child for no apparent reason other than negligence, both by the nurses and the doctors. This caused a stir at the hospital and the doctor directly involved was Dr Edema. A misunderstanding between him and Dr Isaac, who was on call that night, led to the baby's life being threatened and the tragedy of it being discovered too late. Even though a disciplinary meeting was convened for further investigation, the staff knew that if it had been another patient,

someone more privileged and who didn't live on a farm outside Thembelani, the consequences would have been disastrous.

Salma sat opposite him and was busy doodling on the back of some patient charts. She suggested Ithala Game Reserve, which garnered nods of agreement from some of their colleagues. Dr Fourie made a list of the suggestions. Eventually, a consensus was reached. It was Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve that they would be visiting in two weeks. It was to be on a Saturday and a picnic was planned followed by a game drive. Imraan couldn't wait. He was too embarrassed to admit to his colleagues that he had never been on a safari in his life. It just wasn't something his family would consider. When he was younger, it was picnics at the beach, or booking into a chalet on the South Coast, or visiting some aunt or uncle's house or farm where the rest of the family got together and spent the weekend. It wasn't anything exotic.

Salma was still at the hospital at lunchtime. She ended up helping Imraan with his patients and since it was the beginning of the week, this meant a queue of admissions.

"You don't have to stay here you know. You need to go home and rest," Imraan said as he signed patients' files. He sat behind a rickety wooden table with a stack of cardboard folders to his right. At least his chair was comfortable, he thought, as the table wobbled when he shifted his elbows.

Salma leaned against the grey filing cabinet and clicked her tongue in mock anger. "I thought you would have appreciated my help!"

He looked up at her and grinned. "Off course I do, but I feel bad because you were on call last night."

"Trust me, it was one of the best calls I ever had. I slept from eleven right through until four thirty."

"Really? That's amazing for a long weekend. I can't believe I'm done with ward work so early today. Thanks a mil!"

In the shack where he and Salma found respite, she asked him, "So how was your weekend?"

Imraan told her about the wedding and she found it hilarious that his mother was so determined to find him a wife.

"Most Indian mothers are like that," he assured her. Then he found himself confiding in her and telling her about his father, something he had never discussed with anyone before. The topic hadn't even come up with Shiraaz, Naeem or Rehana. He told her how angry he was with his



father because he was hardly ever around. "I know he's a workaholic. We all know that but no one ever says anything!"

Salma listened quietly. "Why don't you ask him about it? Phone him and tell him how you feel?"

"You don't understand... we don't have that type of relationship. I can't just phone him up to say 'How you doing?' I've never done that before."

Dr Liz Smith entered the shack before Salma could reply. Liz was in her late thirties and had a diploma in anaesthetics. In a rural area like Thembelani, she was probably just as good as a qualified anaesthetist.

Liz collapsed next to Salma on the couch, letting out a huge sigh. "I am going to scream if I have to dope any more teenage mothers having Caesars!"

Salma and Liz were quite close and hung out together regularly. Salma gave Liz a hug. "Ag shame man. What does the theatre slate look like? I see you're still in your scrubs."

Liz yanked off her head cap and ran her fingers through her short brown hair. "I think there's one more Caesar scheduled for later." She turned to Imraan, "How're you doing Dr Desai? I haven't seen you in a while. Even if it's not at the hospital, we doctors usually bump into each other at the shops in town!"

"That's coz he's hardly ever in Thembelani at the weekends," Salma said with a laugh.

"She's right. I'm usually in Durban on the weekends." As an afterthought, Imraan said shyly, "You can call me Imraan."

"Imraan? Ah, okay then," she said. She pronounced his name *Eem-run* and Imraan had to stifle a giggle. "I hope you're not going to be in Durban when we all go to the game reserve!"

"Oh, I'm definitely going to be there!"

Supper that evening at the Mayet Mansion was unusually quiet. In the spacious dining room, only three places were laid out. Dada was invited to one of his friends and would only be coming home after *Esha*. Imraan knew that Uncle Ahmed would probably be returning a little late from work, as he usually did. Imraan felt odd to be eating all alone with Auntie Shireen. As she began chatting to him about the day's events, he began to feel more at ease. He told her about the coming trip.

"Hluhluwe is just gorgeous! I remember when Asif was younger, his father and I would take him to the game reserves in the weekend. He loved it."

Ahmed arrived a short while later, while the food was still warm. This pleased Shireen. "At least now I don't have to dish out again." He greeted Imraan and sat at the table, his forehead creased with lines of concern.

His wife didn't seem to notice. "Do you know Dada hardly ever leaves the house? I was so surprised that he agreed to go. I think it's because this friend has been ill recently and he's so particular about visiting the sick."

It was only after five minutes that Aunty Shireen noticed her husband hadn't dished out any food. Uncle Ahmed feigned interest in his wife's chatter, nodding at the right moments, yet Imraan could see that he wasn't really listening.

"What's wrong, Ahmed?"

"Nothing," he muttered and quickly helped himself to the chicken.

"Are you sure?"

Imraan finished his meal and excused himself. He felt like an intruder on their privacy at times like these.

## Twelve

They set off at half past six on Saturday morning for the game reserve. The sun had barely risen when Imraan left the Mayet Mansion. Although he was excited about the trip, his mind was occupied.

His mother had called on Wednesday evening to tell him that he needed to come home this weekend. He told her that wasn't possible because of the team-building exercise. She was furious because she had already made arrangements to take him to see "that pretty Patel girl" she'd been telling him all about. He couldn't even remember what the girl looked like, he told her. But that was beside the point, he thought. Why couldn't she discuss it with him first, before she phoned the girl's family and made an appointment with them? When Imraan told her that he was not interested in seeing this girl, his mother began screaming at him.

Calmly he explained to her that it was his decision in the end and he really didn't want to see this girl. That's when his mother did something she'd never done before. She slammed the phone down on him. He gave her about ten minutes to calm down and then called back. Rokaya answered and told him that their mother was sobbing in her room and refused to take his call. Imraan thought that his mother was over-reacting, but then considered the possibility that she was menopausal. So he excused her behaviour. Instead he sent her a text message apologising for not being able to come to Durban. Three days had passed and he hadn't yet received a reply.

Salma leaned close to Imraan and whispered as she took a seat beside him, "Is everything okay?" Imraan inhaled her perfume, a fresh, flowery scent.

He nodded and smiled. "Everything's fine." He wasn't going to allow anything to spoil his day.

The drive took about two hours. The scenery was breathtaking as they went over the hills, passing smaller, rural towns with green fields where cattle grazed and barefoot children scurried about playing with sticks.

At the game reserve, they alighted in the sandy parking lot where a guide awaited them. He introduced himself as Dave, a guide from Cape Town who had previously worked at the Kruger National Park. Dave wore khakis with a large sunhat and glasses. A noisy transistor radio was fixed at his hip. He ignored the messages being transmitted and led them to the open safari vehicle.

The safari began with a hilly and very bumpy ride and the open vehicle made Imraan nervous. He sat in the middle row on the left seat, with Salma beside him and Liz next to her. Imraan wondered whether Salma would laugh if he asked to swap places with her? He decided against it.

The sparse trees along the sandy road were yellowish-green. The acacia bushes scratched against the sides of the vehicle as they headed downhill, but Dave didn't seem bothered. Instead he briefed them on a few rules as they set off. They shouldn't move or get up from their seats when they spotted any animal. They were allowed to take photos but couldn't get off the vehicle until he instructed them to. He advised them to keep a keen eye out and if anyone spotted anything, they should just say so and he would stop immediately.

Imraan wasted no time and began watching eagerly for any sign of movement. He almost thought he saw some animal in the distance but as the vehicle chugged uphill and headed closer, he realised it was an unusually shaped bush.

Dave doled out some interesting bits of trivia as they went along. Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve was roughly about ninety six thousand hectares and housed the Big Five. There was a buzz of excitement at the mention of the Big Five, but Dave cautioned against expecting to see all in one day. "It's highly unlikely. A lot of our visitors, especially the foreigners, expect to come here and see everything in one day, like a National Geographic documentary. That's not going to happen."

Salma and Liz both shrieked at the same time when they spotted an animal a few hundred metres from the vehicle.

"I think it's a buck!" Liz said as she squinted through a pair of binoculars.

Dave stopped and grabbed his own binoculars from the dashboard.

"Aah, it's an impala," declared Dave. He started the vehicle and headed closer toward the animal that stood under a tree. "Good spotting ladies! Now the impala is a very common antelope in Africa and also known as *rooibok*. You'll notice that they usually have an 'M' on their rear end. They're very good at adapting to their environment, which means they can be both grazers and browsers."

About half an hour later, Dave spotted a bull elephant, who was apparently in musth, and so had to be carefully avoided. The elephant was too far away, standing alone at the base of a grassy hill and trumpeting in anger. Imraan was glad that they were at the top of the hill. This was the first time he'd seen a wild elephant.

Around half past ten, Dave parked at a secluded spot with a few trees. It was time for drinks and snacks. He opened a fold-up table that was neatly stored in the vehicle, along with a tablecloth, and he brought out a cooler bag with drinks and finger snacks. Imraan stood with Salma and Liz as they discussed the beauty of the game reserve. Then Liz told them about her last trip to the Kruger where she witnessed a kill. A group of lions hunted down a buck. "It was so exhilarating to watch it right before my own eyes. You know, you would think you only see this type-uh-thing on National Geographic? Bloody amazing, I tell you! No pun intended," she said, throwing her head back in laughter.

Imraan finished his can of Coke in no time. "I would love to visit the Kruger."

"Oh but you must! Everyone has to go there at least once in their lives!" Liz said.

Salma was still drinking her coffee when she stumbled backwards on a rock hidden in the grass and lost her footing. She landed on her bum. Her coffee spilt over her jeans.

Imraan reached for her instinctively and offered his hand. "Are you okay?"

"Eish, are you hurt sweetie?" Liz asked.

Salma nodded and laughed nervously. She gripped Imraan's hand tightly and regained her footing. The rest of the group turned towards the commotion. When Dr Fourie asked if she was fine, Salma laughed it off and, looking toward the ground, said, "Just a little uneven here."

It was only when Dr Edema remarked to Salma, "At least you have your other half by your side in times of distress," that she could feel herself blush. Imraan pretended not to hear by asking Liz if she wanted another Coke. But he knew that Salma knew he had heard.

On their way back to Thembelani, the sun disappeared behind the hills in the distance, the ones that resembled mountains, while the clouds were like grey swabs of cotton balls. For about half an

hour there was a slight drizzle. Most of his colleagues were asleep, including Salma who sat between him and Liz, her head resting on Liz's shoulder. Dr Fourie drove in silence and switched the radio off after realising that no one was listening.

After lunch when the game drive continued, they had spotted a herd of buffalo, wildebeest, a giraffe with her newborn, crocodiles that were masked with mud and lazing in the sun, a lone white rhino, and a range of antelope. For his first time on a game drive, Imraan was impressed. Growing up in Durban, he had never been one for animals. His mother would have brought the roof down if any animal entered her house. The only other time he had contact with animals was on *Bakri Eid* when they had to slaughter sheep. Even then, he would not get too close. He would watch from afar as his cousins grabbed the sheep and steered it towards the slaughter hole where his uncle stood with a sharp knife. Everyone would chorus *Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar* as his uncle slaughtered the animal. It was only when Imraan was in high school that he began joining his cousins in the pen to bring out the sheep. But he wouldn't slaughter. He told himself he would one day and get over his fear of killing a live animal. Every *Bakri Eid*, he would remind himself that this was Allah's will and if Prophet Ibraheem was prepared to sacrifice his own son for Allah, how could he not sacrifice an animal, one that he barely knew?

## Thirteen

"So much problems doctor, what mus' do? My chillin's are longing me in Joburg but I dunno when I'm gonna go. *That one* doh wanna look after the house then who gonna look after eh?" *That one* was Aunty Maimoona's *dor-tin-law*. The one who kept her son away from her.

Imraan glanced at his watch and sighed. It was Sunday morning and he was surprised to see Aunty Maimoona waiting for him in the lounge. When he went downstairs for breakfast, Shireen told him that he had a visitor. "She's not feeling too well I think."

He wondered whether it was normal for sick people to just pitch up at the doctor's house here in Thembelani. Aunty Maimoona was one of the older ladies in the community, whom Imraan had treated once before at the hospital.

"So sorry to trouble you like this but I din know who to go by on a Sunday. You know how it is?"

"It's okay, Aunty Maimoona. What's wrong with you?"

Initially she said she had a heart problem. Then she lamented her hypertension, or "high blood", as she called it. Now Imraan began to realise why she was here.

"How you think I manage at home? Cooking, cleaning – that blurry *karni* is a waste of time and money – and look afterin' the chilluns. That's my life. I make so much *dua* that Allah takes me away from here and sends me by my daughter's." Here she searched her brassiere for a white hanky and began wiping the tears from her eyes.

Imraan nodded along. She just needed someone to talk to. When he finally got a chance to speak, he said, "That's why I think you should go to your daughter's house. You're too old to have all these worries on your mind."

"Hmmmph!" she snorted. "How you think they'll manage without me? *That one* can't even fry an egg! You know how muh son loves muh cooking?"

Imraan silently prayed that his cell phone would ring or that Auntie Shireen or Dada would summon him for something or other. Calmly he told Auntie Maimoona, "I really think you'll be just fine once you take all your medication and it would be better for you if you went to stay at your daughter's place. You really don't need that stress of caring for the house at this age."

Auntie Maimoona looked up at Imraan, her face grim, her permanently downturned lips forming a pitiful pout. That was her characteristic trademark. When she did occasionally smile, it was always only for a few seconds before her expression reverted to its original form. She nodded and agreed with him. "Ya I mus' go now. Haf to still cook."

When she had gone, Shireen sympathised with Imraan. "Poor you. You don't even get a break in the weekends! Come and have some cheese omelette for breakfast. I'm sure you're starving."

After breakfast, Imraan called his mother. He wondered whether he should be feeling guilty that he still hadn't heard from her. It was very unlike her. He dialled the landline number in Durban from his cell phone. There was no answer. Perhaps she was at Nani's house? He dialled his sister's cell phone. Rokaya answered after two rings. They were at Nani's house and had spent the weekend there. Daddy had gone to Cape Town and was only returning that same evening. Imraan could hear a noise in the background.

"Choti Khala is also here. She and the boys spent the weekend with us too." The boys were her twin sons, Sameer and Yahya. They were eleven years old and quite a mischievous pair. He could hear his Nani screaming for Yahya to "leave the Playstation and come to eat" because the "food getting cold!" He smiled to himself as memories of his childhood at his Nani's house flooded back. It was different when he was the twins' age. Nana was still alive then and he would play cricket with him in the garden.

"Is Mummy still upset with me?"

Rokaya hesitated before she replied. "I...think so. Uhm, how was your weekend?"

"Can you talk or should I call back later?"

He heard the background noise fade and then his sister answered in her normal tone. "No it's fine. I'm upstairs now. Everyone's downstairs...Mummy is still angry that you didn't come this



weekend. She feels so embarrassed because she already phoned that girl's family to say that we're coming and then she had to phone back and say that something came up."

"Well if she only asked me first before she made the arrangements, we wouldn't have had this problem."

"I told her the exact same thing! She scolded me for saying that, telling me I'm disrespectful and that I don't listen to her!"

"Don't worry about her. She'll get over it. I'm just surprised she hasn't called for so long. She must really be angry with me."

"Don't stress about it...she probably forgot about it. Do you want to talk to her?"

"Okay."

Imraan heard his sister go downstairs and call for their mother. When she came on the line and greeted him, she sounded like her normal self.

"How are you? How was your weekend?"

"The game reserve was something else! We spent the entire day there. I got to see so many animals." He named the wild animals he saw and imagined the expression on his mother's face.

"What if they attacked you?"

Imraan laughed loudly. "Mummy, we were in one of those large safari vehicles and there was a guide with us! When is Daddy coming back from Cape Town?"

"This evening..."

"So you're going back home tonight then? What time is he arriving?"

"Yes, *insha Allah*. I don't know exactly what time. He didn't tell me."

"Pass my *salaams* to him. Tell him to bring you to Thembelani and visit me some time. Auntie Shireen said you all must come and spend the weekend here."

"When does your father ever take us on an outing together? You know how he is. Work, work, work! I didn't even know he was going to Cape Town this weekend until an hour before he went to the airport."

"Just tell him anyway. Tell him he's never even met the Mayet family and they've so generously welcomed me into their home and their lives. They want to meet Daddy too."

"Did they say that?"

"Not in so many words but Uncle Ahmed did mention that he knows one of Daddy's cousins and that it would be good to meet Daddy."

"You're right. What will they think of us? That your father doesn't care about you. He hasn't even spoken to Uncle Ahmed or Old Man Mayet. I have to tell him."

When he ended the phone call, Imraan went to shower. He heard the last part of the *azaan* for *Zohr* just as he came out of the bathroom. He had forgotten it was Sunday and that *Zohr* was early today. He grabbed his *topi* and rushed downstairs.

That was when he heard a commotion outside. Auntie Shireen shrieked with delight before he heard Uncle Ahmed and Dada talking at the same time. In the front garden, Imraan discovered the reason. Asif stood next to his car, having removed three packed suitcases from the boot.

Ahmed, in the authoritative tone that he reserved for the workers at GHM Wholesalers, demanded to know what Asif was doing back in Thembelani before the semester ended. Shireen pleaded with her husband not to create a scene outside the house. Dada watched silently and when he spotted Imraan, he hurried towards him. "We can make it in time for *Zohr*."

Imraan nodded towards Asif, muttering a *salaam*. Asif responded quietly.

As they removed their shoes at the entrance to the mosque, Dada said, "I hope Ahmed doesn't do or say anything he'll regret."

~

"I hated it! I had to force myself to study. Most of the time I wasn't attending my lectures."

It was after *Esha* when Asif confided in Imraan. As they walked back to the Mayet Mansion from the mosque, people noticed Asif and stopped to talk to him. Many were his childhood friends and they demanded to know why he hadn't told them that he was around. The evening was cool with a bite of ice, a sign of the impending, bitter winter soon to embrace the town.

"Why didn't you consider changing your degree?" Imraan asked when they were alone again.

"Because I know what I want to do! My father just won't listen to me. I tried telling him about it last week."

"What did you tell him? What did he say?"

"I phoned him last week and told him I wasn't enjoying studying at all. He told me that I shouldn't be stupid and waste his time because this was my last year anyway."

When they reached the Mayet Mansion, Ahmed and Dada still weren't back. Shireen was nowhere to be seen but the coffee table in the TV lounge was laid out for tea, snacks and dessert.

"So you didn't tell him you were not in your final year?"

Asif shook his head. "I just didn't know how to. I didn't know how my father would react. I couldn't be dishonest with them any longer. It was eating me up inside. So that's why I decided to come home."

"How did he react when you told him?"

"Didn't you hear him shout earlier? He told me that I have to go back and that I shouldn't waste his or my mother's time. I told them I have an extra year to repeat. I told them I hated it. After you and Dada went for *Zohr*, my mother insisted we all come inside and talk about it. But my father wouldn't give me a chance." Asif looked down at the carpet, shaking his head. Sheer disappointment was etched on his face.

"What did your mother say?"

"What could she say? She can't exactly take my part in front of my father. Our mothers don't do things like that. But I know that she feels bad for me and if there's anyone that can convince my father to not force me to study, it's her. Oh, and Dada can maybe change his mind."

"So are you going back now or not?"

"I don't want to. My father says he doesn't want to see me at home. I should pack my bags and live elsewhere. He refuses to even look at me now."

"Eish, that's hectic man. Why don't you tell him that you won't study pharmacy but you'd rather do a degree that will help you run his business. Maybe do a B.Com degree? You can study that through UNISA."

Shireen came downstairs clad in her *burqa*, and switched the kettle on for tea. She told Imraan and Asif to help themselves to the homemade ice-cream.

As if on cue, they heard the front door opening. A few moments later, Dada appeared in the TV lounge. Ahmed headed straight upstairs. Imraan sensed that he wouldn't be joining them that evening.

Dada sat in his recliner and instead of switching the TV on like he usually did, he turned to Asif. "*Beta*, what happened? Tell me everything."

And Asif did. He told his grandfather what he had told Imraan less than an hour before. Shireen listened quietly, in between serving them tea. Dada sighed aloud when Asif completed his story.

"Your father will come around, don't worry. Where does he expect you to go anyway?" Dada said.

Shireen turned to Asif, who sat beside her, and rubbed his back lovingly. "Dada's right. Papa will get over it."

## *Fourteen*

Salma was absent from work on Monday morning. She wasn't at the meeting nor could Imraan find her in the ward. He sent her an SMS asking her if she was at the hospital. He didn't get a reply immediately. Two hours later, when he managed to take a brief break, he went to the shack to have something to drink. Liz was the only other person there. She was busy on a phone call and mouthed a "hello" to Imraan when he entered.

She sat with one leg folded up on the couch, still dressed in her scrubs, and doodled on a notepad whilst murmuring "uh-huh". Imraan filled the kettle with water and switched it on. He checked his phone to see if he had a reply from Salma. There were no new messages.

When Liz ended her call, she was fuming. "I don't know why these blurry specialists in Durban give us such a hard time! What are we supposed to do with a patient we can't treat and they can?"

"What happened?"

"I've got a serious case, came in last night, MVA. Had to have surgery this morning but the patient is not improving and needs to be transferred to a tertiary hospital. These people are giving me such a hard time!"

"Isn't that always the case? I hate it when they make it seem as if we are trying to pass our work onto them."

“Exactly! I’ll just phone them later, coz that’s what they told me to do, and nag them until they agree. They mustn’t give me nonsense about not having any beds. They need to find a bed!”

The kettle let off a low whistle. Imraan found a clean, empty mug and added a Five Roses teabag. He turned to Liz. “Is Salma here today?”

“No man, poor thing hurt her coccyx on Saturday when she slipped. She says it’s very sore and needs some rest.”

“Oh, okay. I was wondering where she was. I sent her an SMS but haven’t received a reply.”

“She’s probably asleep. I should go and visit her and check if she’s okay.” Liz got up from the couch and tucked her pen in her top pocket. “Anyway, I’ve got to head to theatre now. Catch you later!”

Imraan sipped his hot tea slowly. He wondered if he should also visit Salma after work. He hoped her injury was nothing serious. If Liz was planning on visiting her, and he didn’t, surely it would seem rude. He worked with her every day. Would it mean something if he went? After all he was a lone Muslim man visiting a single Muslim woman in a small town. Would her father be upset if he found out?

Moments later his cell phone beeped. It was a text message from Salma. She confirmed what Liz had told him. She had hurt herself and didn’t think she would be coming to work for the next day or two.

~

The block of flats was situated very close to the CBD. Just down the road was the shopping centre with a Pick ‘n Pay and smaller shops like a video rental place and a hardware shop. Liz had given him directions to Salma’s flat shortly before he left. The face-brick three-storied building was home to twelve flats. It was around half past four when Imraan found an empty bay in the parking lot of the building.

He debated whether he should take anything for her. Eventually he settled for a bunch of yellow carnations. She was his colleague after all. And more recently, she had become his friend. At the back of his mind, the thought of *what would people say if they saw him taking something for her* niggled.

Salma answered the door. Her hand flew to her mouth in shock. “Oh it’s you!” She wore black track pants and a white Adidas T-shirt. Her bedraggled hair was uncovered.

"Just hold on a sec," she said and scurried away, leaving Imraan waiting patiently on the other side of the Trelidor. He wondered at that moment whether he had made a mistake by coming to visit her.

Almost five minutes passed before she reappeared. She had donned a loose-fitting black *abaya* with a matching headscarf.

"*Assalamualaykum!* Sorry I was so rude. I wasn't expecting you," she apologised as she unlocked the gate.

"*Wa'alaykumsalaam.* I should be asking you for *maaf*. I should have let you know that I was coming."

"Don't stress about it. I was expecting Liz, that's all." She led him inside to an open-plan lounge and dining area. "The flowers are gorgeous! Thanks!"

Imraan blushed. He shouldn't have brought the flowers. What was he thinking? He was only here to check if she was alright. He took in every bit of the flat, the eclectic mix of colours and textures. The white tiled lounge area had a double seater black suede sofa with orange cushions. An orange bean bag was adjacent to it, next to a cream wrought-iron magazine rack. *Marie Claire*, *Oprah* and a few local Islamic magazines were bursting from it. The lounge was demarcated from the dining area by a zebra-patterned rug. To complete the cosy look of the lounge, a rustic TV stand stood in front of the large window. Thin rays of sunlight streamed through the venetian blinds that were only slightly open.

"Cosy. Very nice," Imraan said as he took a seat on the sofa. "Reminds me of one of those designer home-makeover shows on TV."

Salma laughed, "Why thank you. Although I have to admit the reason I chose this place to rent was coz it came fully furnished."

"Aah, and here I thought you were some sort of an interior decorator."

They shared a laugh and Imraan suddenly felt at ease again, like he did when they were at the hospital together. He enquired about her health and Salma insisted she was fine, assuring him it was nothing serious and that she should be back at work by the end of the week. An hour went by as they discussed their patients. Halfway through, Salma ignored Imraan's protests and disappeared into the kitchen to make tea. She served it in a bright pink mug with cursive handwriting all around. She apologised for having only a pack of Tennis biscuits in her cupboard, and grinned when he told her that was his favourite ready-made biscuit.

Then Salma asked about his family and whether he had spoken to his father. Imraan replied with a laconic "no" and didn't elaborate. Why should he ruin his mood when he was enjoying his

afternoon? During the awkward silence that followed, Imraan made an attempt to read the writing on his mug. They were random sentences about life in general. A bit confusing as none of the sentences ended with full stops.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You don't have to apologise. I just don't want to talk about my family. Not today anyway."

Liz arrived at the right time. Three loud knocks on the door and that was enough for Imraan and Salma to burst into giggles.

"Don't we all just know when Liz is around?" Salma said as she answered the door. Liz shrieked in delight when she saw Imraan.

"Is there a party happening here? How sweet!" She grabbed Salma and gave her a bear hug as she balanced a pot of white carnations in her hand. "These are for you darling!"

"Aww, they're gorgeous. Thanks! Imraan just got me a bunch of yellow carnations." Salma placed them in the centre of her dining table.

"What a coincidence. Although I think he should have got you roses, hey?" Liz winked at Imraan. He turned bright red.

"I should be going now," Imraan mumbled, glancing at his wristwatch.

"Ag, just when I arrive!" Liz pouted. "See you at work tomorrow." She headed to the lounge and made herself comfortable on Salma's bean bag.

Imraan turned to Salma. "Sorry to take up your time. I hope you get well soon..."

Salma replied with her eyes downcast and a smile playing on her lips. "I'm glad you came. I feel so much better already."

"See you soon then. *'Salaamalaikum.*" As Imraan walked down the stairs, he could hear Liz's infectious laughter and smiled to himself. He turned around in surprise when someone called out, "Hey doc! What you doing here?"

It was one of Asif's best friends, Hamza Rasool. Imraan greeted Hamza with a firm handshake. Since Asif got back from Jo'burg, Hamza had been frequenting the Mayet Mansion at least three times a week. Imraan avoided Hamza's question as he walked towards his car. He made small talk about sport instead.

"You must come and visit me. I live on the second floor. By the way, who did you come to visit? I know most of the people in the building?"

Imraan hesitated. "I had to drop something off by Dr Madlala." He didn't quite know why he avoided the real reason for his visit.

## Fifteen

Imraan found a fresh sense of serenity whenever he was in Dada's presence. Thinking of his own chaotic household back home in Durban, he was grateful that he was away from it all. At this moment, his mother was probably whining about his father. There was always some reason or the other. Here in the Mayet Mansion, Dada welcomed Imraan home each day with an alacrity so endearing that Imraan felt as though he was his biological grandfather.

On this Friday afternoon, it was no different. Dada sat in the wicker chair in the gazebo that dominated one end of the garden. Legs crossed with his knees jutting out. He wore loose white cotton pants and a faded grey T-shirt. His glasses were perched on his aquiline nose, his expression serious.

A gentle breeze made it easy to enjoy the garden in the warm sunny afternoon. From the gazebo, the back of the Mayet Mansion was visible. Dada looked up with sheer delight when he noticed Imraan who had just returned from the hospital and found no one in the house. He knew that Dada would probably be in the garden reading.

After exchanging greetings, Imraan took a seat opposite Dada and stared with amusement at the untidy stack of books on the small round table that stood between them. He caught sight of a *Reader's Digest*, a few Urdu magazines and the latest issue of *Minaret*, amongst other books that were scattered on the table.



“Do you know what I’m reading about today?” Dada’s eyes shone with the wisdom of age, the rim of his irises an iridescent blue.

Imraan smiled in response for Dada didn’t give him time to answer.

Without missing a beat he began with childlike enthusiasm. “Do you know that it was not these Europeans that discovered the workings of the human anatomy? These white people always love to hog the credits when it comes to anything intellectually progressive. Ibn al-Nafis was an Egyptian doctor who discovered the lungs purify the blood. He did so in the thirteenth century. Three hundred years before the Europeans discovered it!”

His eyes wide, a triumphant smile on his lips, he nodded his head with an exaggerated slowness, waiting for Imraan to say something.

“That is impressive Dada...I had no idea that this was the case.”

“And you’re a doctor too!” Dada laughed his wheezy laugh. Imraan urged Dada to tell him more.

And Dada did just that, in his customarily loquacious manner. He told him how Arabic science was very much a reality hundreds of years before Western science, and how the Arabs were centuries ahead of Europe in disciplines like physics, chemistry, medicine, astronomy, optics, cartography and evolutionary theory. He explained that cities like Istanbul, Baghdad, Cairo, Toledo, Damascus, and Bukhara became hubs of investigation and experimentation. “Just to name a few, but there were others,” Dada assured him at this point.

Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, the Persian astronomer, created precise tables for calculating planetary positions. Reworking Ptolemy’s model, al-Tusi designed a model of planetary motion that was considered very advanced for his time. Three hundred years later, Nicholas Copernicus borrowed his model and improved on it. A heliocentric model was the result.

Imraan listened with intense interest, hearing names like al-Tusi, al-Sizji, al-Farisi for the first time in his life. Here was a man who had never completed standard five yet was able to tell him about a wide range of subjects.

Later that night, Dada deftly operated the remote control for the DSTV. Imraan had grown accustomed to joining him to watch the evening news after supper. Dada checked the TV guide and added the ‘autotune’ option to one of the programs on Al-Jazeera. Imraan watched with amazement. His own father probably had no idea how to access the TV guide.

When he was done, Dada turned to Imraan. “If you’re not busy tonight, you can watch with me. It’s about Palestine.”

Imraan nodded. He probably would end up watching the program with Dada. He didn't have much to do anyway.

After the evening tea, the phone rang. Shireen answered and spoke for a while before calling for Imraan, "It's your mother."

Farida informed her son that his father had agreed to bring them all for a visit to Thembelani on the coming Sunday. It would be a day visit even though Shireen had begged Farida to stay the night. Imraan couldn't believe it. This was probably the first time in many years that his father would be spending time with them as a family. Only Mohsin was missing.

~

The silver-grey E-class Mercedes Benz pulled up at the Mayet Mansion around half past eleven. From his window upstairs, Imraan caught a glimpse of his family as they alighted. Nani had also come! He rushed downstairs catching a whiff of the delectable aromas coming from the kitchen. After exchanging hugs and kisses with his mother, Nani, and Rokaya, and a handshake with his father, he guided Nani, who struggled to walk because of the arthritis in her knees, into the Mayet Mansion.

Farida came once again bearing gifts for the Mayets. This time they weren't extravagant. She brought a fancy platter that was neatly gift wrapped for Shireen, and Rokaya, dressed in an ankle-length denim skirt with a black wrap-over top, carried a round Tupperware with a beautifully decorated chocolate cake. Farida was thrilled that she could finally get to see Asif, whom she had only heard about from Imraan. For the first time in ages, Asif and his father were in the same room together for more than five minutes.

The initial awkwardness of meeting a new family quickly dissipated when Dada made an appearance. Heartily he welcomed the Desai family and enquired about their journey. When he spotted Nani, he switched from English to Gujarati effortlessly. Within minutes he and Nani had discovered a few mutual relatives by marriage. Imraan couldn't help but feel pleased with his father for agreeing to come to Thembelani with his family.

Lunch was a grand affair. From as early as the *Fajr* prayer, Imraan had heard the metallic clang of pots and pans in the kitchen and felt a little bit guilty that Auntie Shireen had had to slog away on a Sunday morning. She had even been busy in the kitchen till late the night before and he knew she hadn't had much rest, but her calm demeanour and perpetual grace belied this. Chicken *biryani* was the main course with *soji* and a platter of *samosas* and pies as starters. Amidst friendly chatter and hearty laughs, the Mayet and Desai families enjoyed their Sunday lunch.

Until Ebrahim Desai's cell phone began to ring.

Not once but three times. The first time it rang, his father checked to see who it was and rejected the call. He muttered an apology to everyone at the table. No one, except his mother, took notice of him. The second time it rang, five minutes later, his father was quick to reject the call again. Then Imraan watched as his father fiddled around a little longer with his phone after rejecting the call. He was sure his father had put his phone on silent mode. And he was right. The third time his phone rang, only Imraan was aware of it. He could hear the vibration of the ringing phone underneath the table. His mother, who was engaged in conversation about the availability of "good" halaal meat in Thembelani with Aunty Shireen, looked up at his father when he excused himself, said that he had to take the call and disappeared into the lounge.

Imraan didn't realise how long his father was on the phone until he walked past the lounge on his way to the bathroom. When his father saw him, he quickly ended the call saying, "I'm kind of busy with family. I'll call you back." Then to Imraan, he said, "These people at work..." Imraan nodded and his father stood in awkward silence for a few seconds before heading back to the dining room.

"So this is what the town looks like? Woolworths...Edgars...Foschini...Truworths...not bad Imraan!" Farida took in every shop that they passed on the main road. Imraan had decided to take his family into the town and show them around before tea and dessert was served. His father had liked the idea and so they all went for a short drive.

Rokaya laughed at her mother. "It's not a bundu town, Mummy!" They passed GHM Wholesalers where Nani made Imraan stop the car so she could take a good look at the Mayet empire.

"Uncle Ahmed is planning on opening a furniture section too," Imraan informed them.

Farida muttered, "Well they can afford to. Business seems to be booming in this town."

Her husband agreed with her, adding, "Remember my cousin from Escourt, Farida? Lanky Laaloo? I hear he's opening up a clothing shop here in Thembelani."

"So why is Asif at home and not at varsity?" Nani asked.

Imraan explained the predicament to his family. "But he is very interested in helping his father in the business."

Nani seemed thrilled at the idea. "Which boys are willing to help their fathers in the business today? Everybody wants to study, study, study and do their own thing. It's not like the old days where the families were kept together by the business."

She motioned to Rokaya with a nod of her head and said with a smile, "He seems like a nice boy too. Will make a very good husband for any girl."

Rokaya caught on and laughed, "Nani! I'm still in school!"

Imraan stopped at Pick 'n Pay, where his mother decided to buy a few bottles of Energade and packets of chips for their trip back to Durban. He accompanied his mother into the store. On their way out they bumped into Salma. Since the day when Imraan had visited Salma at her flat bearing the bunch of carnations, he had been avoiding her. When he knew she was at the shack, he wouldn't go there. He didn't know exactly why he was doing that but knew it had something to do with Liz's insinuation.

Imraan greeted her, avoiding her gaze, and then introduced her to his mother, "This is Salma Madlala. She works with me at the hospital." Salma wore a denim skirt and a long-sleeved blue top. Her hair was covered with a black scarf.

Farida smiled at Salma warmly. "Nice to meet you."

## Sixteen

"Your mother's such a wonderful person! So friendly!" Salma spotted Imraan in the parking lot on Monday morning. She waited as he gathered his stethoscope and white coat from the boot before they began walking together. There was no way he could avoid her now. Salma spoke as if nothing had happened and this made him feel at ease. *Because nothing did happen. They were only flowers.*

It was probably the first time his mother had interacted with a Black Muslim, he thought to himself. Outside Pick 'n Pay, Farida had spoken to Salma for about five minutes. Asked her where she studied, what her parents did, where she was brought up – typical questions any Indian person would ask. Imraan didn't tell Salma that on their way back to the Mayet Mansion, his mother had remarked in the car, "It's so good to see these people doing something with their lives instead of just relying on other Muslims to help them through life. I mean look at her, what's her name again, her father is a muezzin and she is a doctor. What an achievement in life. What would these people do without loans today?"

"What makes you think she got a loan to study?" Imraan had asked.

"Obviously her father couldn't have afforded to put her through medical school!"

Imraan had said nothing, silently fuming over his mother's presumptions. *These people.* His father had added, "There are a lot of successful Black Muslims on the rise. In our company, we just hired a young Black guy, Sulaiman, to do his articles."

Now as he walked with Salma, Imraan changed the subject. "Hey did you know that this morning's meeting has been cancelled?"

"Uh-huh. I read the notice board on Friday. Dr Fourie is in Jo'burg for some workshop."

In the shack, no one else was there, probably because everyone knew that there wasn't going to be a meeting. A recent issue of *YOU* magazine sat on the table beside the sofa. Idly, Imraan began flipping through it as Salma busied herself making tea.

Minutes later, Imraan looked up to see her holding two mugs. "You didn't have to do that. I can make my own tea."

Salma's eyes widened with surprise. Then she looked down and mumbled, "I just thought it would be easier for one of us to do it."

Immediately Imraan regretted what he had said. He made light of it. "It's just that you're always making tea for me. I should be the one making it now!"

His feeble attempt at disguising his embarrassment didn't go unnoticed. Salma handed him the mug of tea and sat quietly on the sofa, sipping slowly.

Why, oh why, did he have to say that to her?

~

Ahmed was obstinate. It was over a month since his son had packed up and returned to Thembelani for good yet he chose to avoid any discussion with Asif. Shireen seemed helpless in her efforts to make her husband and son reconcile. Dada watched the unfolding of their dilemma with mirth. "Ahmed has always been used to getting his own way. It's about time he realises that Allah is the Master of Planners."

"Don't you think Uncle Ahmed should talk to Asif?" Imraan asked him one evening.

Dada coughed, a wheezy one again. "*Beta*, he *has* to talk to his son at some time. He's just so stubborn. He'll come around. Mark my words." Dada waved his bent forefinger and his eyes shone.

Asif thought that Dada was being Dada, optimistic about every situation. He even begged Dada to talk to his father on his behalf, but his grandfather refused. "Don't you see my Asif? The more I tell your father to accept your choice, the more he will resent it. You have disappointed him. He had high expectations of you and now? What has come of it? Two years of paying tuition fees, travelling and boarding and lodging expenses and now you come home with no degree? How *do* you expect your father to react, *beta*?" Dada raised his eyebrows and watched his grandson

carefully. "You need to prove yourself. You said you wanted to help out in the business. You need to start."

And start he did. Each morning Asif would wake up earlier than his usual time. For once Asif actually had breakfast. It was one meal he usually skipped when he was at home. Now, after breakfast, he would take his car and go to GHM Wholesalers where his father would glare at him wordlessly. Asif would ignore the glares and engage with the staff, all of whom adored him. He joked with them, spoke to them in Zulu and even shared his tea breaks with them. For them, that was more than enough. *The Mkhulu's son was having tea with them!*

It was only during the second week after Asif began coming to the store that Ahmed finally relented. Asif was helping one of the workers repack cans of baked beans after a customer's toddler had rammed a trolley into a shelf, sending all the cans rolling into the aisle. His father came up to him and said, "I need you to help me out in the office." Then he turned and walked away.

Asif, mouth agape, looked at Bongi, the shelf-packer. "Was he talking to me?"

Bongi nodded.

In his father's office, which was an enclosed glass cubicle in the front corner of the store, piles of papers covered his desk. A computer whirred as an animated screensaver filled the screen. Asif laughed to himself, wondering how old the computer was. His father was going to need to make a lot of changes now that he was around.

"I need to meet with one of my furniture suppliers for lunch. I want you to make a few phone calls for me." Unsurprisingly, his tone was business-like as he gathered a few papers from his desk and arranged them in order. He didn't look up. Instead he began scribbling down phone numbers on the back of a used envelope.

Asif nodded, "Sure. Just give me the details."

"That's what I'm doing," his father muttered, his eyes downcast.

Asif's face broke into a huge smile. Dada was right. *It was only a matter of time.*

As the days went by, the staff at GHM Wholesalers got to know that Asif was their new boss. All their concerns and complaints were directed to Asif since his father was hardly ever in the office. With the furniture section of the shop to opening in the next month, Ahmed was occupied with more important issues. He was particularly worried about the success of the furniture sales.

Mduzi and Jabu came up to Asif one morning. "We need to ask you something." Mduzi said.

"Ask me what?"

Jabu said, "We asked your father before but he is not *leesin* to us."

Asif had a feeling he knew what was coming. He had overheard his father complaining to Dada about the workers a few weeks ago.

Mduzi elaborated. "With the furniture *sekshin* opening, that means new workers for that *deepartment*. But your father said he no getting new staff. He's going to reassign duties." Mduzi had been working at GHM Wholesalers for more than a decade. He was one of the most loyal workers at the store.

Jabu continued, "We want increase."

Mduzi nodded in agreement. Then he switched to Zulu. "We know that when the furniture section opens, all of us are going to be overworked. We hear your father doesn't want to hire more staff. Talk to your father. Please. We also have families."



## Seventeen

"So are the rumours true then? About you and whats-her-name?" Asif winked at Imraan, a smile playing on his lips as they walked back to the Mayet Mansion for lunch one Friday after Jummah.

"What rumours?" Imraan could feel the blood rush to his face.

"C'mon man, you can tell me."

"There's nothing going on. Only Hamza could have created this ridiculous story. I was just going to drop something off at her flat. Jeez, small towns are hectic."

"Whose flat? What you talking about man?"

Imraan stopped in his tracks. "Who are you talking about?"

"Didn't my ma tell you? That patient of yours, Aunty Maimoona? Her daughter from Jo'burg is in town. And she's convinced that she'll make a perfect wife for you."

"Oh."

"Oh? What on earth were you on about?"

Imraan shook his head and muttered, "Nothing."

In the dining room there was a buzz of conversation. Dada had invited home two Jordanian travelling merchants he'd befriended at the mosque. Imraan was grateful for the distraction.

"I didn't forget about earlier. I wanna know what you were talking about," Asif told Imraan that evening. The two of them just started playing *Fifa* against each other on Asif's PS3 that was neatly set up in his bedroom.

"It was nothing. Forget about it." Imraan focused on the game. "Ha! Take that goal!"

"Damn, that was a great one." Asif put the game on pause and turned to Imraan.

"Hey don't you want to play?"

"First tell me who you were referring to."

"No one, forget about it man."

"Then I'll just ask Hamza..."

"No!"

Asif raised his eyebrows. "That doesn't sound like nothing to me."

Imraan sighed. "I don't even know myself what's happening."

"With who? Ask me, I know all the chicks in town." Asif winked.

"I think I like Salma."

Asif stared at him, his jaw hanging open. "As in the muezzin's daughter?"

"I know, I know..."

It took Asif a few moments to register what Imraan was saying. "A *kaaria*? You sure about this? There are so many *apra waara*'s that would die to marry you."

"Forget it." Imraan flung the console aside and headed towards the door.

"Hey relax. Get back here. I'm the last person that'll judge you, trust me." His eyes pleaded with Imraan, who relented and returned to his seat.

"Did you tell her anything?"

"Not yet. But things have been getting awkward lately. It's as if we're unsure about our friendship. The other day she told me that it's not right for us to spend so much time talking to each other."

"So what's this story with Hamza now?"

"She was sick a few weeks back and I went to visit her at her flat. She stays in the same building as him. I thought he saw me take some flowers for her."

Asif laughed and whistled. "You already took flowers for her and you saying you're unsure about your friendship?"

"It wasn't like that. Another colleague also visited her the same day and she also brought flowers."

"Hmm... I remember Salma. We used to play together as children."

"Ya, she told me..."

"Dude, I'm sure you know what this means if you're serious about her."

Imraan cupped his face with his hands. "I don't know if I really am though."

"Have you ever been serious about any other girl before?"

Yasmin came to mind. "Yes."

"And?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay... I'm gonna give it to you straight though. You know what you're getting yourself into. Your ma is gonna flip out. This town is gonna love it. No one cares about the "we're all Muslim" part. At the end of the day, we're Indian. We're born racist."

~

The first official indication that something was amiss at GHM Wholesalers was a small article that appeared on page two of the *Thembelani Times*. It read:

#### **Disgruntled Workers Demand Increase**

Employees at GHM Wholesalers expressed dissatisfaction with their wages at one of Thembelani's oldest businesses. Situated on South Street, the store serves more than a thousand customers per day, and even attracts customers from neighbouring towns.

An employee who did not want to be named said, "The boss just expects us to work and not give us a proper salary. We also have families to support."

Another employee echoed his colleagues sentiments, adding, "Things are quite bad here. We are all very angry."

The owner, Ahmed Mayet, told *Thembelani Times*, "I pay my workers accordingly. If they are unhappy, they must lodge a formal complaint. Why aren't any of them doing that?"

According to some workers, there has been an air of discontent since GHM Wholesalers opened a furniture department and instead of hiring new staff for this department, workers' positions were reassigned. All the employees are now responsible for overseeing more than they can handle.

Asif Mayet, the owner's son who recently joined the family business, commented on the alleged rumour after his father slammed the phone down on a *Thembelani Times* reporter. "We are in the process of negotiating with our workers."

"Can you believe this stupid blurry tabloid?" Ahmed shook his head. "What do you think of this?"

He turned towards Dada, who reclined comfortably with his feet on a footstool.

"What do these Israelis expect the Palestinians to do when they restrict their movement so much?" Dada muttered. He had almost forgotten then that his son was talking to him. "What is it Ahmed? What does the tabloid say?"

"They're saying that my workers are unhappy! That they're being underpaid!" Ahmed shook the paper in front of his father's face. He paced the room with hot tea sloshing in his mug, drops spilling on the floor as he walked. "Here I am giving them a job and they're so ungrateful. And Asif tells the paper 'we're negotiating'!"

Dada pressed the mute button. He looked at his son and calmly told him, "Why don't you take a seat and drink your tea?"

Ahmed obliged and sat opposite his father. Dada continued, looking his son in the eye, "Now tell me *beta*, would you be happy if Asif earned a salary like that and had to support a family?"

Ahmed laughed. "Now you can't compare them to Asif. He's going to own this business one day. But before he does so, he needs to answer some questions."

At the store, Ahmed summoned Asif to his office. "Why didn't you tell me first before telling the blurry tabloid we're negotiating? Now they think we're going to increase their wages!"

"Papa, I tried to tell you but you wouldn't listen! You told me we need to see how the furniture sales go before we employ more staff. What else could I have told them?"

Ahmed ran his fingers through his beard. "Did they ask you anything this morning? Have any of them even read the article?"

"I don't think so... nobody has said anything yet."

"Can these *kaarias* even read English?" Ahmed looked at the pile of papers on his desk and muttered, "I don't have time for this nonsense."

"But don't you think we should give them the increase?"

Ahmed shook his head. "We can't. Times are bad. We can't afford to."

Asif was silent for a few moments before he said, "But I've been going through the books and I think maybe we can afford to give them an increase."

"Going through the books? What the hell are you talking about?" Ahmed yelled.

"I called our accountant and got some figures. I just thought..."

"Got some figures? I allow you, a university drop-out, to help me in the business and suddenly you want to take over? Make decisions without me?"

The words stung Asif. University drop-out. So that's what he'd always be to his father.

## Eighteen

Thirteen ladies sat on the blue carpet of the *namaaz* room in Apa Sarah's house. The *talim* was about to start. Farida inched her way forward on her knees towards Fathima Moosa.

Apa Sarah stood up, greeted everyone and positioned herself at the front of the room. The ladies were arranged before her in a semi-circle. She explained the agenda for that day's *talim*: a discussion of the meaning of Surah Kaafiroon; the story of Asma bint Abu Bakr, followed by a talk on *geebat* in Islam. There were murmurs of approval at the topic.

The first half hour passed with Apa Sarah's commanding voice booming through the airy room. Farida sat in the front row, staring at the elderly burqa-clad teacher before her. But her mind was elsewhere. She was hoping she would get a chance to talk to Fathima Moosa at the end of the *talim*. Was it her blue Mercedes Benz she'd seen parked outside? Who else could it belong to?

"And the last *ayat* is *lakkum deenukum waleeya deen*." Apa Sarah paused with her eyebrows raised and stared at the faces of the *abaya*-clad women.

Then her eyes settled on Farida. "*Bhen*, can you tell the rest of us what that means?"

Farida's mouth went dry. She searched in the recesses of her mind for hints of the Arabic she'd learnt in a well-publicised introductory workshop the previous year. "Uhm... Apa, I don't really know how to express myself..."

Apa Sarah's unsmiling face bore down on her. "It means 'To you be your way and to me mine'."

Farida silently reproved herself. *Why did I ever tell her I started learning Arabic?*

There was a noticeable hum in the group when it was time for the talk.

"It is like eating the flesh of your dead brother. It is worse than adultery." Apa Sarah surveyed the ladies purposefully, raising her eyebrows as if she were posing a question, a tacit challenge almost. "*Geebat*. Backbiting."

What was supposed to be a talk became a discussion with all the ladies contributing fervently on the evils of *geebat*, a pastime of all women, according to Apa Sarah. One of the ladies, Zubeida Khan, who got divorced after discovering that her husband was having an affair with his *hindustani* secretary, said, with pain etched on her heavily made-up face, "I personally know what it's like to have people make *geebat* about you. After my rough patch I heard that some of my closest friends, amongst other women, were spreading malicious stories!"

There were whispers and shuffling amongst the women. They looked around at each other suspiciously. Farida silently sympathised with her and wondered who she was talking about. She first met Zubeida a month ago when she started attending *talim*. Her ex-husband owned a few restaurants in Durban and rumour had it that her divorce had been a pricey one, especially for him. This bit of information she got from Ebrahim. Her ex-husband was one of the richest clients at his firm, before the divorce at least. Farida knew the woman had been through hell but wondered whether she didn't bring the trouble on herself. She wasn't exactly the friendliest person at the weekly group.

Farida began silently comparing herself to Zubeida. Even though she was still married, it didn't feel like that. Ebrahim was more of an ATM than anything else. She knew most of the ladies had nothing in common with their husbands. After *talim* when tea was served, she would listen to their stories. Some even admitted to performing *shukrana namaaz* when the IPL tournament ended. The complaints were repeated each week.

"It must never be held in South Africa again! Those cheerleaders with their tight tight tops and panties! *Astaghfirullah!*"

"I know! I told Salim the same thing. What do they have to do with cricket? Do you know what he tells me? Why don't I come with him to the matches then?"

Farida couldn't help but think to herself, *At least your husbands are willing to take you with and go somewhere.*

Teatime brought energy back into the women. Each week they would bring homemade cakes, biscuits, pastries, pies, *samosas* or *bhajias*, which they would lay out as a buffet. Automatically, the ladies broke into their smaller cliques of three or four once they had helped themselves.

"You didn't tell us the hubby got you a new Merc!" Farida nudged Fathima.

Fathima giggled. "He was feeling guilty for attending most of the IPL matches."

"So he buys you a car?" Razia Patel asked.

"Well, I've been hinting for a while now. Anyway, who do you think Zubeida was talking about?"

"I don't know but it's not like she could keep her mouth shut about everyone else's business. Since her divorce she's made herself this victim." Razia scowled at the divorcée.

"She's been single for quite some time now, isn't it?" Farida asked as she sipped her tea.

Fathima scoffed, "The way she dresses when she's not attending *talim*, one would think she's an unmarried teenager!"

Farida mouthed "Sshh" when she noticed Apa Sarah approaching them.

"So what's happening with your son? Wasn't he supposed to meet my niece? The one he saw at your cousin's wedding?" Razia asked Farida.

Farida was hoping Razia wouldn't raise that topic. It had been very embarrassing for her to cancel the appointment when Imraan couldn't make it that weekend. She was grateful to Apa Sarah when she interrupted the conversation to enquire who had made the delicious *bhajias*.

"Her aunty asked me what's happening with you and her niece. I didn't know what to tell her after that embarrassing incident!" Farida called Imraan that evening.

"Don't feel pressured into going to their house just because you cancelled the first time."

"But this girl is a good girl. Why don't you at least speak to her first?"

Imraan groaned.

"You're twenty six years old! It's about time you got married. You have cousins younger than you who are married."

"I'll tell you when I'm ready."

"So you're not ready?"

"I didn't say that."

"If this is about Yasmin..."

"It isn't!"

"I just thought you still..."

Imraan was silent.

"If it's not about her then... Is there someone else? You can tell me, I'm your mother."

*No I can't tell you, he thought.*

~

The dreams were recurring. He woke up with a sudden jerk and realised that he was in his own bed, covered with the embroidered duvet that he had been using from the time his wife was still alive. The night was still, punctuated by the occasional sounds of insects. He glanced at the alarm clock, its bright red digits lighting up his side table. 2.43am.

He rubbed his eyes and sighed aloud. What did his dream mean? This was the third time in the week he'd seen them. He hardly ever dreamt of his parents. They had lived in an era when everything was different. Because they had lived their entire lives in India, his parents never saw him once he set sail to South Africa. He was only nineteen at the time. His relationship with them from then onwards was a long-distance one marked by hundreds of crumpled, stained letters in Gujarati. Occasionally, his father would write in Urdu, to which he had to reply in the same language.

They wore white clothing and sat next to each other. They didn't speak but they did smile. That had to be a good sign. Then Sulaiman entered the room, his expression serious. He held out his hand and pleaded with him. "Bhai, *aawoh*."

The last memory of Sulaiman he harboured was his three-year-old brother waving to him as he set sail to Africa. As the ship began moving, hundreds of people, like him, began waving earnestly to their loved ones. Whilst some of them cried over the sound of the engines, others yelled out promises that they would be back soon. Sulaiman left his mother's hand and began running forward, shouting in Gujarati, "Take me with you Bhai!" His father rushed after him and yanked him by the collar, admonishing him immediately.

Three years later, Sulaiman had passed away. When the letter arrived he was busy in the shop, serving a customer. He collapsed after reading it. They said his fever was too high and the doctors could do nothing.

The pain shot through his arthritic knees as he got out of bed. In winter it was always worse. He hobbled into his bathroom and began his ablutions, the pain worsening in the chill of the tiled bathroom. He had been warned by his physician to take it easy as he aged.

Goolam Hussain Mayet patted his face with the towel as he stared into his bloodshot eyes in the mirror. Then he made his way to the *namaaz* room to do what he'd been doing for the past twenty years – read his *tahajjud*.

~



"Baas, what's it gonna be? Are we getting the increase?"

Asif locked his car and turned around to see Mduzi, smoking a cigarette.

"What you doing out here? You should be working."

"Aweh baas, jus' a smoke break."

"Smoke break? My father didn't tell me anything about any smoke breaks. Now get inside."

Asif playfully whacked Mduzi with a rolled up newspaper.

"Seriaasly baas? Our increase? What's happening?"

"Sorry man. The lahnee said no. Times are bad..."

"And our fumeelies?" The smile disappeared from Mduzi's eyes.

"How old are your children Mduzi?"

"My big son, she is sixteen, and my dawtuh is eight."

"You only have two children?"

"My youngest son, Siyabonga, died at beth."

"Sorry about that Mduzi."

"Ja boss, you say you sorry but then you not help us."

"I am sorry. I'll try and make a plan for you. But don't tell anyone else coz the lahnee won't give everyone an increase. *Verstaan?*"

~

It was ten past four. He glanced at his wristwatch again, his heart palpitating as each minute passed. They agreed to meet at four. Why wasn't she here yet?

He had read the SMS only in the morning. "*Slmz. We need 2 talk in pvt. 2moro @ 4pm?*"

The library was the safest place for them to meet, she had said. *I don't think the Muslims in this town read.*

He felt like a thief but he had no reason to. He had parked his car a block away and taken a leisurely walk until he reached the library. Where would she park, he wondered as he paged through a tattered copy of a *National Geographic*.

He looked up when he heard the familiar jangle of keys followed by a whiff of her flowery scent.

Salma apologised. She had struggled to find parking. "Cosy spot you found here."

The bookshelves surrounded their wooden desk and no one else was in view.

"Erm, how you're doing?"

"I'm okay... you?" Salma avoided his gaze. "About last night..."

"I'm so sorry I didn't reply. I fell asleep."

"I wasn't expecting a reply and I don't expect one now... I just thought you should know...uhm... how I feel."

She didn't mention the sleepless night she had had wondering what was going through his mind. In the past month it had become a nightly routine. They'd start chatting on Mxit around 8pm and would continue until one of them fell asleep.

At 3am she tried to convince herself that he really did fall asleep and hadn't read her message, *"I think I'm falling for you."*

"But I feel the same way too."

Salma was deafened by the sound of her heartbeat. Did he really mean it? Or was he saying that to make her feel better? And was he truly over Yasmin?

## Nineteen

Farida woke up that morning feeling very irritable. Ebrahim was already in their bathroom trimming his moustache. Ignoring him, she began brushing her teeth.

"I'm going to be late tonight. Don't wait for me for supper."

Something inside her snapped. She turned to face him. Did he conveniently forget about the family braai later that evening? "Why? Where are you going?"

Ebrahim's eyes widened.

"I asked you where are you going?"

"Just dinner with some clients. What's wrong with you?"

She watched her husband carefully. "What's wrong with me? You know very well that Ma's having a braai tonight!"

"I'll come afterwards, Farida. I have to meet a client. Business is business."

"Don't bother. Everyone knows you're such a snob. Never want to mingle with the family!"

Ebrahim sighed aloud. "I'll come afterwards." He squeezed her shoulder gently.

"We'll see. Why you're meeting your client for supper and not lunch?"

"It's Jummah today. It's going to be difficult." He splashed water on his face, dabbed himself dry and left the bathroom.

Farida felt guilty. Perhaps she was too harsh on him? No, she thought. There was always some reason he was away from the family. Apart from the recent trip he'd made to Thembelani, he hadn't taken her or the kids anywhere.

She thought back to the days when Imraan was still at primary school. The lonely nights waiting for him to get back from work, the phone calls she'd eavesdrop on, the rage and jealousy. And Imraan saw and heard all of it. He'd heard the shouting, the insults, the swear words she'd uttered, words she thought belonged to the vocabulary of only vulgar women. Yet he said nothing. Even at that age, he would wait for the fight to end and then follow her into the lounge where she'd sob only to feel his tiny fingers grasp hers. She often wondered if he ever remembered all of this.

Then everything changed when the *maulana* spoke to her and Ebrahim. That same year they performed their first Hajj. That period was the highlight of her marriage. Ebrahim was truly a changed man. Or was he?

Recently he'd been more attentive towards her and she was surprised by this sudden change. Were her *duas* finally being answered? There were things that happened in the past that she wasn't proud of admitting, even to herself. She couldn't totally erase those memories but she could rearrange their order. The most unpleasant times of her life were neatly stacked in the recesses of her mind and she fought hard for many years to let them stay there. Human nature just wouldn't permit that. There were times when she would deliberately bring out the past just to hurt her husband, to make him feel the pain that she'd been through.

~

Farida hurried to the kitchen. She needed more platters for the braai'd meat. She glanced at the time. It was almost nine o'clock and Ebrahim wasn't here. Surely supper would have been over by eight.

"Farida, is Ibby here yet?" It was her cousin, Althaaf. "Needed some advice from him. He said he'll help me."

"When did you speak to him?"

"I saw him earlier at Pavilion. Zainub wanted a cake from Woolworths. I bumped into him over there."

"What time was that?" She tried her best to appear nonchalant.

"Just before we could get here."

Farida knew Althaaf and Zainub had arrived later than the other guests. What perplexed her was what on earth would Ebrahim need from Woolworths at that hour?

~

“So how’s the bundu town?” Choti Khala nudged Imraan and winked.

“Freezing!” He turned the chops and sausages deftly with the tongs.

“That’s all? We want to hear the exciting stories. Save it for dessert time.” His aunty disappeared into the house with a platter of steaming chicken fillets.

Nani had insisted they have a family braai before Ramadan, even though that was about two months away. The house was buzzing with his aunties, uncles, and cousins all over the place.

He joined the rest of the men in the backyard where they were ensconced around a trestle table laden with braaied meat. Durban’s winter couldn’t compare to the icy cold of Thembelani and it made Imraan smile when he noticed most of his family dressed in their warmest jackets. Tonight was cool but not cold enough for him to wear a jacket. Nani had scolded him earlier about it, “You going to catch a cold! Dress warmly!” He’d laughed and assured her, “Don’t worry Nani, I can treat myself if I get sick.” He realised ages ago that when dealing with traditions, especially with the elders in the family, it was futile explaining the science of medicine.

Just as Imraan helped himself, the commotion began. There were shouts and screams from the house. Rokaya ran outside, “Come quick Imraan! It’s Nani!”

Imraan dashed inside to find his grandmother on the lounge floor, her head cradled in his mother’s hands. His mother and Choti Khala were panic-stricken.

“She just fell down now,” his mother cried.

Nani’s eyes were semi-shut and the left side of her mouth stretched to one side. “Nani, can you hear me?”

She didn’t respond. Imraan held her hand and counted the beats for a minute. Her pulse was fine.

“We need to get her to the hospital. She’s had a stroke.”

## *Twenty*

When Mduzi brought his son to work on Saturday morning Ahmed looked up in surprise. He caught a glimpse through the window in his office and thought, does he blurry think it's Bring Your Child to Work Day? The insipid midlands news and events was of no interest to him any longer and he flung the free magazine on his desk.

Outside his office Asif was already talking to Mduzi and his son. Ahmed kept his cool, especially since Asif had turned laconic on him after his harsh outburst days ago. He regretted calling his son a failure, not in those words, but in his mind the image stuck out. All the years of hope, waiting for his son to graduate from university were washed away. He remembered the first time he drove Asif to Wits, he could feel the excitement rush through his body, as if it were him about to start the semester. Ahmed had been on a high during the first few months of Asif's first year. He would tell everyone he met that his son was attending Wits University. The novelty eventually wore off when Shireen gently reminded him that he should rather concentrate on Asif passing his studies than bragging about it. When Asif had to write a sup, that's when reality had sunk in and he realised Shireen had a point.

"What's going on here?"

Asif turned to his father and said coolly, "Meet Mduzi's son, Petros. He's our new casual worker."

Ahmed didn't even get a chance to respond for Mduzi was all smiles, prattling away thank you's by clasping his hands together as if he were praying. Petros took the cue from his father and began doing the same thing.

"Thank you so much *baas*. This is my first job. You don't know what this means to me and my family."

"You can start by packing shelves. I will show you what to do," Asif said as he led father and son away.

Ahmed clenched his teeth. The nerve his son had vexed him. Something needed to be done.

~

Dada emptied the drawers in the *namaaz* room. Piles of books flanked him on either side. He flipped through frayed, yellowed pages of magazines that dated back to the sixties. He squinted to read the fine Urdu. He looked up at the higher shelves that were crammed, every inch of space used up. Thick spines, thin spines, hard covers, soft covers, and some books with no covers stared down at him. This would take him an entire week to sort out.

He needed to separate Iqbal from Rumi and Ghalib from Daag Dehlvi so that he could set out what he planned to do – read all his books one final time before distributing them to those who would appreciate them.

On the highest shelf, all his editions of the Quran stood out imperially. The highest shelf was always reserved for his Qurans. For now, they would remain there.

~

Imraan didn't return to Thembelani the day after Nani was admitted to hospital. He called Salma at 1am to tell her what had happened. The conversation was brief. The awkwardness that he had expected to surface never did. Whether it was because Salma had just woken up from her sleep – although she assured him she had just dozed off while waiting to chat to him on Mxit – or whether it was because neither knew how to mention their baring of their hearts at the library, he wasn't certain.

She wanted to know how serious Nani was.

"Quite bad I think. She's going to take a few months to learn how to walk and talk properly again."

~

In her warm bed, under the electric blanket, Salma still felt goose bumps when Imraan called. She had been waiting to hear from him since their clandestine meeting.

She knew about nuptial etiquette amongst the Muslim community. Most of her friends from campus were Indian Muslims. The boy's mother or aunt or someone who would assume the role of a mediator between families would call the girl's mother and arrange for a meeting with them. The boy and his parents would accept an invitation to an afternoon tea at the girl's house where small talk would be made and the boy and girl would get a chance to talk. Thereafter if the boy was interested in the girl, a phone call would be made about a week later to put forward a marriage proposal. Then the wait would begin for the girl and her family would deliberate on the decision to accept or reject the proposal. Usually the girl's family, in order not to appear desperate, would delay before accepting the proposal. Even if the boy and girl did know each other prior to any arranged meeting, the procedure was the same.

What concerned her was the implicit warning Imraan had uttered when he said he would need to talk to his mother first before he could promise her anything. She'd assumed it was customary to do this but she didn't know whether her assumption was based on what she wanted to believe or on the facts about their situation. How could he not mention the fact that she was a Black could mean an imminent crisis?

Salma snuggled up tighter and forced herself to think positively. There had never been a significant other in her life before. Sure there were prospects but none whom she'd seriously considered.

~

Nine thousand and something kilometres away in London, Mohsin sat in the flat that he shared with another South African, worrying about his grandmother. He had read the SMS only when he woke up around ten that morning.

"How is Nani doing? Should I make a trip home now?" he asked Imraan over Skype.

Imraan knew his brother was asking indirectly if Nani's death was imminent.

"That's not necessary but we'd all be thrilled, especially Mummy. Nani's stable and should recover *insha Allah*. She can talk but her speech is slurred. It's going to take months before she will bear any semblance to her normal, healthy self."

At the mention of Nani's probable convalescence, his spirits lifted and he began filling Imraan in about his adventures. Paris one weekend, Berlin the next, with Premier League soccer matches punctuating the weekdays.



“When you coming to visit, man? I’ve told my friends already to expect you later this year!”

Imraan laughed. “When did I say I was coming?”

“Hey some of your friends from med school are here. Living and working in Ireland. Remember Taufiq? I think he was a year or two ahead of you?”

How could he forget Taufiq? There was no bigger soccer fanatic at university than him.

“I think he’s attended all of Man United’s matches this season. The guy’s crazy! And don’t ask how he manages to get tickets!”

Imraan regaled Mohsin about life in a farm town. “There’s absolutely nothing to do!”

“That’s exactly why you deserve a holiday here! SAA are having a special until the end of September. Think about it. You’ll save on accommodation. You can crash with us.”

“Sounds tempting. Maybe after Ramadan.”

## Twenty One

*Allah tests those whom He loves. Make sabr Farida, make sabr.* She repeated those words in her mind but her heart couldn't fully comprehend them. She felt no profound effect and her demeanour hadn't changed. It was all part of Allah's plan, she told herself. It would take time, no doubt, before everything would fall into place.

The phone calls hadn't stopped since her mother had been admitted. Everyone wanted to know what they could do to help. Nani's sisters had been sending fresh homemade curries every day for Farida and Taslima. Farida appreciated their kindness.

It was Tuesday afternoon and she had just returned from the hospital to pack some clothes for her mother and sort out the house. Imraan had left for Thembelani earlier that morning. She wanted him to stay the entire week but he assured her that Nani would be fine. Besides, he couldn't miss so many days of work.

Her mother's maid was in quite a state, having refused to eat after hearing of Nani's stroke. Nombuso had been a part of the household for almost a decade now and had been living in ever since Farida's father had passed away.

"Where's Ma's petticoat?" Farida called out as she rummaged through a pile of clothes that she'd emptied from her mother's imbuia wardrobe.

"Which one? The one with the lace?" Nombuso poked her head around the door. She was cleaning the bathroom.

"Same one. Ma is so fussy, I know she'll prefer that one."

"I'm coming now."

Farida roughly folded the rest of the clothes and returned them to the drawers. Nombuso entered the room moments later and began sifting through another cupboard.

"Is this the one?" She held out a white satin petticoat. After a brief inspection, Farida nodded and thanked her.

"When is she coming back home?"

She could feel the tears well in her eyes but Farida reminded herself to be strong. "I'm not sure yet. The doctors are not talking about discharging her at the moment but they said she's doing very well."

The cordless phone rang and Nombuso answered. "It's your husband."

Ebrahim enquired about his mother-in-law's condition. Farida responded coolly that the doctors hadn't said anything different from the night before. She didn't know whether her husband could even sense her cold attitude.

He chatted normally about plans for that evening and asked if he had to get anything for supper. Farida wasn't even listening to him properly. All she could think about was what was he doing at Woolworths? He hadn't bought any new clothing, she was sure of that and if it was for food, she did all the grocery shopping. Ebrahim probably didn't even know where the pantry was at home! Why would he need to go there after having supper with a client?

~

It was twenty five past six in the evening and hordes of visitors gathered at the hospital to visit her mother. Five more minutes before the nurses would allow them to see Nani.

Taslina was busy explaining how Nani fell. Family always wanted to know everything, Farida thought irritably. *Let them see Ma for themselves, mouth pinched to one side, slurred speech and then they'll know what happened.*

Ebrahim wasn't here tonight, he was busy at work. She didn't ask for details. So much for pretending to care and asking if she needed take-out for supper. She was still giving him the cool treatment but he still hadn't noticed. She would deal with him after her mother was discharged.

Nani was barely responsive to her visitors. When she did speak, her speech was slurred to such a degree that even Farida had trouble making sense of it.

When visiting hours were over, Taslima asked the nurse, "When will my mother be discharged?"

Sister Jane, as her name tag read, said with a bright smile, "Doctor is quite happy with her CT scan results and there's no major damage in her brain. If Doctor doesn't discharge her by tomorrow afternoon, then he'll do so the following day."

~

The unfamiliar woman's voice made *salaam* and asked to speak to her.

"This is Farida speaking..." She replied, trying to put a name to the voice.

"It's Zubeida here. I heard about your mother. How is she doing?"

"Zubeida?"

"From *talim*."

"Oh! *Maaf* I didn't recognise your voice." Farida couldn't believe Zubeida Khan was calling her. Immediately she felt guilty for thinking the worst of the divorcée.

She was genuinely surprised at the warmth that emanated from the woman whom she'd labelled a snob. Zubeida offered her help in any way and Farida thanked her, genuinely pleased by her gesture.

~

Ebrahim emerged from the hour long meeting with his client. He shook his hand and they parted ways. But something else occupied his mind.

It was the estate agent's phone call that morning that had ruined his day. After so many weeks of negotiating, the owners of the penthouse flat in Umhlanga were having second thoughts about selling it.

So much for a surprise gift for his wife.

## Twenty Two

"How are sales going? Customers satisfied with the furniture?"

"The ones who bought seem to be. But I was expecting more sales. At least for the opening week when we had very good specials," Ahmed told his supplier in Durban over the phone.

"Be patient. Things will improve. I wanted to discuss some other appliances this *ou* I know is selling. I reckon you'd make a killing from it."

Ahmed groaned silently as he watched the workers on the camera in his office. If he didn't end the call now, this guy would go on forever. "I don't think I'd be interested. Let me deal with the furniture for now."

"Kettles, toasters, microwaves, all the kitchen appliances. You'll never get these deals. Consider it. You guaranteed to make two hundred per cent profit!"

"Send me his details."

He felt guilty sometimes as he sat in his office and watched his staff do their work. The voyeuristic tendencies within him emerged when he had decided to install cameras about a year ago. Too many items were going missing.

On screen three he watched the black and white images of Asif waving a finger angrily at one of the employees in the delivery yard. He squinted to get a better look at the person on the screen. It looked like Petros. What did that clumsy boy do now?

On his second day at work he'd broken a few glass jars of pickle. Mduzi came to beg for forgiveness from Asif. Ahmed only discovered what had happened when another worker complained to him that Mduzi's son was useless and that he should rather employ their own son. That was exactly what he didn't want, the staff begging him to hire their children on a part-time basis all because of Asif's impulsive decision.

~

Asif listened as Petros repetitively explained his reasons for being caught asleep under a delivery truck.

"I am having so much of *homewek* last night. I was tired. Please *baas*, forget about it. Grade eleven is so hard *baas* but I still have to come here after school. We need the money."

"I did your father a favour. My father isn't happy about you working here and now you messing up again?" Asif hissed.

"Please don't tell my father or your father. Please *baas*?"

"This is your last warning." Asif turned around and walked back into the store without bothering to respond to Petros' words of relief, "*Thank you baas, thank you.*"

~

Back in Thembelani in the week following Nani's stroke, Imraan's new hangout during his lunch breaks was the local CNA. He knew all the Playstation games and their prices. He'd browse through the car magazines then move to the technology ones, reading anything he'd found interesting. When one of the cashiers glared at him as he walked out on the third day, he knew he should buy something. So he bought the first thing that his eyes settled on, the newspaper. Only later he realised that Dada would have the newspaper at home and he should have bought a magazine.

Imraan was deliberately avoiding Salma since he got back from Durban. He hadn't been on Mxit since but had sent her an SMS to ask how she was doing and to find out whether there was going to be a staff meeting that week. She'd responded to the message by answering his questions and not mentioning anything about their "relationship". He was grateful for that.

The only problem was he didn't know what to do next. This wasn't the right time to tell his mother about her. Not with Nani's recent discharge and many months of therapy ahead of her. He needed to read *isthikara* but even if he did, what would he do next?

He felt confused. There was only one person he could talk to about this.

"Are you still sorting out all your *kitaabs*?" Imraan stood at the doorway and smiled at the sight of Dada, cross-legged on the floor of the *namaaz* room, his piles of books having only increasing over the past few days.

Dada beamed with delight, his glasses perched on his nose. "Come and see this, *beta*." He pushed a few books aside and patted the spot beside him on the carpet. Imraan obliged, removing his shoes and taking a seat on the carpet. Dada produced an old postcard with a black and white photo of the Kaaba in Makkah. The edges were bent and when he turned it over, he noticed yellow stains on the tiny, illegible writing.

"This was in sixty-six when Ahmed's mother and I took the ship and went for Hajj. Those days it was too expensive to fly. We were gone for six months."

"Six months?"

"We visited Pakistan and India and then we came home. What a trip that was!" Dada chuckled wistfully. Then Dada noticed Imraan's serious face. "Something is troubling you *beta*?"

Imraan didn't reply immediately.

"It's nothing," he said moments later, feeling silly.

Dada removed his glasses and tucked them in his pocket. Imraan squirmed under Dada's penetrating gaze. Dada put the postcard in one of his hardcover books and got to his feet slowly. He asked Imraan if he would join him for his daily walk in the garden and Imraan acquiesced.

Outside the yellowtail birds skittered about the lemon tree. Dada pointed to the top of the tree and said, "They've been building their nests for the past week. I think it's complete now." Then he turned to Imraan. "So *beta*, what is her name?"

## Twenty Three

Imraan was curled up on the couch in the shack, fast asleep, when Salma walked in and woke him up. "We need to talk," she said. Her eyes were dark with seriousness and she was not smiling.

Rubbing his eyes, he sat upright. "About what?"

"Us."

"You want to talk now?" His throat felt scratchy from the night before. He hoped he wasn't getting the flu. He noticed she had closed the door to the shack. His eye caught the time on the teapot-shaped clock that hung above the fridge. It was half past six!

"Couldn't you wait until eight?" he asked her, irritated that his sleep was interrupted after a hectic call. She didn't even ask how his call went.

"No, this can't wait." Her tone was unusually calm. When he didn't respond, she continued, "You need to make a decision. We can't carry on like this. It's either you're interested in me or not."

Imraan was taken aback. "What are you talking about?"

Salma's mouth hung open in shock. "What am *I* talking about? Well let me tell you what I am talking about." She stood up from the sofa and began pacing about the room. "I am talking about you and me. About you expressing interest in me and then telling me you want to propose to me. And the next thing you do is act as if you've never said that. That's what I'm talking about!"



Imraan's cheeks reddened. "I never said I wanted to propose!" Immediately he regretted his words.

Salma glared at him, her mouth widened with disbelief.

"What I mean is I never promised anything. I said--"

"Why don't you be honest with me? Your family would never allow you to marry a Black girl, would they?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that now is not a good time. My mother is busy with my grandmother and I just need some time before I tell my mother about you."

Salma's eyes concealed her emotions. "Well then, I take it you're no longer interested."

"No, no, no," he insisted. "I just need some time, please?"

"I know things are hectic for you at the moment but it's not right for us to communicate with each other unless it is to discuss marriage. I'm sorry." She turned on her heels and walked out of the room.

He made a silent vow to tell his mother before Ramadan arrived.

~

Farida was the centre of attention at *talim*. All the ladies listened intently as she told them how her mother had collapsed in her arms. Even Apa Sarah was riveted and didn't mind delaying the start of the programme. The questions were endless and everyone shook their heads in understanding when one of the ladies asked how she managed cooking and caring for her mother simultaneously.

"We hired a full-time white nurse."

There was an instant buzz, murmurs and nods of approval and envy amongst the ladies.

"My *choti foi* had an English nurse," one of the ladies interjected.

Farida told them how she spent the entire day at her mother's house, cooking and caring for her, and seeing to the visitors.

"Today people don't just visit the sick, they expect tea and snacks," Fathima Moosa proclaimed.

Farida couldn't agree more. The reason for that she'd attributed to her mother, whose home had always been the hub of impromptu meals for family and friends over the years and at times like these it was a difficult standard to live up to.

Where her mother would grind her own masalas, never even consider buying *pur* or pastry for her *samoosas* and pies, and hand make all her own sweetmeats for Eid and occasions, Farida and her sister were the opposite. There was always someone or the other who took orders for savouries

and sweetmeats in Durban and that made life easier. Both the sisters, although having learnt under their mother's expert tutelage, were given to the "lazy wives' sin-drom" as Nani put it. "Wasting money is what these young girls do these days," she would lament to Rokaya. "That's why your Nani will teach you how to make everything."

At a time like this Farida wished she'd taken her mother's advice. Nani's freezer, usually stocked with dozens of *samoosas* and pies, was empty. Her own supplies at home were low and she'd only get her order from her savoury lady a week before Ramadan started, which was in a month's time. Taslima had brought whatever she had in her freezer and that's what was being served to the visitors in the meantime.

Her mother's Ramadan preparations would only start two weeks prior to the first fast. She'd live in her kitchen for those two weeks, making *samoosas*, pies, moons, pizzas and any other new savoury that she'd learnt.

"What about your sister? Why don't you have turns to go to your mother's place every day?"

"Taslima does pop by daily but she helps her husband in the business."

The ladies offered their help to Farida and she thanked them profusely.

"I really appreciate it. My mother's doing very well *alhumdullilah* so far but her speech is still slurred. Her physiotherapist comes to our home every day. Just make *dua* that she becomes her normal self again."

The murmurs of "*Ameen, ameen, inshallah ameen*" was Apa Sarah's cue to begin that afternoon's programme. She announced that all the ladies would be reading Surah Yaseen for Farida's mother.

At teatime, Zubeida Khan came up to Farida and offered to do some baking for her mother's visitors. Farida was touched but told her not to worry. Everything was under control, she assured her.

"What did she want from you?" Fathima Moosa eyed her suspiciously. She shoved a cocktail *samoosa* into her mouth.

Farida told her about the sympathetic phone call she'd received from her the week her mother had the stroke.

"Oh. Who told her about your mother?"

"I thought she heard from you...I missed *talim* for two weeks, remember?"

"I didn't tell her anything. I also missed *talim* the week your mother fell ill. I was in Cape Town."

"Oh well, it doesn't matter how she found out. The fact is she phoned to sympathise. She didn't have to. And now she offered to do some baking for me. She can't be such a bad person after all."

Fathima snorted, “Hrmmph! Can she even bake?” Then she stuffed her face with a slice of cake.  
“Mmm, this is divine.”

She didn’t know that it was Zubeida Khan’s chocolate cake she was devouring.

## Twenty-Four

At the Mayet Mansion it was a tradition for guests to be invited for supper or *iftaar* if they were fasting, on *Shabe Baraat*, the fifteenth of *Shabaaan*. This was the auspicious night when each person's Book of Deeds would be closed and kept aside for accountability until the Day of Resurrection and the new book would be opened for the coming year. The *maulanas* would preach the wonders of this night from a few days before and people would mark their calendars. It also portended the arrival of Ramadan, the month of fasting, a mere two weeks away.

It was during supper on this propitious evening that Dada announced he would be performing *Umrah* during Ramadan. Surrounded by his friends at the table, he ignored his son's instant protests.

"You can't go alone! Not at your age. You'll never manage the heat in Saudi."

"Then send Asif with me."

Ahmed's cheeks turned a deeper shade. Why was his father putting him in a spot in front of everyone?

"I don't mind going with you," Asif piped from the end of table where he sat with the younger generation.

"We'll have to talk about this first." Ahmed motioned to the smorgasbord that lay before him. "Why isn't anyone eating? Shireen prepared so much. Let's do justice to the food. *Kawa*."

~

The new stock of kitchen appliances arrived at GHM Wholesalers on Friday afternoon from Durban in a white Nisaan 1400 bakkie. On his surveillance camera Ahmed watched the workers offload the goods, even though Asif was there to oversee the delivery.

For a few minutes Asif disappeared from the screen and Ahmed watched the hazy recording of the driver talking to someone who appeared to have come around from the parking lot. It could be no one else but Petros. *He's catching a thick dos behind the trucks*, Ahmed thought angrily.

Petros and the driver chatted until moments before Asif appeared on the screen again. Just before he dashed away from the scene, Petros and the driver exchanged pieces of paper.

"What does he think he's doing? Probably looking for a job in Durban, the useless idiot!" Ahmed muttered aloud.

~

Petros waited for twenty five minutes outside the transparent glass doors whilst Ahmed chatted on the phone.

"What?" Ahmed eventually opened the door and barked at Petros, who sat on the narrow wooden bench, reserved for the staff when they came to complain.

Petros grinned, his neat white teeth shining. "I got an idea boss."

"You blurry sleep half the time. What idea do you have?"

"I come inside your *ofees* and talk, *baas*?"

"Get in."

Petros told Ahmed his idea.

Ahmed had to restrain himself from flinging his stapler at the blithering idiot in front of him.

~

"I want Petros fired."

"Why?" Asif was startled when his father poked his head through his bedroom door.

"Because I said so."

Asif stared at his father. "No."

"He's too damn lazy! All he does is sleep throughout the day!"

"He only comes to work after school on Friday and Saturdays. Give him a break. He also has to study."

"I don't care. You hired him and you must fire him." His father's tone was provocative.

"I'm not going to fire him. His family need the money."

"How dare you backchat with me?"

"You fire him if you want to," Asif turned away. He didn't need to be facing his father to witness the anger that surged through him at that moment. It was evident in his heavy breathing.

"Oh," Asif turned around, "and Dada and I are going for *Umrah* in the last ten days of Ramadan. I booked our tickets today."

"Who the hell do you think you are? I'm your bloody father and I will make decisions in this house. Is that clear?"

Asif was taken aback when his father punched the wall in anger. His voice wavered as he said, "But Dada wants to go, so he asked me to book it. Are you going to tell him no?"

"I'll deal with Dada. He's getting old and his health is more important. How is he going to manage?"

"I'll be going with him. I'll take care of him. It's only for ten days."

"You can't even take care of your own affairs," his father scoffed.

## *Twenty Five*

"They want to know if you'd be interested in buying the place fully furnished."

"So the deal's still on?" Ebrahim's tone rose with excitement. He quickly lowered his voice when he heard Farida in the passage. She entered the room, glanced at him on his cell phone and made a face.

Ignoring her, he told Rob, "I wouldn't mind viewing it but I need to see the account first."

On the other end the estate agent was confused until he caught on and laughed. "Oh is your wife around?"

"That's right. Let's make an arrangement for Tuesday afternoon."

Farida snapped at him when he ended the call, "When can I make an arrangement for you to visit your mother-in-law?"

His mouth agape, he said, "We've been there almost every day since she got sick. What more do you want?"

"I've been there every day! Slogging so hard!"

"Farida, not now please."

"Why were you at Woolworths the night Ma had a stroke when you told me you had to meet a client for supper?"

A perplexed frown creased his forehead. "What are you talking about? Are you having me followed?"

"Do I have to?" she challenged. "Altaaf told me he saw you there."

"Oh yes. I went to buy those cakes that Rokaya likes but they didn't have any."

"Since when do you ever care about what any of your children like?" Her astringent words cut deeply and she regretted it when she saw the look on her husband's face.

"That was uncalled for," he said quietly. "Nothing can ever make you happy."

At his last remark, Farida was filled with a renewed sense of rage. "After what you put me through?" she shouted.

"Sshh, Rokaya will hear you."

"You're a fool if you think she doesn't know what I go through with you!"

"Why do you always bring up the past? That's over. Move on. Stop being a bitter woman all your life!"

Farida watched him angrily walk out of the room. She knew he had a point. Why couldn't she just move on? How could she when he was the reason she was so bitter? She wiped away her tears with the sleeve of her *Samira* caftan. She had to change otherwise she would regret it. She didn't want her marriage to end up in a divorce – what would everyone say?

~

The pungent aroma of fried chillies evoked his childhood memories. For the entire morning he and Mohsin would climb the oak tree in his grandparent's garden in the summer school holidays. Nani would yell at them to come inside and eat and when they failed to respond to her numerous calls, Nana would insist they all eat lunch outside – something Nani didn't quite like. It was too windy, she'd say. A white tablecloth was thrown over the stone table and they would sit on the benches. The maid would bring out a tray filled with bowls of steaming rice and curry, sambals and salad.

Imraan remembered the fried chillies vividly. Especially the first time he was allowed to taste them. It was with *kuri kitchri*. He couldn't handle the spiciness and had gulped down all the water in the jug. Nani summoned the maid to refill it but Imraan couldn't handle the heat. He rushed to the garden hose and directed it towards his mouth, wetting his entire body. He'd never heard Nani shriek like that before. "Sies! Dirty water! You'll get germs!"

That memory returned to him as he peeked over his mother's shoulder, "What are you doing?" The frying pan sizzled with sliced green chillies. "I see you're trying to make it like Nani," he mocked.

Farida whacked her son playfully. "I can also make it. It's just that Nani always makes it for me so why should I bother?"



"Well she won't be able to make it any longer."

She looked up. "I thought her therapy was going well. You said she's recovering nicely."

"She is, *alhumdullilah*. But there are things she's never going to have the strength to do again."

"I'm just so glad she is taking a few steps with the walker. The physio said that's a very big achievement especially in such a short space of time." Farida manoeuvred her way around Nani's kitchen, multi-tasking. "Please call Nombuso for me. She must set the table for lunch. We must eat quickly and clear up because all my *talim* friends are coming to see Nani after lunch. And where's Rokaya? I told her she must lay out the cakes for tea. Also, tell her not to forget to empty Auntie Zubeida's Tupperware. Such a sweet woman. She baked fancy mini cakes and sent them yesterday."

"Oh okay...Mummy?"

"Jee?" Farida slipped a sheet of *papad* into the oil and immediately it inflated. Deftly she removed it from the heat using two tablespoons and placed it on the paper towel.

"There may be someone I'm interested in..."

*Cling clang bang*. The steel pot lid fell to the floor. "What was that you said Imraan? But before you tell me, please call for Nombuso first." Farida bent down and scooped the steaming lid with a kitchen cloth.

Imraan leaned over the half closed kitchen door and yelled for the maid three times. Somehow it seemed more effective than just once. That was the way Nani called for her too, muttering that she was deaf when she didn't appear immediately.

He watched his mother scurry around the kitchen, stirring the pot on one side, and chopping dhania on the other. Then she would peek into the oven every few minutes.

"What were you saying earlier?"

"It's nothing, I'll talk to you later. I'll call Rokaya for you."

One week until the first fast. Time was running out and he needed to prove to Salma that he was committed. He wished he didn't have to tell his mother at a time like this, with her spending most of the week seeing to Nani's visitors. But he also knew he was finding excuses to procrastinate.

*Whether you tell your mother today or in two months, she is going to take a while to accept it. That's what Dada had told him, warning him to expect the worst reaction from his family. But Dada did not judge matters and seemed pleased. "Her family is like my own. She is a wonderful, good-hearted girl. Everything will work out as Allah has ordained in your taqdir."*

## *Twenty-Six*

Ahmed accelerated hard, maximising the power of his 4x4 for once. He almost didn't see an old woman crossing the road and braked just in time.

"Shit," he muttered. "Go on old hag!" The white lady began waving her arms at him in anger. He wasn't even listening to what she was saying.

He was scared. Terrified in fact. His supplier had just called him while he was having breakfast, the elaborate spread that Shireen had prepared. Ramadan would start the next day and it was a tradition of hers to spoil them the day before.

While enjoying hot pancakes, he almost rejected the call when he saw whose name flashed on the screen. That was the beauty of cell phones, choosing who you wanted to talk to. When his phone rang again, his wife said, "Aren't you going to answer? It must be important, so early on a Saturday morning."

"It's my furniture supplier in Durban. I don't need any new stock now."

"Maybe it's something else."

It was.

"Are you alone? Can you talk?" Ahmed instantly knew something was wrong.

Something was very wrong in fact. He didn't even get to finish the pancakes, never mind the soufflé omelette and the fresh fruit juice, for he was in quite a state. He left the house immediately. "Something urgent. Have to go."

Asif, who'd just woken up, watched him leave but didn't ask what the problem was. Thank god, Ahmed thought. The boy was too big for his boots.

From the Mayet Mansion, the drive to the store took about eight minutes. All Ahmed could think about was Petros. He was involved somehow. And he knew exactly where to find him.

~

Under the truck, behind the back wheel, a figure lay curled up, covered in old overalls.

Ahmed crouched and yelled, "Petros!"

He awoke in shock, bumping his head on the metal that sheltered him. "S-s-orry *baas*. I wake up at four 'o clock this morning. I'm going to work now!"

The scruffy-faced teenager's eyes pleaded with him and something inside Ahmed exploded. It was all Asif's fault. Feeling sorry for these dumb, lazy *kaarias*. He grabbed Petros by the collar and shook him hard, "Why did you and the driver tell the police that the goods were stolen?"

"W-w-what you mean *baas*?" His eyes widened with fear.

Expletives flew from Ahmed's mouth, as he accused Petros of being a liar. He shoved him away and Petros fell.

The boy was in tears. He got to his knees and implored Ahmed, "Please *bielief* me *baas*. I say nothing to the police. The driver too."

"Yes you are involved! It's because I didn't allow you to take the appliances and go selling door-to-door in the villages, isn't it?"

"No *baas*, I swear." He held his fingers up to make the sign of the cross. "*Jee-zaas*, son of God, is my witness."

"Don't give me that crap! The police are now investigating all those who bought the appliances. I'm asking you again, what exactly did you and the driver tell the police?"

"Nothing I swear, nothing!"

Ahmed felt his fury rise. Petros was still on his knees, blatantly lying to him.

"Then what piece of paper did he give you that day he came to deliver the appliances?"

Petros said, "No paper *baas*, no paper."

That's when Ahmed lost it. He kicked Petros in his stomach and he doubled over, screaming with pain.

"I saw you on the camera. He gave you a piece of paper. What was it?"

Petros wailed like a baby. "It was his phone number *baas*. He say me to sell some kettles and toasters to the people in my village but I come to you first *baas*."

"I don't believe you, you dumb monkey!"

"But I tell the truth. I think you don't know the goods are stolen so I come to you to warn you but you already know *baas*." Petros realised what he had just said but didn't get a chance to regret it for Ahmed was already pounding him with punches and kicks. Petros rolled on the dusty ground, covering his face between his hands.

Ahmed ignored his girlish screams and continued to rain the blows upon him until he heard someone shout, "Stop it! Stop it!"

Asif grabbed his father, yanking him away from the bloody pulp that lay curled up on the floor. By this time some of the other workers had come outside and gathered to watch the scene.

Asif yelled at the workers, "Get the driver. We have to take him to the hospital!" Then he turned his attention to Petros, who lay unmoving.

~

Farida removed a new duvet set from her cupboard and placed it on her bed. The maid knew what to expect each year, a total spring clean of the entire house before Ramadan arrived.

It felt so good to be in her home again. She loved her mother dearly but the daily visits to her house were becoming taxing on her and her marriage. With the melodious Quran recitation playing on the local Islamic radio station in the background, Farida felt like she was on a high. She made a vow to become a changed woman. Forget the mental baggage that she'd lugged around for so many years in her mind and be the best wife she could. Ebrahim was right, even though she'd never admit it to him, that she was bitter. And she was still young. This Ramadan would be a spiritual enhancer for her and she'd already decided to start it off with a positive attitude.

In the past week, she'd been ultra considerate and kind towards her husband and she thought that even he had noticed. They hadn't argued once.

As she opened the plastic wrapping of the duvet set, she heard an unfamiliar ringtone. Perplexed, she looked around the room and realised that it was Ebrahim's cell phone. He forgot to take it before he left the house.

She looked at the snazzy piece of technology and wondered how to answer it. She remembered what Rokaya had told her. The green button is to answer the call and the red button is to end the call. That was all she needed to know, according to her daughter.

She carefully pressed the green button and answered. "Hello?"

"Hello, is this Mr Desai's phone?" she heard the voice of a white man.

"Yes...this is his wife. Can I take a message?"

"Mrs Desai, how are you? Were you excited about the surprise your husband gave you?"

"Excuse me?"

"The penthouse in Umhlanga he bought for you? I told him he was lucky to get such a deal since it comes fully furnished."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what you're talking about. Who is this?"

"Is this Mrs Desai? Mr Ebrahim Desai's wife?"

"Yes..."

"Mrs Zubeida Desai?"

Farida froze. The slim Nokia slipped through her fingers and fell on the polished porcelain tiles. The screen cracked on impact, flinging shards of Perspex in different directions.

## PART THREE

*Do not try to run away from trials and tribulations, but endure them with patience. They cannot be avoided and there is nothing for it but to endure them with patience. How can you expect the whole of this world, and all that has been created therein to undergo change and transformation, just to suit your convenience?*

Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani

## Twenty-Seven

The last time the Mayet Mansion was so quiet during Ramadan was when Dada sat for *ithikaaf* in 1996. Shireen was preparing for *iftaar*, her mind filled with nostalgic memories. She wondered what the evening ahead of her would be like without Dada. Tonight was one of the holiest nights of the Islamic calendar and she was going to miss her father-in-law more than anything. *Laylatul Qadr*, the twenty-seventh of Ramadan was the Night of Power, the Night of Excellence, when the Quran was first revealed. Dada and Asif were in the city of Madinah tonight and Shireen wished she was there with them. With all that had happened recently, she needed her *duas* to be accepted more than anything.

Over the years she'd grown accustomed to watching Dada immerse himself in prayer throughout this night. She'd also become used to the visitors he'd bring along for *iftaar*, especially in the last ten days of the month. To her, this Ramadan didn't feel like a proper one. With all the gossip that had been flying around town, Ahmed refused to have anyone over to break their fast at the Mayet Mansion. Even Dada had not objected.

Ahmed was in the *namaaz* room praying fervently, a rare sight for Shireen since she had married him twenty six years ago. One thing was for sure, she'd never seen her husband so terrified in his life. She was even more scared than he was but she didn't show it to him, not for one minute. Now that Dada wasn't around, she had to be strong. Making constant pleas to the Almighty to deliver them from the problems they currently faced.

~

Tonight he was not going to come home. Listening to the virtues of the blessed night on the radio, Farida began sobbing on her *musallah*. She tried to stop herself but instead began bawling.

Taslima and Rokaya, who had made it their mission to make sure she wasn't alone for more than five minutes at a time since the day she discovered Ebrahim's secret, rushed to Farida's room.

"Sssh, make *sabr*," Taslima whispered, hugging her sister. Rokaya watched her mother sob and tears welled in her own eyes. Taslima turned to her niece and nodded her off. "It's okay. I'll be with her."

When Rokaya was gone, Taslima turned to her sister and whispered, "Farida, this is enough! Get yourself together!"

"I know, I'm trying so hard but why did he have to do this?"

Taking a deep breath, Taslima said, "Rokaya needs you more than anything now. You can't afford to show her you're unable to keep it together. You have to! For her sake! For Imraan and Mohsin's sake!"

"But why? Why must I still stay with him? He doesn't care about us!"

"I told you before and I'm going to tell you again." Taslima gently held her sister's shoulders. "He is your husband. Whatever happens you will always be his wife. I can't imagine what you're going through right now but you need to think of your children. The sooner you accept this Farida, the easier it will become to deal with. You do know that? You're doing really well so far. So quickly a month has passed and it'll only become easier."

*It seems to be getting more difficult each day,* Farida thought.

~

The night was still with no hint of a breeze. Tranquillity embraced the town. Imraan returned from *Maghrib* prayer alone. Dada and Asif had been gone for a week now but it felt longer and Imraan had never felt so lonely in Thembelani. Even though a part of him was happy that Dada would be making *dua* for him in the two holiest cities in the world (as he'd given his word before he left), he wished the trip could have been postponed.

So much had happened in the past few weeks that Imraan was having a difficult time dealing with it. Salma refused to reply to his messages and calls unless he'd told his mother about her. How could he possibly do that now, when, according to Choti Khala, she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown?



If it wasn't Choti Khala that phoned him every day, it was Rokaya. He would be busy at work only to feel his phone vibrate. For a second, he would get excited thinking it was a message, perhaps from Salma, but it wasn't. Just a voice message, if he couldn't answer.

Choti Khala wanted the details of a Muslim female psychologist in Durban who would be "discreet". She has to be discreet, he'd told her, or she'll lose her licence. After contacting a few of his medical school friends, he managed to get the details of an experienced psychologist. The only problem was, when he'd given Choti Khala the details, she gasped in shock. It was his mother's second cousin's wife's sister. How on earth did his family have the ability to trace everyone's genealogy?

No way, no way, could his mother see her now. Choti Khala was adamant even when Imraan reiterated that she would have to trust the psychologist.

It was a futile attempt anyway since his mother refused to see any psychologist. "The whole *dunya* is going to laugh at me!"

So each day the household was in turmoil. Rokaya would tell him on Mxit each night after *tarawih* how his mother's moods would fluctuate just when everyone thought she was coping.

The first week after she'd found out was the worst. His mother remained in her pyjamas for three days. Imraan would call her and listen to her muffled voice for over an hour, unable to make out what she was saying through her tears. He'd told her what everyone else was telling her, make *sabr*, Allah loves those who are patient. But what exactly do you tell your mother when your father takes on a second wife?

## Twenty-Eight

It was around half past ten when Imraan received the life-changing phone call. He was treating fifty-seven-year-old Florence Masundo. She had been on ARV's for the past six years and if he hadn't seen her file, he would never have known she was HIV positive. Boisterous and talkative, she was one of the very few patients who enjoyed her visits to the hospital. Imraan was making a telephonic booking for her at Grey's Hospital in 'Maritzburg for a benign tumour to be removed from her breast.

While the phone played *Bittersweet Symphony* into his ear, Florence regaled him with stories of her six children. In the middle of hearing about sixteen-year-old Nonhlanhla's academic accolades, someone finally answered his call. When the booking was confirmed, he told Florence. "Make sure you come early to the hospital on the twenty second because the transport to Grey's leaves before sunrise. Okay?"

He scribbled the date on her white card and made some notes in her file. She sat patiently on the chair across from him in the small consulting room. A leaky tap dripped every few seconds no matter how hard Imraan tried to fasten the faucet. Posters in English and Zulu about hygiene were plastered across the walls.

When his cell phone rang, he glanced apologetically at Florence and answered the call. She didn't seem to mind. His expression changed moments later and the colour drained from his face.

"Aweh! Are you awwright doktah?" Florence asked when he ended the call.

Imraan shook his head. "Someone very close to me has just passed away."

~

As in any small town, news would spread like wildfire. Not just any type of news, but the kind that involves a tragedy, something out of the ordinary. The housewives loved the birth of a baby with a serious complication so that they could shake their heads in an "I told you so" manner. Like the time when Firoza Suliman's daughter was born with a harelip and the women hinted that it had to do with the breadknife they saw her brandishing around the time of the eclipse. Or the death of someone, even if the person was terminally ill for almost a decade, it didn't matter. There had to be some "other" reason for the cause of death.

So when the news of Dada's death spread through Thembelani, the people were shocked – the man may have been in his eighties "but who would say?"

By noon, the Mayet Mansion was teeming with what seemed like the town's entire Muslim population. Shireen and Ahmed organised the demarcated men's and women's sections in the house with copies of *Surah Yaseen*, a few Qurans and *tasbeehs* for the sympathisers.

The mood was sombre, the questions endless.

*What time is his janaazah salaah going to be?*

*Will he be buried in Jannatul Baqi?*

*What is Asif going to do now?*

*Did he see the doctor before he left?*

*Was he fit to travel?*

*At Ahmed: Why did you ever allow your father to go in the first place?*

~

He'd only caught a glimpse of Salma when she and her parents had come to the Mayet Mansion to offer their condolences. Her father was in tears and Uncle Ahmed had to hold him to calm him down. "No one has done so much for me in my life as that man!" he cried out. "That is why he got such a good *mawth*. Twenty seventh day of Ramadan in Madinah! Allah is the Greatest!" And then he burst into a fresh bout of tears.

Salma and her mother had disappeared into the ladies section and Imraan got no chance to talk to her.

~

Twenty four hours had hardly passed before the rumours started.

*His heart couldn't take it anymore, especially after what Ahmed did to the business.*

*Sadness kills. That had to be it.*

*First the only grandson couldn't finish his degree, and then his only son causes a riot. What's an old man to do? Who will take over his legacy now?*

~

Between answering phone calls and responding to guests at her home, Shireen had found no time to mourn her loss. The greatest loss of her life, after her mother.

The only memory she had regarding her father was playing on the steps of her home while watching the procession carrying a bier adorned with a green cloth. She remembered entering the front room where her mother sat in the company of the other women in her family, weeping softly. Years later she was told it was her father's funeral. She was only three at the time.

Now that the visitors were gone, she, Ahmed and Imraan restored the furniture to its original positions. They did so wordlessly, each trying to make sense and find a way to accept the reality that Dada was no more.

*Iftaar* passed by in silence and soon after Ahmed and Imraan left for the mosque. It was only then that Shireen entered the *namaaz* room, the room where Dada had spent most of his time in the past two months. At the sight of the stacks of books everywhere, she burst into tears. What had Dada told her before he left for *Umrah*? "Bet, I know it's in quite a state but I promise you by Eid, everything will be sorted out."

She'd laughed and told him, "There's no rush. No one except you understands those books anyway."

Shireen sat on the carpet and gingerly browsed through a book. The yellowed, torn pages contained tiny Urdu text. She tried to decipher the words, but beyond the obvious words like *Bismillah-hirrahman-nirraheem* at the beginning of each chapter, she didn't have a clue what the book was about. Her knowledge of Urdu was confined to the basic text book she'd read when she was in class one. *Alif se anaar*. Pomegranate. *Beh se botthal*. Bottle. *Peh se pul*. Fruit. *Theh se thalwaar*. Sword.

She closed the book, placed it back on the pile and neatened the stack. At the desk where Dada wrote his letters to his family and friends in India, she noticed an A4 page that contained a list. It had the titles of books with a person's name and contact details beside them. So there was some

order amongst the disorder! He'd known exactly whom he would be giving items in his collection to.

Wiping away her tears with the back of her hand, the reality finally sank in. He was never coming back home again. She would never share interesting conversations with him whilst picking out dhania leaves or cleaning *methi bhaji*. She would never listen to the words of Rumi, Jami, Amir Khusro or Iqbal again. It didn't matter that she didn't understand Urdu or Farsi for Dada would always translate.

Then she saw a small white envelope with Ahmed's name neatly printed in English. The envelope was sealed. She made a mental note to give it to her husband.

## Twenty-Nine

He held the book tightly as he walked towards the gazebo. The leaves stirred with the cool breeze. He couldn't hear the birds chirping. Were they also affected by the loss? Who would talk to them now?

The book he held was not on the list. Aunty Shireen couldn't believe that Dada would forget about one of his favourite books, one that she'd seen him read hundreds of times. She almost missed the message inscribed on the inside, "For Imraan".

The large bold font stood out: *The Secret of Secrets*. When Imraan would ask "But what is the secret?" Dada would reply, "That, *beta*, you will discover for yourself when you take the time to read this book. Then *insha Allah* you will be blessed by the Almighty to understand the mysteries of the human soul and its link with the divine."

He opened the book and flipped through the pages. Blotches of tears found their way onto the words of Chapter One, with a gentle splat. In the quiet afternoon with only the plants, trees, and insects looking on, Imraan cried.

He wept for the first time since he'd heard that Dada was gone. He cried like a baby as he remembered the conversations he'd shared with Dada, grateful that the sprawling garden gave him the privacy that he required so urgently.

~

He'd insisted that Shireen not come with him. He needed to be alone, even if it was for a few hours. If she came along, she would be tempted to recall memories of his father and inevitably end up crying. Who knew how much worse it would be when she saw Asif at the airport?

As he left the town, he passed GHM Wholesalers and a pang shot through his heart. He hadn't set foot on that property since he had almost killed Petros. Asif wouldn't allow him to, at least not until the situation was resolved. He had to give his son credit where it was due. If it wasn't for his diplomacy, the situation would have got worse almost immediately. Fortunately, the newly-appointed temporary manager was doing a great job, according to Asif's report just before he'd left for *Umrhah*.

Petros was sent to Newcastle Private Hospital and was released after two weeks, when he had fully recovered. His workers were irate, especially Mduzi, who'd only agreed not to press charges under three conditions: if his son's hospital bills were taken care of, if he was paid out a handsome sum of money for his silence, and if all the workers got an increase.

Ahmed had refused resolutely, especially to the last condition. And that was when the rioting started. For three days, the workers went on strike. Asif begged him to just agree to everything but Ahmed was having none of it. Dada and Shireen would plead with him each evening at *iftaar* but Ahmed would not budge. It was a week since he'd assaulted Petros that a procession had lined up outside the Mayet Mansion, picketing and ululating. The reporters from the town's tabloid had had a field day. Photos appeared all across the front pages of the tabloids of the neighbouring towns too. Not only did they report on the strike but also the owner's alleged involvement with stolen goods. Ahmed still would not budge. He managed to avoid police investigation by claiming what his supplier had said, he had no idea that the appliances were stolen.

It was only when the workers began threatening to burn down the store that Ahmed had to rethink his decisions. He finally agreed to a slight increase. Everyone was satisfied. That was until rumours began to surface that Mduzi was going to press charges against Ahmed despite the fact that he had been paid for his silence.

Now as he drove silently to Jo'burg, he whispered words of *dhikr* softly. As is human nature, he remembered his Lord only when problems occurred.

Four hours later Ahmed arrived at OR Tambo International Airport. As he waited for Asif in the arrivals hall, he felt something in his pocket. It was the envelope Shireen had given him that morning.

His father's handwriting had always been tiny and neat. Overcome with emotion he began reading, drowning himself in his father's words.

My dear beta,

We all go through trials in our lives; it is a test of our faith. When I see you every day, worry etched on your face, my heart aches. This is just one of your trials in life. What may appear like a mountain of worries is nothing you can't bear. It will never be as great as the trials that our Prophets like Ibraheem or Ayoob (alayhis salaatu wassalaam) had to endure. Allah tells us in the Quran, "*Innama al usri yusra*", with every difficulty comes ease. Remember that, always.

I look at how you have expanded the business over the years and I am proud of you. From just a corner shop selling the basics, you created an empire. From a modest three bedroom home, you built a mansion. Which father wouldn't be proud? But beta, there comes a time in our lives when we begin to realise that the shiny, glittering objects of this world are the worst things for us. When we reach that epiphany, we should be grateful to Allah and seize that moment and make the change. Then we begin to question ourselves, what is the purpose of our lives on this earth?

Ponder on this *ghazal* that Iqbal wrote in a letter to his son, while he was studying in London:

*Dayar-e-Ishq main apna maqam peda kar  
Naya zamana naye subho shaam peda kar*

*Khuda agar dil-e-fitrat-shanas de tujh ko  
Sukoot-e-lala-o-gul se kalam peda kar*

*Uta na sheesha garan-e-ferang ke ihsaan  
Sufal-e-hind se mina-o-jaam peda kar*

*Main shakh-e-tak hun meri ghazal he mera samar  
Mere samar se mae lalah fam peda kar*

*Mera tareeq ameer nahin faqiri hai  
Khudi na beych gharibi main naam e peda kar*

Create a place for thyself in the world of love,  
Create a new age, new days, and new nights.

If God grant thee an eye for nature's beauty,  
Converse with the silence of flowers, respond to their love.

Do not be beholden to the West's artisans,  
Seek thy sustenance in what thy land affords.

My ghazal is the essence of my life-blood,  
Create thy elixir of life out of this essence.

My way of life is poverty, not the pursuit of wealth,  
Barter not thy Selfhood, win a name in adversity.

You are always in my thoughts and duas.

Your loving father.

"Papa?"

Asif stood before him, flanked by his luggage, looking fatigued with bags under his tear-filled eyes.



It was only when he hugged his son for the first time in twenty years, that he realised he was crying too.

## Thirty

It was the day before Eid. Imraan found Salma in the shack, busy at her locker.

"How are you doing?" she asked softly.

"The house is just not the same without him." He swallowed hard. "I'm really missing him. It was just so sudden, although I feel that he may have known his time was near.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he did know. My father is taking it very badly."

"I know...I didn't get a chance to talk to you that day. How are you holding up?"

"I thought you looked like you were in no state to talk."

So she had noticed that he'd been shattered. He couldn't help but feel a twinge of happiness.

"So much has been happening at home in the past month..."

Then he told her everything.

"There were so many times I'd typed out messages and even emails, wanting to send them to you...but I had to tell you in person. You wouldn't reply to my messages, my phone calls and you were never around. I just couldn't find you. Whenever I asked Liz if she'd seen you, she never seemed to know anything."

Salma looked away in embarrassment. "Imraan, I'm sorry, but as much as you needed me at the time, I need to know where I stand. I still do. First, your grandmother fell ill and now your mother has to deal with such a big issue. I understand but I need to know that you are serious. I just keep on wondering if you are ever going to find the right time to tell her?"

Imraan couldn't admit that he was wondering the exact same thing.

~

On Eid morning, Farida scurried around her mother's house, preparing for the sumptuous breakfast, a family tradition that she and Taslima have been keeping up for years. Although she tried her best not to think about it, she couldn't help it. Ebrahim had spent the night away and would only be coming later. She wondered what *she* was preparing. Would he like it more than her chicken *biryani*?

Farida never asked him why he did it, when he did it or how he met her. She was sure that he'd met her while handling her ex-husband's accounts. When he got home that day she found out, his sanguine demeanour irked her. All Taslima's words of advice were lost on her.

"So does the other Mrs Desai like her penthouse?" she sneered. Initially she had started talking in a low voice but not even five minutes into the conversation, she was screaming and in tears.

Ebrahim said nothing, apart from trying to calm her down. Rokaya, who had just got home from tuition, ran to her parent's room when she heard the commotion. If there was one thing Farida would never forget, was the look on her daughter's face when she'd realised what her father had done.

Farida was hysterical. Rokaya was in tears. Ebrahim asked Rokaya to leave them alone. When Rokaya was out of earshot, Farida declared, "I don't want you any longer. Get out of this house."

"Come now Farida, don't act like that. I did it out of sympathy. She has no husband and has three kids."

"Three kids? What about your own bloody children? When last have you ever done anything for them? Do you even speak to your sons?" Farida had been reduced to the level of expletives, insults and name-calling. And she didn't care.

Now as she checked the *biryani* in the oven, she hoped against all odds that Ebrahim would come home and tell her that he'd realised it was a mistake and that he would divorce Zubeida. But even if he did do that, the hurt that he'd caused would never go away. Not until the day she died. And it would never be the same again between them. Especially after everything they'd been through over the years. They may not have been the most compatible of couples but they suited each other, according to their families. Her parents had known his family when they were younger. Their

backgrounds were similar and they spoke the same mother-tongue. That was all that really mattered at the end of the day.

~

He heard the automated gates open in the driveway. Imraan peeked through the curtains and was surprised to see his father's car. No one was expecting him. Apparently he was supposed to have been at *her* house.

"*Kaun che?*" Nani asked from the lounge. She sat in the armchair, her walker at her side. His mother and Choti Khala had barred her from the kitchen despite her protests that she was well.

"It's Daddy," Imraan called back.

He couldn't hear what Nani muttered but he was sure it wasn't good. This was the first time he had ever seen his grandmother show irritation with his father. Obviously, she knew.

Instead of his mother being teary-eyed and panicky, she was as cool as the jug of Bombay crush laid out on the table. "What is he doing here?"

Rokaya and Choti Khala were peeping at him from the window and whispering to each other.

Imraan wasn't sure what to tell his father. Wishing him on such a holy day usually consisted of a firm handshake. Since he'd heard about his father's second wife, he'd been wondering what to tell his father when he met him? Was it even his place to ask his father about the second wife?

~

Ebrahim entered his mother-in-law's house bearing gifts for his family. For over two decades he'd been welcomed to this house regardless of what had happened between Farida and him, but as he stepped through the back door, he did so with trepidation. He could sense a tension in the air and he hadn't even seen anyone yet. Perhaps it was the silence that worried him? On Eid morning it was usually bustling with activity.

In the lounge everyone sat quietly, murmuring a response to his greeting. Farida wouldn't even meet his gaze. Nonchalantly she chatted to Taslima and her mother. He felt awkward holding three gift bags in his hand. He turned to Rokaya and hugged her whispering "*Eid Mubarak*" in her ear. Then he handed her a gift. He hoped she liked what he had got for her.

Imraan was next. He hadn't seen his son for almost two months. He felt Imraan's body stiffen when he hugged him but he couldn't blame him. Then he handed him a gift bag. Imraan muttered, "*Jazakallah.*"

Farida disappeared into the kitchen before he could get her attention. He wished "*Eid Mubarak*" to his mother-in-law, Taslima and the twins. He asked where Riaz was and Taslima said he would be arriving anytime soon. At least his sister-in-law had had the decency to treat him with civility since everyone had found out.

He went into the kitchen. "*Eid Mubarak* Farida."

There was no exchange of handshakes or hugs. Ever since they were married it had been like this. He left the floral gift bag on the counter and walked away.

## Thirty-One

"How's everything at the Mayet Mansion? They're all still coming to terms with the Old Man's death?" Farida relaxed on the leather recliner, her feet on the matching footstool.

Imraan had not expected to be sitting with his parents and sister and casually chatting about the day's events. Eid this year had surprisingly been pleasant. Mohsin had called earlier and wished everyone, telling them how he'd spent his day in London with other South African Muslims. Imraan told his brother to expect a visit from him soon, just as soon as he confirmed his leave at the hospital. Mohsin was overjoyed.

"It's not the same at all. Uncle Ahmed spends most of his day locked up in the namaaz room and Aunty Shireen and Asif barely speak." As an afterthought he added, "I also miss him too."

"I'm sure you do. He was quite a talker."

Imraan was annoyed by his mother's insouciance. She didn't know Dada and would never know him as he did.

"How's the business? The protesting is over now?" His father asked.

"It seems to be okay at the moment. Asif's back so he'll be there full time." Imraan didn't want to say much. He felt guilty, almost as if he was betraying the Mayets.

He hadn't seen his mother so calm in a long time. It probably was because his father had spent the entire day with them, without disappearing for a few hours. Now as Imraan listened to them

talk about their extended family that they'd met earlier, he reflected. He wanted to tell his mother about Salma before he got back to Thembelani.

Tomorrow he would leave after lunch and there would be no time.

It would have to be tonight.

~

Farida had too much pride to ask him why he chose to spend the day with them even though she longed to know what had happened between him and Zubeida. She wondered whether the silent treatment she'd been imposing on him for the past few days was taking effect. Not only had she been ignoring him until this morning, but she also refused to see to anything of his, whether it was his clothes or food. He had to help himself. She knew exactly how he liked his formal pants, once ironed, to be hung up in the cupboard but now he was left to hang them up himself.

She felt guilty about not cooling his tea. A few days ago he had scalded his tongue when he took a sip. She watched him enter the kitchen, heard the cupboard doors open and close as he searched for a saucepan to cool it himself.

She deliberately fried potato *samoosas* for *iftaar* when she knew he only ate mince *samoosas* and she baked chicken pies although he preferred steak. She watched him eat without complaining.

Although she should have been feeling elated for making him realise what he'd jeopardised in their marriage, all those minor luxuries that made his life more comfortable, she felt guilty. She almost felt sorry for him. Then she would chastise herself silently and tell herself it was he who married someone else and that he deserved everything.

Curiosity had got the better of her and she had peeped in the gift bag earlier that morning before breakfast only to find the most beautiful gold bangle she'd ever seen. It was stunning and it must have cost a fortune. The happiness lasted for less than a minute before she realised that he had probably got Zubeida something more expensive. She was still debating whether she should thank him for the gift. After all she was being civil to him, because it was Eid, and it felt good.

Now she stared at herself in the mirror. She wore Ebrahim's favourite colour today, a turquoise caftan. He even commented that she looked good in it. That had made her feel warm and fuzzy, like she was newly married.

It was late and she was exhausted. Even though her body begged for sleep, she had to read *Esha* first. She wished on days like these she could perform all her prayers on time.

~

"You will never marry a kaffir! Not in this lifetime anyway!" his mother yelled at him, her eyes blazing with a fury he'd never seen before. Not even when she and his father had fought did she appear in this state. She was standing before him in her bedroom, the *musallah* laid down before her as she had just finished her *Esha* prayer. She hadn't even removed her burqa before he told her.

Imraan had deliberately chosen this moment to tell her, when she was calm and feeling spiritually enhanced. In the cool air-conditioned room, suddenly he felt hot and bothered. He was sitting on her bed, on the one hundred per cent imported white cotton linen. The one that cost more than the maid's monthly salary.

Kaffir. She had referred to Salma as a kaffir. He flinched when she said that word. Acidic tone. Spiteful. Laced with hatred. Imraan looked at the floor, his head cupped in his hands. He felt a hot sting in his eyes and blinked back furiously.

"Look at you Mummy," he finally said when she had quietened down.

"What 'look at you'? Look at yourself! What will everyone say? That doctor Imraan Desai, a handsome, intelligent young boy wants to marry a *kaaria*? A *kaaria*! Do you know that we will become the laughing stock of society? That all your father and I have done for you and Mohsin and Rokaya will be gone to waste? Are you mad? What has gotten into you?" She didn't even pause for a breath as she lashed out.

Imraan got up from the bed, looked at his mother long and hard, and walked out of the room. As he headed downstairs and out of the house, he could hear his mother screaming, "You come back here right now!"



## PART FOUR

*They plot and plan, and Allah too plans; but the best of planners is Allah.*

Holy Qur'an (8:30)

## *Thirty-Two*

He zipped up his jacket, pulled on a beanie and checked that he had his Oyster card in his wallet. They had agreed to meet at the cafe. The tubes were busy even though it was past the morning rush hour. The “Mind the Gap” T-shirt that Mohsin had bought for him months ago was more meaningful now. He was on the Piccadilly line to Piccadilly Circus.

Dressed like a proper tourist with his complimentary Department of Health Community Service bag on his shoulders and a camera around his neck, he searched for the cafe. He bumped into dour-faced people as he scrolled through his draft messages to find the name of the cafe even though he’d already done so numerous times on the tube. One thing was certain: nothing could beat the warmth of South African citizens.

Regent Street was bustling. Mohsin had told him that’s what most of London was like daily. This was his fourth day here and he couldn’t get enough. From the efficiency of the tubes to the number of people confined to a city smaller than Johannesburg, Imraan was overwhelmed with the difference between the countries. The cold weather was endurable, he’d braved the winter of Thembelani so he was prepared.

She was rummaging through her designer handbag when he entered the cafe. He could recognise her from a mile away, red coat, navy jeans, long black boots, and her shoulder-length mahogany hair neatly sticking out from under a woollen black hat. Suddenly he was nervous.

She looked up, grinned broadly when she saw him, and began waving.

"Did you get my message just now? I've already ordered a cappuccino and donut for you. I know you must be starving!"

He shook his head. "Thanks. I didn't check my phone in the last ten minutes. Was bumping into too many people. Even though I apologised they just glared at me."

Yasmin threw her head back and laughed. "Welcome to London. So where have you been so far?"

"Just the London Eye and that debating place in Hyde Park."

"You mean Speaker's Corner?"

"Yes that's it. What an interesting place."

"It is, although it can get a bit too much sometimes with religious fanatics."

The waiter arrived with their orders.

"How long are you going to be here for?" Imraan added two sachets of sugar to his cappuccino.

"I'm here to write my exams. I'll go back to SA and depending on my results, I'll return here to work. I've got family all over England. What about you?"

"I'm on holiday. I go back home in a week's time."

"If only Mohsin had told me earlier that you were coming, I would have told Bashir and Farah. You remember them from med school? Two years ahead of us?"

"I remember them. I didn't know they were around."

"They're here for almost two years now. Just left for a holiday in Spain. They have a little daughter, Amina. She's so adorable."

Imraan watched her babble with delight but forced himself to concentrate on what she was saying. All he could think about was how could she sit before him, pretending that nothing had ever happened between them?

The children played in the corridor with a soccer ball that had already bounced three times from the second floor to the courtyard below in the time that Imraan tried to unlock the door. The key was rusty. Mohsin had showed him how to open it, he had to twist the key to a certain angle.

The flat was small and cramped. Mohsin's Lebanese landlord was away in the US. He wasn't sure how long he'd be there so he didn't want to move his furniture out. It was perfect for Mohsin. He and another South African roommate, Luqman, who was attending a family wedding back home, shared the flat.

Mohsin returned from work while Imraan was still asleep on the sofa in the open-plan lounge-dining room. He woke up with a nudge from his brother.

"Get ready. We're meeting friends for supper."

"But tomorrow's a working day."

Mohsin laughed. "Here it doesn't matter if it's Tuesday or Friday night. People are out every night. Now get dressed."

On their way to a *shisha* cafe on Edgware Road, Mohsin asked, "So did you meet Yasmin?"

"We had coffee this morning."

"And?"

"How come you never mentioned to me that she was here?"

"Would you have still made the trip if you knew?"

"Probably..."

"I didn't know she was divorced. I used to wonder how come she was always alone every time we all met up. You know my friend Patel? The one with the glasses? That's her second cousin. He told me about her."

Imraan's interest was piqued. "Did he say why she got divorced? I heard rumours but didn't know if it was true."

"Didn't say why. But he said her husband was full of himself. Apparently he's this top surgeon in Jo'burg. The marriage didn't even last three months."

"It figures why she isn't completing her com serv this year. Maybe she wanted to get away from everything."

"So she didn't tell you about her divorce?"

"Not a word. Is she also coming for supper?"

"Nope, it's only my close chommies and us."

~

Imraan switched the stove on and watched as the plate lit up with a ring of blue accompanied by a hissing sound. He turned it off. He'd never used a gas stove before. It was almost supper time and he thought he'd make something for Mohsin. His mother had sent a Pick 'n Pay green bag, the one with the zipper, filled with frozen food. The *samosas* were what his brother missed most. "They don't make it like back home."

He poured some oil into a saucepan but before he could put it on the stove, he heard the doorbell ring. Was Mohsin too lazy to unlock the door with the rusty key?

He was wrong.

Yasmin stood before him, wisps of her hair sticking to the sides of her face. She carried a few shopping bags and greeted him enthusiastically. "I was in the area."

Inside she took over in the kitchen. "You've never fried *samosas* before?"

The elongated kitchen was too cramped for the two of them so he left her to it and went into the lounge. He could hear the sizzle of the hot oil over the sport commentary on cable TV.

"Should I heat some curry with roti?" She poked her head through the small window from the kitchen to the lounge.

"I think my brother would like that. Thanks."

He logged onto Facebook through his phone and viewed Salma's profile. Her status message about her crappy night call from the previous week was still on. Salma hadn't responded to his SMS's for almost two days. Was she still upset with him for telling her it wasn't fair to hold it against him if his mother needed time to get used to the idea. He was reading his friend's status updates when she came into the lounge.

She removed her long black coat. "It's like a furnace in there!" Turning to him, she asked, "What are you so engrossed in?"

"Nothing, just checking my Facebook."

"Oh hey, I should add you as a friend!" And then she disappeared into the kitchen.

When Mohsin arrived home, he masked his surprise at seeing Yasmin. He raised his eyebrows questioningly at Imraan when the two of them were alone. Imraan shrugged.

"Dinner's almost ready," she announced. Yasmin had laid three places at the dining room table, rearranging the piles of books, letters and small ornaments so that there was enough room for them to eat comfortably.

"Luqman and I have never used this table," Mohsin said with a laugh. "It's always the sofa or we're eating out."

"What was that all about?"

"What was all what about?"

"Yasmin coming over. I didn't know you're interested in her again..." Mohsin flopped on the sofa beside Imraan and began channel surfing.

"I'm not." His words were sharp. "What must I tell her when she acts all friendly and normal?"

"Ask her what she wants."

"If you were in my position, would you do that?"

"Perhaps."

"Ya right."

Mohsin finally settled on a sports channel.

"Did Mummy tell you anything before I arrived?"

"About Daddy?" Mohsin turned away from the TV.

"No man, but I'm sure you know the whole story about that by now."

Mohsin nodded, unwilling to say anything else. "About what then?"

"Me..."

Mohsin looked perplexed. "What about you?"

So his mother hadn't told him. What did that mean? That she was in the process of accepting the idea?

Imraan shook his head. "Nah, it's nothing."

## Thirty-Three

Imraan heard over twenty different accents and dialects at Regent's Park mosque where he attended Jumma prayer. He waited for the crowds to disperse before he made his way out to the street. The crunch of autumn leaves under his Reeboks brought back memories of Dada surrounded by his books in the gazebo under the warmth of the afternoon sun.

Waiting patiently by the gate was Yasmin, clad in a silky black *abaya* with shining stones. He couldn't see an inch of her hair as she was covered up with the matching *hijab*.

"I got our tickets for Madame Tussauds," she gushed.

"But I don't want to go. I'd rather you buy me tickets for a soccer match."

"How can you come to London and not go to Madame Tussauds? What about Harrods? Have you been there?"

She gasped when he shook his head. "You have *got* to be joking! We'll stop by there afterwards."

"Listen you don't have to do all of this...aren't you supposed to be studying for your PLABS?"

"I'm taking a break. Anyway I'm so excited to see one of my friends from back home."

*One of my friends?*

Madame Tussauds was impressive, Imraan concurred. And so was Harrods. He got lost twice in the labyrinth of halls looking for Yasmin, who proved to be great company. On the tube, he logged on to his Facebook account to check if Salma had any recent activity. There was none.

He looked up to see Yasmin giggling, her cellphone in her hand. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," she said coyly.

"Are you taking pics on your phone again?"

She laughed. "You looked so deep in concentration. So cute!"

They alighted at Earl's Court Station. She wanted to stop at her cousin's flat, where she was staying, to change her clothes. "I can't possibly go out for supper wearing this!"

"You're meeting friends for supper?"

"Just you, silly! Now make yourself at home. I won't be long." She disappeared down the passage and he heard a door close.

Ten minutes later, she reappeared clad in skinny jeans, a black woollen jersey with knee high boots. Her hair was perfectly straightened, probably with that GHD, Imraan thought. What was it about this hair iron that drove young women, including his teenage sister, crazy?

"Where are we going for supper? I need to tell Mohsin so he can meet us after work."

Yasmin laughed liltingly. "Doesn't he have his own set of friends to meet tonight?"

"I'm not sure..." Imraan shuffled nervously. "Uhm, Yasmin. I need to know what's going on here."

She stopped dabbing powder on her cheeks and looked up. "What do you mean?"

"Since when are we *just* friends?" He asked quietly.

"Imraan, we can't pretend that we never knew each other."

"Nor can we pretend that everything's fine between us...especially when you told me you loved me and a month later married someone else." He was surprised by his own candour.

Yasmin blinked away tears, saying nothing at first. She snapped the face powder container shut, tucked it away in her handbag and took a seat opposite him.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you like that but please know that I still have the utmost respect and love for you."

Imraan refused to be sidetracked by the tears in her eyes or the words that she thought he wanted to hear. "Do you know how long I've agonised over what happened? And the fact that you so coldly refused to explain anything was beyond cruel. How can you suddenly expect everything to be okay between us? How could you not tell me that you're divorced?"

She was sobbing now, muttering "I'm sorry," repeatedly.



"Every day you make some plan to show me this and that part of London and I go along with you, hoping you'd give me some closure, to tell me what happened that made you cancel our wedding plans and marry someone else, but you've done none of that."

Imraan stood up and headed for the door.

"Please don't go. Please? Ask me anything you want and I'll answer you."

A list of questions ran through his mind.

*How did you meet him?*

*Did you love him more than me?*

*Why did you get divorced?*

He shook his head ruefully. "How ironic it is that when you're finally prepared to tell me what I want to hear, I suddenly realise that I no longer care."

As he shut the door behind him, he could hear her plead, "Wait Imraan... is there someone else?"

That night he couldn't sleep. He kept on playing the conversation between him and Yasmin over in his mind. What was it that Salma had told him when he first confided in her about Yasmin? *You need to tell her what she did was downright wrong. Whether she's married or not is irrelevant. You can't treat people like cell phones, discard the old one with mundane yet practical features for the latest, more attractive one on the market.*

He'd argued it was pointless and then joked and asked her which cell phone did she think he was?

Now as he shifted around under the duvet, he knew that Salma was right. It felt very good to finally speak his mind on something that had been affecting him for so long.

## Thirty Four

The shelves were empty except for the copies of Qurans, the Arabic only, the Arabic-English translation, the Arabic-Urdu translation, the English only, and even a Zulu only edition. All the books were given out to whoever he had wanted them to go to. Ahmed himself had made the phone calls to his father's friends, some even in India. Their devastation was apparent over the phone. The saddest part for Ahmed was wishing that his father could have at least left something for him. But not one book. Just the letter he'd written.

It wasn't difficult for Shireen to sort out Dada's room. His prized possessions were his literature. The white cotton pants and T-shirts and *kurtas* were few in number and she'd donated those to the needy.

"Don't you think it would do you some good to come out of this room?" Shireen leaned against the threshold, her arms folded across her chest.

"I just posted the last book today. The Qurans belong to all of us."

"Asif was telling me he needs you at the store. Now that the temporary manager's no longer there."

"I want to know what he used to read every day. What kept him so intrigued from the time I was a boy? But I will never know now."

"Don't do this to yourself. Your father and you always had different interests." She removed her shoes and joined her husband on the carpeted floor.

"But in his letter he was telling me that I was materialistic."

"He didn't say that. He mentioned he was proud of you more than anything."

"The words of Iqbal's ghazal had a profound effect on me Shireen. I wish I was fluent in the different languages like he was."

"It's never too late to start reading those books. You can get the English translations."

Ahmed stared out the window, the sunshine seeping through the chiffon curtains and warming the room. He turned to Shireen, noticed the weariness on her face and said, "Asif can handle the business better than I ever could. Don't worry about him."

~

She sighed as she picked up his clothes from the floor. He had left quite early to work that morning. Some important meeting with one of their biggest clients, he'd said. Farida made scrambled eggs for him even though it wasn't the weekend. He'd looked stressed and she felt sorry for him.

She opened her bedside drawer, shifted some old letters, receipts, and medicines and removed a small notebook. It was one of those complimentary ones that came with a women's magazine. Inside were a few pages of handwriting. It was more like short notes, the dates and times that Ebrahim had spent at home or with *her*.

She smiled with self-satisfaction as she riffled back to see that in the past three weeks he hadn't spent a full night at *her* place. She wasn't even sure if he'd spent much time there at all. She would never ask him. She'd rather pretend that it didn't affect her at all.

Since Eid day Farida had changed her attitude towards him. She was more amiable and even made a conscious effort to look attractive when he was at home. Ebrahim had responded. It was small things like paying compliments to her when he enjoyed the food she'd prepared or when she cooled his tea before serving it to him. Farida revelled in the attention. Suddenly she'd seemed to forget what he'd done, how he'd hurt her, and was even making excuses for his actions.

*Perhaps I wasn't giving him enough attention.*

*Maybe he was right, I do complain all the time.*

*I nagged him too much and he couldn't cope with it.*

After writing down the previous day's date in the notebook, she closed it, and returned it to the drawer with a smile.

She called for her maid to tidy her bedroom before she dialled Mohsin's flat number in London.

"Hello?" His voice was groggy.

"*'Salaamalaykum*. Sorry I woke you. How are you?"

"I'm okay, just tired."

"I've been trying every night but you boys are never at home. I don't know how Mohsin can stay up till so late on weeknights."

"Meeting up with friends and stuff. He's only doing it coz I'm here." Imraan rolled over in bed and rubbed his eyes.

"What time is your flight tomorrow?"

"Early in the morning. Before *Fajr*."

"Do you want me to wake you boys up?"

"No Mummy. I'll set an alarm."

"How's Yasmin? You must give her my *salaams*."

"How do you know Yasmin's here?" He narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Mohsin told me."

"Well I'm not going to see her... I'll tell Mohsin to pass your *salaam*."

"I heard about her situation. Shame, what a lovely girl."

"So I'll see you all tomorrow evening *inshallah*."

"*Inshallah*."

How was it that his mother always managed to sweep things under the carpet? How long would she pretend that he'd never told her about Salma?

When he'd returned to Thembelani the day after Eid, he had asked Salma to meet him in the hospital parking lot. Salma had wanted to know what his mother's reaction was when he'd told her but Imraan evaded the question by reassuring her that his mother would definitely come around – she just needed more time.

Imraan was hurt when Salma asked how much time his mother needed. "Don't you wish I knew that too?" he'd told her.

Instead of being pleased with the progress of his plans to commit, she was subdued.

## *Thirty-Five*

Haroon Karwa was an old friend from childhood, who'd made it big in Jo'burg in the textile industry. He now lived in Houghton and owned holiday flats in Durban and Cape Town. He was away on a business trip to the Far East when he'd heard of Dada's passing, so here he was now, sitting in the wing chair in the lounge of the Mayet Mansion, reminiscing.

"I remember in standard three when my cricket bat broke and I was too scared to tell my father because we couldn't afford to buy a new one. Your father pitched up one morning at my house and told my father that he was taking you and me somewhere. In the car, I noticed you were not there but I didn't ask why. Your father drove me to the store and asked me to choose the cricket bat I wanted. I kept on looking at the prices. He told me to pretend that the price tags weren't there. And then he asked me which one was my favourite. Later as he dropped me off home, a brand new bat in my hand, he told me I must never tell anyone, especially you."

"Me?" Ahmed was incredulous. "Why me?"

"Because he said you would get jealous and would want one too even though you didn't need it. Said your mother spoilt you too much anyway."

Ahmed guffawed. "All these years and he never told me what he did!" Turning towards the kitchen he said, "Shireen, did you hear that?"

"I did," she poked her head into the lounge. "I don't know how many people that I've never seen in my life, have come over here since he passed away, to tell me how he'd helped them. The new Muslims from the townships even as far as Mpumalanga have come."

Shireen felt her house alive for the first time since Dada passed away. Ahmed laughed until his sides ached when Haroon recalled memories of their childhood together. Asif joined them for lunch and shared in the laughter and recollections. She felt a rush of warmth to see her husband vibrant again.

"Business must be going good for you to be making your Far East trips in this recession?" Ahmed said.

"*Allhumdullilah*, I can't complain. Our prices are very reasonable so our customers are happy. What about you? How's GHM Wholesalers?"

Ahmed nodded towards Asif. "Ask the manager here. He's in charge now."

Haroon raised his eyebrows and whistled. "Impressive." Turning back to Ahmed, "So you've retired?"

"I'm tired and old. The business needs young blood."

"You're not old Papa," Asif protested. "I still need you there. I've got so much to learn."

"Listen to your *laaitie*, Ahmed."

"Yes, you're not old. What are you going to do every day at home?" Shireen appeared from the kitchen having refilled the curry bowl. "Tell him it's too early to retire, isn't Haroon?"

Ahmed sighed aloud. "It's only *dunya* things. Why do we care so much? I think I'll be better off running a small shop for someone else."

~

Ebrahim lingered in the kitchen in the late afternoon where Farida was on the phone with her mother and trying to cook at the same time. She greeted him when she hung up.

"You're home early?" She didn't want her happiness to be too evident.

"Ya I was thinking." He peeped in the pot to see mutton chops sizzling in the oil, the smell of chillies and *dhana jeeru* intoxicating him.

"Oh?" She tried hard to appear nonchalant.

"I want a divorce."

Farida looked at him in disbelief, unable to register what he had just said.

Realising his error, he quickly added, "From her."

She swallowed hard and remained frozen before she understood the impact of his decision. In a state of unadulterated bliss, she hugged her husband and cried. He held her in his arms tightly and whispered in her ear. "Make me *maaf* please. I'm so sorry for everything I've put you through."

~

It was 4am and he had just boarded the plane at Heathrow. Mohsin had come with him in the Tube, eyes barely open. He wished him a safe trip, gave him an awkward hug and said, "See you in November *inshallah*. Give my *salaams* to everyone back home."

As he leaned back in his window seat Imraan contemplated messaging Salma again. She'd finally replied to his SMS. It was a laconic message: *Wslm. I'm fine, tx. See you soon. Slms*. He didn't know whether he was reading in too deeply but he had a feeling that she was still upset. About what, he couldn't fathom.

He thought about his trip. The highlight was definitely the Premier League match between Chelsea and Arsenal that he'd attended. Telling Yasmin a piece of his mind came a close second. He would miss the Tube, the bustling streets of London, and the grand edifices that peppered the city.

Now as he heard the flight attendant's voice over the speaker, instructing them to fasten their seatbelts, he switched his phone off. He shut his eyes and hoped that he would be able to sleep for most of the flight.

London to Amsterdam.

Amsterdam to Johannesburg.

Johannesburg to Durban.

Durban to Thembelani.

To Salma.

## Thirty-Six

The crumb-coated chicken sizzled and sputtered in the hot oil. Farida adroitly moved the pan to a cold plate on the glass-top stove without spilling the oil. She called for Rokaya, who she could hear animatedly discussing over the phone the sad ending to the movie she had seen the night before with her friends. A few minutes later, her daughter sauntered into the kitchen. "You need help?"

"I needed help ages ago. You and your phone calls." Farida switched the fryer on. "Here come and fry the chips. Daddy should be here with Imraan anytime soon."

Rokaya made a face. "What time is Imraan's flight?"

"He was supposed to have landed around now."

"Mummy, relax. It's just Imraan coming home. It's not like the food isn't cooked."

Farida seemed preoccupied. She moved around the kitchen wordlessly, lines of concentration etched on her forehead.

"Did Imraan tell you about any girl he might be interested in?"

Rokaya shook her head. "No...why? Is there someone?"

"No, I'm just asking. He must settle down now. Don't you have any nice friends?"

"Eww Mummy! All my friends are my age and at school. There's *no* way that I'm going to allow any matchmaking. Besides, Imraan is so old!"

"Don't talk about your brother like that! And remove the chips now, they're getting too brown."



They were overjoyed with the gifts he bought for them. His mother loved the silk scarves he'd chosen for her. Farida dug deeper into the gift bag. "Oh and there's something else here." She removed a slim cosmetics bag. She ran her fingers over the Harrods logo, turned to his father and said, "Ibby, you've never taken me to London."

His father laughed. "Is that a hint?"

Rokaya gushed over her DKNY charm bracelet watch. "I can't wait to show my friends! Samira Abdullah will be going green with envy. She's always going on about how she gets the latest clothes and accessories."

Imraan removed two more gift wrapped boxes from his hand luggage. "This is from Mohsin."

"Ooh more goodies!" Rokaya squealed with delight.

Imraan lay on the bed waiting for Salma to come on Mxit.

His mother peeped in his room. "Are you busy?" Then she noticed his cell phone beside him. "Are you expecting a call?"

"No." He slipped his phone into his pocket.

She was grinning when she sat down at the foot of the bed. "Daddy is divorcing her."

Imraan's jaw dropped. "What?"

"He wouldn't tell me details except to say that she's a gold-digger," she whispered, her eyes shining with glee.

"Mummy that's wonderful!" So that was the reason for the cheerfulness he'd noticed since he got back.

"Allah is the greatest, *alhumdullilah*."

Imraan sat up, debating whether he should discuss Salma again with his mother.

As if reading his mind, his mother said, "I know you've been hurt before but that doesn't mean there isn't someone out there for you. Allah has chosen who your partner is, the one that will be perfect for you in every way."

"I know what you are saying is true...because I know in my heart it is Salma."

His mother's cheery disposition changed instantly. There was no anger like the last time. Instead she said quietly, "She is not like us and will never be. It is very difficult to marry outside your culture. Please Imraan, listen to me. I am your mother. I know better."

"But Mummy, it doesn't matter what culture she belongs to, as long as she is Muslim right?"

"I'm older and wiser than you. Please listen to what I'm saying. I've seen marriages break. There are so many lovely girls, like your type, that I can arrange for you to meet. Nani was just telling me-"

Something inside him snapped. "You're not even listening to me! I know she is the one. I even read *isthikara*."

"Sometimes when you read *isthikara* you want it so badly that your mind makes you think positively."

There was no getting through to his mother. "In that case why do the *maulanas* advise everyone to read it?"

"The *maulanas* also tell children to keep their mothers happy. Paradise lies under the feet of your mother." His mother stood up, her words adding finality to their discussion, and left the room.

He checked his phone one more time. She still wasn't online. Annoyed, he dialled her number only to reach her voicemail. Why was she ignoring him? He logged onto Facebook and checked her profile. There was no new activity but he had new notifications on his own profile.

He'd been tagged in a few photos. Curious, he clicked on the link, only to find that it led him to pictures of him and Yasmin in London.

## *Thirty-Seven*

This Google site was amazing. Ahmed typed in names of books and topics of interest and hundreds of pages came up in a few seconds. Why hadn't he ever used the Internet before? Asif had mentioned online banking to him recently but he'd refused to agree. He'd read about fraud and online scams in the papers. There was no way he wanted his details typed out on some computer but now as he marvelled at the wealth of information, he was having second thoughts. Surely, it made life easier for everyone.

His computer in his office, which Asif referred to as Eniac, was only ever used to check his email, type out letters on Microsoft Word and play Solitaire. Now in the study at home, he was discovering a whole new world. Shireen was getting more upset with him each day when he refused to go to work. Why couldn't she understand that he needed to change his priorities? No, he'd assure her every so often, he was not depressed. Making money wasn't the only thing in this world. He'd made enough to last them the rest of their lives and even the rest of Asif's life. His father had had the right attitude towards life, he'd concluded, but too bad he had realised it too late.

After clicking a few links, he found an online forum where people discussed literature, the very same literature his father read. Ahmed could feel his heart beat faster with excitement. A person called 'Truth-Seeker' posted a message about not understanding any language besides English and

he wanted to know whether the meaning of Rumi's *Mathnawi* was lost in translation? Because if it was, he said, he wouldn't mind learning the original language so that he could understand it.

~

Imraan scoured the hospital for her unsuccessfully. She wasn't in the shack or in the female medical ward. He eventually bumped into Liz who told him coolly that Salma wasn't at work today. He didn't even wait to hear what else Liz was saying. He thanked her, dashed outside, got into his car and headed to her flat.

He knocked three times before she could answer. Her eyes were puffy and red, her voice hoarse. "What do you want?" She didn't invite him in.

"Please listen to me. I know you saw those photos but they mean nothing. Absolutely nothing." He shifted his feet nervously at her doorstep, glancing sideways in the corridor, hoping none of the neighbours would hear anything.

"If they meant nothing, how could you not tell me that she was in London?"

"Please can I come in?"

He didn't sit down in the lounge and neither did she. "You have to believe me. I didn't know she was there. I didn't even care. In fact, I did exactly what you told me I should have done. Confronted her about what she did to me!"

"I wouldn't imagine that after a confrontation, you two would still be such good friends, snapping pics of you together at different landmarks."

"That was before I told her."

Salma stared at him listlessly.

"She would just pitch up at my brother's flat and tell me she was in the area or tell me she'd bought tickets for us to go here and go there."

"So you were obliged to just go with her everywhere. How difficult was it to just say no?"

"I thought she would tell me why she did what she did. She didn't even tell me she was divorced."

When Salma said nothing, only tears welling in her eyes, Imraan pleaded, "I really don't care about her anymore. She isn't who I thought she was. In fact, the best thing that could have happened in my life was her breaking up with me."

Salma bit her bottom lip stop herself from crying. "Imraan, I just don't know what to believe any more. I'm tired. I'm tired of everything. Everything just seems too complicated."

"What do you mean you don't know? I'm telling you the truth! Do you know how difficult it was to tell my mother?"

"So it's my fault your mother is racist?"

"I didn't say anything was your fault. My mother's been raised in a different era, with a different mindset. Naturally, it's going to take her a while before she accepts the idea. All I'm saying is give me some credit. If I really didn't care, would I come here today?"

"And if she never accepts us?"

"She has to...eventually." Imraan was thinking about the person he needed to desperately talk to.

~

Choti Khala admitted to not knowing about a girl he may be interested in. "Your mother didn't mention a thing to me! How could she not?" Imraan knew how close his mother was to her sister but she didn't even tell her that he was in love with someone. Why not?

He decided to call his aunt, the one person who would be able to empathise with him. How could he not have thought of her before? She would be able to play a pivotal role in convincing his mother to accept his choice.

"So who is she? Is she from Thembelani?" He could hear the excitement in Choti Khala's voice and he smiled. She was still young at heart, as he remembered her from his childhood days.

"Yes she is from this town--"

"I knew it! Didn't I tell you you'd find a wife there?" She giggled. "Sorry, go on. I want to know everything."

"She's a doctor and we work together at the hospital."

"That's great! What's her name?"

"Salma..."

"Salma who?"

"Mdladla."

There was a silence.

"Who?"

Imraan repeated her surname, slowly and clearly.

Choti Khala was quiet. "Is she a Black Muslim Imraan?"

"Yes she is."

"Uhm...are you...uhm...sure about this girl? Have you seen other girls?"

"I've made up my mind. I just need you to talk to my mother. You know what it's like to be in my situation. Nani and Nana refused to agree at first but eventually they allowed you to marry Riaz masaji."

"I know my darling...but your situation is different."

"Because Salma is Black?"

"You must understand that it's going to be very difficult for your mother. She would never agree. Not in a million years."

"What if you spoke to her on my behalf?"

"Do you really want that? Why not see other girls? There are so many lovely single girls that I know of. Why don't I introduce you to some of them? You're a doctor. You can get the best."

"Choti Khala, if you were my mother would you have agreed?"

When she hesitated, Imraan knew immediately that his mother wouldn't be the only one to oppose his and Salma's union.

"Forget this phone call. You don't have to speak to my mother for me."

"Wait Imraan--"

*Click.*

He switched his cell phone off when he ended the call. He couldn't understand Choti Khala's double standards. Two decades ago, she was in the same situation yet today she wasn't prepared to talk to her sister on his behalf. He furiously blinked away the tears that were beginning to blur his vision.

~

It was around half past two in the morning. Farida tossed and turned, sleep evading her. Ebrahim snored softly beside her. It always amazed her how he could sleep so peacefully.

Now as she forced her eyes shut, trying her best to summon the elusive sleep, she couldn't get the thought out of her mind. *What if Imraan refused to consider marrying anyone else?* She was desperate to find out how serious he was about her. She hadn't told anyone about it, not even Ebrahim.

Just when she thought happiness was finally granted to her, she was faced with a new challenge. She loved her son deeply and she wanted him to be happy but how could he ever be happy with someone who would never be compatible? How many times had she heard stories

about children marrying partners that their parents weren't happy with only to get divorced a few years down the line? What place would he have in society if he married her? No place at all! How could he not see it? And what of their offspring? She shuddered at the thought.

One of her friends recently lamented how difficult it was to raise children in "today's day and age". Whereas their parents had decided what they should study and who they should marry, today it was the opposite. Her friend blamed technology. Television, cell phones, computers, Internet, games. Lacking all of those inventions, they were raised decently, obeyed their parents and conformed to the rules of society.

At the realisation of how subservient she and Ebrahim had been to their parents in their youth, she was suddenly overcome with a renewed sense of vigour. There was no way she would allow her family's name to be destroyed in such a manner. Especially not when everything was going so well for her.

## Thirty-Eight

Ahmed packed his fishing rods, the old and dusty ones that had been stored in the garage for years. The fishing equipment he'd last used more than a decade ago was in a plastic container on the bottom shelf of the spare cupboard.

"Are you ready?" Shireen made place for the cooler box in the boot of their 4x4.

"Almost. Where's Asif? He said he wanted to drive. Does he have the map with him?"

Shireen closed the boot. "You're asking him? He goes to the Berg every year with his friends. Off course he knows the way."

Ahmed secured the fishing rods on the roof of the car. "Has Imraan left yet?"

"I'm about to leave," Imraan said, entering the garage. "I hope you all enjoy the weekend."

Asif came up behind him. "You too. Take it easy on the roads."

"Wait," Shireen said. She dug in her handbag and removed a set of keys. "You'd better keep these. Just in case you reach home before us on Sunday."

"Thanks."

"Pass *salaams* to your mother." Shireen said before Imraan got into his car and set off for Durban.

Shireen relaxed in the backseat, the silence of the journey a source of comfort to her. Ahmed was asleep in the passenger seat, Asif concentrating on driving. She had never expected Ahmed to



agree to a holiday for the three of them at an exclusive resort in the Drakensberg. The holiday was courtesy of Haroon Karwa. A timeshare booking that would go unused since Haroon had a family wedding to attend.

She thought that Ahmed was making progress in dealing with his father's death. He no longer sulked in the *namaaz* room. Even though he refused to go back to the store, he would sit for hours each day using the Internet. His melancholic moods were a thing of the past.

Asif had told her not to nag him. When he was ready, he would come back to work. But Shireen wasn't sure. In all the time she'd known her husband, there was not a day that went by when he didn't talk about the business. The business was his life, his obsession. Perhaps death did that to people. Made them aware of the meaningful things in life, she'd concluded.

Whatever Ahmed's reasons were, she was content for now. She hadn't been on holiday with her husband and son in the last twelve years. And she was going to enjoy herself.

~

Farida wasn't sure how Imraan would react. It was a bold move she was making. But she had no other choice.

She was ecstatic when she discovered that he would be coming home for the weekend. Her original plan was to organise this "meeting" when Mohsin was around. He was due to come home for a holiday in the first week of November, just two weeks away. But since the opportunity presented itself before her intended date, she couldn't possibly ignore it.

Their last talk concerning Salma was more than a month ago and since then Imraan had said nothing of that girl. Farida was careful not to bring up the subject in their conversations, going so far as to not phoning him more than once a week.

She'd considered discreetly calling Shireen Mayet to find out what was really happening. But after thinking about it she realised that she wouldn't want the rest of the town to find out that her son was actually considering a Black Muslim as his wife. News spreads fast in small towns, she knew that for a fact. In a few weeks people in Durban would get to know. Then no one would consider offering their daughters to Imraan for marriage.

No, she'd decided, his reputation was far more important.

His mother was alone when he arrived home. Daddy had taken Rokaya to her friend's house for a sleepover, he'd been told.

"Aren't we going to wait for him for supper?" he asked when his mother began serving.

"Oh I don't know what time he'll be back. He said not to wait for him. He's popping by at Uncle Ismail's too."

His mother seemed to be in a hurry. Supper on the evenings he arrived home from Thembelani was usually languorous, with his mother only beginning to clear the dishes off the table an hour later. Now she ate in haste, barely talking and constantly glancing at the time.

"Is someone supposed to come tonight Mummy?"

His mother didn't answer, instead she exclaimed, "Oh yes, I forgot to give you all your mail from the last time. I think you have some bills to pay. Sorry about that!"

Imraan muttered that it was fine but couldn't figure out why his mother was acting so weird. He hoped it had nothing to do with his father.

After supper, his mother began setting the table for tea.

"Mummy, there's no rush. Daddy isn't even back yet."

But his mother didn't hear him. She was too busy arranging fancy cupcakes on a platter.

Everything made sense to Imraan when the doorbell rang fifteen minutes later. His mother dashed to answer it, straightening her scarf, checking her image in the hallway mirror. He shook his head in amusement. What was his mother up to?

Then he heard a familiar voice.

"Imraan, see who's here to visit," his mother called out.

He froze when he saw Yasmin.

"What is she doing here?" he looked at his mother.

Farida's eyes widened in shock. "Imraan, she's here to visit. Don't be rude."

Yasmin turned to his mother, "But Aunty Farida, I thought you said Imraan wanted to talk to me which is why I came."

"Well my mother lied. I have nothing to say to you." Without another look at either of them, he stormed up the stairs, slamming his bedroom door shut.

Farida was beside herself when Yasmin left the house, humiliated and in tears. What was wrong with Imraan? She had never seen him so angry before.

She found him in his bedroom, using his computer.

"How could you be so rude?"

"Mummy, how could you call her here tonight? What were you thinking? I don't even like her anymore! And you know that!" He was on his feet, pacing the floor.

"Not long ago she was going to be your wife! I know you like her, how can you not?"

"She became someone else's wife and then got divorced. I've moved on."

"I still think you two can work things out. She's single now Imraan. You two make such a lovely--"

"Enough Mummy! Can you even hear yourself? Weren't you the one who recently prevented me from considering a marriage prospect because the girl's parents were divorced? And now you don't even mind if I marry a divorcée. What double standards you have!"

Farida broke down in tears and Imraan softened up. He said quietly, "I don't ever want to see Yasmin again."

"But you saw her in London."

"More like she encroached on my holiday."

"Fine, don't bother about her. I'm sorry about all of this. Make me *maaf*," Farida looked beseechingly at Imraan.

"I'm not only upset about the fact that you called Yasmin over. It could have been any girl and I would have been just as angry. Especially when you know I've made up my mind."

"But I'm not happy. I will not allow it at all. You will never have my blessing." Farida looked her son squarely in the eye.

"What about my happiness? That's being selfish. Would you rather I marry someone you think will be a good match for me and have a marriage like yours?"

"*Astaghfirullah!* Listen to yourself. How can you be so disrespectful?" Her eyes flashed with anger.

"I didn't mean to say that," Imraan mumbled. He faced the window, watching the lights of the city and the harbour in the distance. His bedroom had the best view from all the rooms in the house.

"I've been through so much recently. Please don't make it worse. I don't want to hear about this girl again. If you marry her, I'll never be happy with you for as long as I live."

He heard the door shut behind him. If there was one thing he knew about his mother, it was that she always had the final say.

Always.

But not this time.

## *Thirty-Nine*

The weekend in the mountains did something to his soul. The beauty of Allah's splendour was so apparent out in the wild that Ahmed felt as though a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. There were no worries about anything when he hiked with Shireen, something he never thought he'd do at his age. There was no one in sight when they reached the top of the mountain, only the trees and plants.

He'd felt young again with a world of possibilities open to him. If this was one tiny portion of the world, what about the rest of it?

When he'd returned from the hike, he'd felt rejuvenated. This was all he needed to confirm what he'd been thinking about for the past few weeks.

The problem was telling Shireen and Asif. How would they respond?

~

Salma had some important news to tell him. Imraan was nervous. She was post-call and at home. He said he'd meet her at her flat after work.

"How do you like Cape Town?" she asked as soon as he got there.

"What?"

She was grinning. "You know that internal medicine registrar post I applied for?"

"You got it?"

She nodded emphatically. "Can you believe it?"

"That's wonderful! Congrats!"

"Thanks but before I accept it, I need to know that you're fine with it. What are your plans for next year?"

"I haven't even applied for a job. So that means in about two months time, I'll be unemployed. I'll probably do locums for a while. I can do locums in Cape Town, that's fine."

"And us?"

He hadn't told her about Yasmin coming over in the weekend and neither had he told her about his conversation with his mother. He knew she'd just get upset unnecessarily.

"I'm still working on it. The thing is I haven't told the rest of my family yet, which I plan to do. My father probably won't get involved. He's never been that type anyway. Mohsin's visiting soon so if he and my sister can convince my mother that my happiness is what counts, she'll get over it." He spoke confidently and almost believed it himself.

"What if, and I'm just saying this even though it won't happen, your mother never agrees?"

He had seen this question coming ages ago. He'd thought about it in the middle of the night when he couldn't sleep.

"Then we'll get married anyway. She can't force me to marry anyone."

~

"I've been thinking..." Ahmed announced at supper.

Shireen and Asif looked up at him expectantly. The seat next to Asif, who now sat in Dada's place, was empty. Imraan was on call tonight.

"...that life is too short." Shireen and Asif exchanged looks. They've been doing that quite often lately, especially when Ahmed would begin his philosophical musing about life, as he was doing now.

"We've all been living in this small town for way too long. We haven't been out, haven't seen the world." He turned to Shireen, "Remember I promised you when we just got married that I'd take you to see all the countries and you were so happy?"

"It's okay Ahmed. I've forgotten about those days. I'm quite happy here and will be even happier if you would just go back to work and our lives returned to normal."

"Mummy's right. Dada's been gone for a while now and we have to move on."

Ahmed nodded. "I know, I know. Who's not moving on? That's precisely what I'm doing!"

"How is that, when you refuse to set foot at the store?" Shireen demanded.

"That's in the past. Asif is doing a good job..." He flashed a smile at his son. "But it won't be for long."

"Sshh," he held up his hand when Shireen and Asif protested in unison. "I'm selling GHM Wholesalers."

"What?" Both mother and son stared at Ahmed in disbelief.

"Ahmed, please stop talking like that. What do you mean?" Shireen asked.

"I want to sell up here and move away. I think Durban would do us some good. We can be near the ocean. Asif can study whatever he wants to, I promise not to interfere, and you and I can travel the world."

"Have you lost your mind?" Shireen said.

"No, in fact I think I've just discovered it."

"Papa, are you serious about me studying whatever I want to?"

"Of course, do your BCom or BSc or whatever it is you want. Even if you do a BA I won't say a thing!" Ahmed laughed jovially.

"Who is going to buy GHM Wholesalers and what about this house?" Shireen didn't seem too convinced.

"Haroon Karwa wants it. In January. Ten years ago he wanted to buy but I said I'd never sell. Little did I know. As for this house, it won't be difficult to sell. We can even rent it at first."

"And you and I would just travel the world?"

"Why not? How else can we broaden our horizons? I want to learn about all the other cultures. I want to experience them. Then only can we appreciate and be grateful for what we have. You know Rumi said--"

"Okay Papa, we get the picture," Asif interrupted.

Shireen laughed. "Only Dada could pull off the quotes so naturally. We're still getting used to the idea of you taking after him."

Ahmed pretended to be hurt but he felt only joy that his family were happy about his decision.

## Forty

Farida had been counting the days until Mohsin came home. Today was the day when her entire family would finally be together after ages. The last time he was home was a year ago. This time she would need to have a long talk with him. She didn't want him to renew his working visa, something he was planning to do. It was time that he got a steady job in Durban and also considered marriage.

She was still concerned about Imraan. He hadn't mentioned his ridiculous idea of wanting to marry that Black girl again and she didn't know what to make of it. In the meantime, she'd taken the liberty of calling a few family and friends to enquire about suitable girls for him. The problem was getting him to agree to see any girl. Perhaps she could bring it up tonight when they all went out for supper.

Saturday nights at Gateway Mall were always busy. Farida was pleased that Rokaya had made a booking at the buzzing seafood restaurant. A lot of Muslim families that Farida knew, and greeted as she passed, were there. She felt a thrill to be able to go out in public with Ebrahim at her side. She noticed Farzana Essa, from *talim*, and waved at her. *At least she can go back and tell everyone that there's nothing wrong in my marriage.*

Mohsin was answering the detailed questions that Rokaya was asking about some actor that he'd seen at a film premier in London.

"He didn't have a one on one session with Brad, he was just one of those crazy fans that the police bar from going any further, just in case they end up on the red carpet," Imraan said.

Rokaya whacked his arm. "Sshh, I just want to know what he's like in person. How could you not get his autograph?"

Mohsin sighed. "Nothing so grand about him. If he knew better, he would have wanted my autograph."

She rolled her eyes and they all laughed.

The waiter arrived, took their orders, promised them it wouldn't take more than half an hour for their food to arrive, before disappearing into the kitchen.

Farida said casually, "I spoke to my cousin today. Do you remember Aunty Bashira?"

"The one who lived in that house with the tennis court?" Mohsin asked.

She laughed. "Same one. Anyway, she was telling me that her husband has a niece, very beautiful girl, who's studying--"

"I'm not seeing anyone. You can take Mohsin to see her," Imraan cut in sharply.

"I'm not ready for marriage now," Mohsin said.

His father said, "Imraan your mother has been telling me that you want to get married so why not just see this girl? Or do you have anyone else in mind?"

Imraan stared at his mother and replied, "Actually I do. Didn't Mummy tell all of you?"

Rokaya's eyes widened. "No she didn't! Who is it?"

Farida shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Imraan, we spoke about this."

"No we didn't Mummy. You just told me you'll never be happy."

"What's going on here?" his father asked.

"Daddy, I met a girl in Thembelani. She works with me at the hospital. I want to marry her."

"Then what's the problem Farida?"

"This is not the place to discuss this," she muttered, aware that other the other Muslim families she knew, were sitting close by. What if they could hear everything?

"There's nothing to discuss. You told me to tell you if there's anyone that I like and I do," Imraan said. "Her name is Salma Madlala."

His family fell silent. His father was speechless. Mohsin looked away in embarrassment and Rokaya's jaw dropped.

"As in a Black Muslim?" Rokaya whispered.

He nodded whilst Farida said, "We'll talk about this at home. This is not the place."



They had just got home when Farida said, "Didn't I explain to you how difficult it is to marry outside your culture?"

The rest of supper didn't go too well. The air of tension between Farida and Imraan was apparent even through Ebrahim's attempts at telling lame jokes he'd received via email. No one was in the mood for dessert. The drive home had been quiet.

"It has nothing to do with culture. It's because she's Black. You and I both know it."

Ebrahim assumed the role of mediator. "Let's sit down and discuss this."

They were all in the lounge, but Imraan refused to take a seat.

"There's nothing to discuss Daddy. I've made my decision."

"Don't you want to see any other girls before making your mind up?" his father asked.

"No. I've read *isthikara* and I'm very happy. I told Mummy this ages ago."

Farida implored her husband with her eyes.

"Your mother does have a point about different cultures. One of my cousins married a Pakistani and it never worked out."

"Daddy, Salma is South African. She's been practically raised amongst Indian Muslims."

Mohsin said quietly, "It's not the same thing."

Farida, with a sudden burst of energy, nodded emphatically. "Tell him Mohsin. Imraan, listen to your brother."

Imraan's patience was wearing thin. "She is a practicing Muslim. That's all that matters! If she wasn't a Muslim or if she didn't have good habits, then I would definitely reconsider. But you can't use culture as an excuse when what's really bothering everyone is that she's Black. Islam doesn't teach us to be racist."

"Imraan's right, Mummy," Rokaya said, only to be fixed with a piercing gaze from her mother.

"Islam teaches you to be obedient to your parents too," Farida contested.

"Not when they're wrong," Imraan retorted. "Prophet Ibraheem loved his father but he still accepted Islam although his father was opposed to it. I'm telling all of you for the last time. I've made up my mind. Whether you all like it or not, I'm going to marry her."

"I will not be a part of your wedding and she will never be welcome in this house," Farida said quietly. "I think you'd better reconsider your decision. Do you want to be responsible for breaking up this family?"

Imraan could feel the tears well in his eyes. "If that's the way you want it, Mummy, then so be it." He left the lounge, headed upstairs to his bedroom and began packing his bag. He couldn't stay

here a night longer. He glanced at his watch. It was 9.20pm. If he left now, he would reach Thembelani just after midnight. He'd just message Asif and tell him to wait up for him.

Throughout the drive, he replayed his mother's obdurate words in his mind. There was no reasoning with her. How could someone be so impervious?

She didn't try to stop him from leaving. His father, Mohsin and Rokaya begged him to stay. His mother looked on silently, her pride intact. His father even told him, in the presence of his mother, to ignore her words, she didn't mean it. But Imraan knew better. She had meant every single word she'd uttered. For the first time in his life his father had verbalised his care for him. Imraan felt guilty for ignoring his father's pleas to not leave for Thembelani tonight.

Asif had called him after he'd received his message. He'd heard Hamza and the rest of the boys in the background, playing with the Playstation. "Everything okay *boet*? You left Durban already?"

"Ya, my Ma and I just can't see eye to eye. I need to get away from here."

"Sorry man. Take it easy on the roads. The boys and I will wait up for you."

Asif had warned him to expect the worst possible reaction from his family when he told them he would be marrying Salma regardless of what anyone thought. Deep in his heart, he knew his mother loved and cared for him. Which mother didn't love her child enough to care about their happiness? More than two months had passed since he first told her. How long would he have to wait for his mother's stubbornness to subside?

But now as he drove through the winding roads approaching Ulundi, surrounded by the blackness of the night, he was beginning to realise that his mother would probably never agree. Imraan felt a renewed sense of sorrow and pain. Did it matter so much to her that Salma was Black?

His mind was so muddled with emotions that he didn't realise he'd accelerated to one hundred and sixty kilometres, a sharp bend less than a hundred metres ahead of him. Imraan pressed his brakes hard and his tyres squealed as he took the bend. He breathed a sigh of relief. The road would straighten out for the next few kilometres so he accelerated again.

He deftly removed his cell phone from his pocket with one hand and decided to send Salma an SMS. He wanted to call her as soon as he reached Thembelani. It was about time she knew how vehemently opposed his mother was to their union.

He was just about to send the message when he looked up. He had not seen the bull a few seconds earlier but here it was just metres away.

His last thought was, "I hope someone finds my body before the morning."

## Epilogue

She awoke with a start and looked around her room. Everything was as she had left it the night before. She closed her eyes, expecting to see him again. He wasn't there this time. A minute ago, he was beside her, smiling. The dream had felt so real and Salma was overcome with disappointment.

The first of March was a bright and sunny day. There was no autumn chill yet. From her bedroom window she could see the harbour and from her kitchen window, Table Mountain. No city in South Africa could possibly match the beauty of Cape Town, she'd concluded.

If things had turned out differently, if it was written in her *taqdir*, she probably would have been married to him and celebrating his twenty-seventh birthday today. She was thinking about him too much yesterday. Perhaps that is why she had seen him in her dream.

Salma showered, dressed, barely ate breakfast, and dashed out the door before she got caught in the morning traffic.

~

A few months ago she would never have guessed that her life would turn out the way it had. She'd been content with the prospect of a new life in a new city with the man of her dreams by her side. Once he got rid of the one little hitch on his side, convincing his mother to allow them to marry, everything would have been perfect.

Until that dreadful night in November.

She remembered it so clearly. Asif calling her around 3am to tell her Imraan had met with a very serious accident. The car was wrecked beyond recognition. He was rushed to Thembelani Hospital all bloodied, with broken limbs and unconscious. She found half the Muslim population, some even in their pyjamas, at the hospital. Salma suspected that although most of them genuinely cared about helping in some small way, they were more interested in being a part of the tragedy so that when dawn came, they could relay the news to family and friends, adding that they had seen the victim in the flesh.

Salma knew all about MVA's, especially the ones that happened on winding roads in the darkness of the night. If it wasn't bad weather, it was the cattle. Most of the victims, especially if the vehicle was going over the speed limit, would die.

His father and brother had arrived in Thembelani in the early hours of the morning, looking devastated. They had briefly spoken to Salma but didn't show any acknowledgement of knowing who she was. Then only did it strike her that Imraan probably hadn't told the rest of his family about her as he said he would that weekend. And why was he returning to Thembelani on a Saturday night? He always drove back on Sunday afternoon before the day had ended.

Imraan, still comatose, was moved to a private hospital in Durban barely twenty four hours after the accident. Salma was in a state. She'd called Asif the next day to find out what was happening. Asif was hesitant at first then told her the reason Imraan had been returning to Thembelani on Saturday night.

She cried for more than two hours after she ended the call. He'd had an argument with his mother over her and that's the reason he was lying in hospital. Salma prayed like she never prayed before. She'd begged Allah to make him survive, without any serious damage, especially to his brain.

A few days later she decided to come to Durban. She needed to see him, find out how he was progressing, whether the doctors thought he would awake from his coma.

Her decision to come to Durban was what changed her life.

Hospitals always harboured the stench of melancholy, she'd thought. No matter how brightly lit the corridors or how many bunches of flowers adorned a ward, that dismal feeling lurked in the distance, that inevitable announcement of something grave. She'd paced the corridor outside Imraan's private room while hordes of people already hovered at the door. Families, including children, were there. Salma had felt out of place and backed away, pretending to visit the

neighbouring patient. In that fleeting moment she'd caught a glimpse of Imraan's mother, crying and hugging a family member.

When she'd returned the next day, a little earlier than the allotted visiting hours, she mentioned to the nurse on duty that she was a doctor and a colleague of the patient. The nurse had smiled and allowed her to go inside, only for her to see Imraan's mother reading *Surah Yaseen* by his bedside.

When his mother had looked up at her, there was a fleeting moment of recognition in his mother's eyes. Salma had met her months ago outside the Pick 'n Pay in Thembelani and had remembered how pleasant she'd been.

She'd greeted her respectfully only to have his mother mumble a reply and turn her gaze towards Allah's words. She couldn't blame her. Salma had stood at the foot of Imraan's bedside, the hum of the machines a painful reminder of the severity of his condition.

When his mother had finished reading the *Surah Yaseen*, she shut it and made a brief *dua*, lifting her hands. Then she'd turned to Salma and said, "The doctors don't know if he'll ever wake up again." She'd burst into tears and Salma wished she'd never come.

She'd wanted to tell his mother that it wasn't her fault but no words came out. What do you tell someone whose child was practically dead? Even though she dealt with death as part of her daily job, it was different when you knew the person.

"Come outside with me, we need to talk." It had been a command and even though she could have refused, she'd felt an unexplained obligation to listen to this woman who she thought abhorred her so much.

In the coffee shop, his mother showed no signs of anger or hatred towards Salma. Instead she'd been more composed and spoke evenly, her tone gentle. Salma knew for as long as she lived she'd never forget what Farida Desai had told her.

"I'm going to start off with something very obvious. You and I are different. Imraan and you are different. The way he was born and raised, the society he's been brought up in is something you could never understand even if you tried. Our tradition, language and just the general manner in which we do things, are totally different to how you've been brought up and how your family do things. You do know that Imraan and you are in different classes. Likewise, it is best for everyone if you find someone within your own class and you can move on with your life. Imraan's family is his life. He can never just be cut off from family. If you come into the picture, his entire family go out of the picture. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Salma had listened to every word, transfixed by her. She'd nodded mutely.

"If you genuinely care about him, you will leave this hospital, return to your hometown and cut him out of your life completely. We don't even know if he'll ever live a normal day again, or if he'll even wake up from the coma." Here she'd broke down, removed a few tissues from her clutch and dried her eyes.

"Please, I beg you, think about what's best for him."

She'd stood up without even waiting for the coffee she'd ordered, tucked strands of her hair back underneath her scarf, and said with an air of finality, "You are an intelligent young woman who will make some man very happy. But that man can never be my son. Take my advice and go home and forget about him. *Assalamualaykum*."

And then she'd walked away.

Salma had only realised when she was back home in Thembelani that she was fooling herself if she thought it would work out between them. The only common factor in their lives seemed to be their professions. How would she fit into such a family?

She'd cried for days afterwards, feeling sorry for herself. She would do what his mother had suggested. Forget about him completely. She would cut herself off from him in every possible way, starting from handing in her resignation at Thembelani Hospital a month early and moving to Cape Town. She'd changed her cell number, deactivated her Facebook account and deleted Mxit from her phone. She'd given strict instructions to her parents to not give anyone her new contact details.

It had been the most painful period of her life but she'd realised ironically that Farida Desai had a point. She'd known what it was like to grow up as a Black Muslim in a predominantly Indian Muslim town. Even at medical school, she was a minority. She'd experienced racism, sometimes inadvertently, in most of the Indian Muslim homes, especially at those of her friends. Very few people were like Goolam Hussain Mayet, a man her father venerated.

It had been difficult to not want to find out Imraan's progress but Salma willed herself to move on. She'd asked her father to not give her any updates on his condition, something he'd been privy to at the mosque.

The move to Cape Town had taken up a lot of her time and energy. She'd been grateful for that. She'd made friends, and the Muslims here were more friendly and approachable by nature. Surrounded by so much beauty and warmth, she'd moved on slowly, with Imraan a distant yet painful memory of her past. He could have passed away and she wouldn't have known. She'd

often wondered to herself if she had known that he was alive, how would she react? She'd realised that question was best left unanswered for it would open up a Pandora's Box. It would bring back the pain that she'd prayed so hard would disappear.

~

The hospital was always busy. Salma dashed to the doctors' room, deposited her bag in one of her lockers, put her stethoscope around her neck, and slammed the locker shut.

Marina Hendricks, a fellow internal medicine registrar, had just arrived. They greeted each other as Salma scanned the notice board. No meetings today.

"Hey aren't you supposed to be on call on this Friday night?" Salma asked. Marina's name was scratched out and replaced with an illegible scrawl.

"Unh-uh. Well I was supposed to, but then the new registrar will be doing it. How cool is that?"

"Oh. I didn't even know there was a new registrar. Anyway catch you later." Salma headed off to her ward.

It was only during her brief lunch break that she'd noticed the paperwork in her consultant's office.

The new registrar was none other than a Doctor Imraan Desai from Durban.

*The End.*

## Author's Note

Throughout my novel, there are references to Sufism, Islamic mysticism, in the form of poetry by great Muslim Sufis and poets like Jalaluddin Rumi, Sir Muhammad Iqbal\* (commonly known as Allama Iqbal), Maulana Jami, and others. Dada's character enjoys reading these mystic poems and his life revolves around the inner dimensions of Islam. There are two reasons why I chose to create a character like Dada in my novel.

Firstly, I grew up in a religious household where great emphasis was placed on literature, especially Islamic literature. From a young age, I took an interest in this and personally, this deepened my understanding of my religion. I couldn't understand the original works since they were written in Urdu and Persian but my grandmother and father would translate for me. I felt that my passion for the inner dimensions of my religion would create an interesting backdrop in the context of my novel, where Imraan is caught between his religious and cultural identities when he falls in love with Salma.

Secondly, to my knowledge, the theme of my novel has not been explored by any local Indian writers. The Muslim community, as they live daily, has not been captured in contemporary literature. In my community we strive to pray five times a day and adhere to certain rules that have been divinely ordained. It is true that Islam is not just a religion but a way of life. In an attempt to illustrate this, I created a character like Dada.

The *Mathnawi* of Jalaluddin Rumi is one of the greatest and most influential works of Sufism. Rumi was a Sufi saint who travelled extensively and wrote Islamic poetry. The *Mathnawi* is a compilation of six books comprising more than 50 000 lines of poetry, based on stories from the Quran, and man's search for one true God. Muhammad Iqbal is considered, after Rumi, the next greatest and most influential poet and philosopher in Islamic mysticism. It was he who predicted the split of India into two separate states, one for Hindus and the other for Muslims, called Pakistan. Iqbal's writing focused on the spirituality and development of Muslims in their contemporary society.

I hope that I have achieved my goal of allowing my readers to gain an insight into the lives of Muslims in Durban, understand the importance of religion in our daily activities, and perhaps gain access to the true ideals of Islam.

\*Translation of Iqbal's poem, *In the Realm of Love*, from his work *Shikwa*, obtained from:

Farscape, a blog

<http://map4lostsouls.blogspot.com/2009/08/javed-kai-naam-iqbals-poem-to-his-son.html#comment-form>



## **Deconstructing *The Muezzin's Daughter*: A Critical Reflection on the Process of Writing the Novel**

Three years ago I decided that I wanted to write a novel after successfully completing a collection of short stories, *Flat 9* (Akabor, 2006), as part of UKZN's postgraduate creative writing program under the tutelage of Professor Michael Green. At first, I had only one thing to go by: the title. The Muezzin's Daughter came to me as a phrase and idea one afternoon but I had no idea what would happen in the story. A muezzin is a Muslim man, usually a Black man, who calls out the *azaan*, or call to prayer, five times a day in the mosque. Humility, quiet, dignity and a lack of materialism, are characteristics that are associated with a muezzin. Here in South Africa, the majority of the muezzins are Black foreigners. In the South African Muslim community, which is dominated by Indian Muslims, there is a tacit divide between the status of Black and Indian Muslims. The latter, seemingly, assume superiority over the former, something that goes totally against the principles of Islam.

*The Muezzin's Daughter* somehow sounded lyrical to me – evoking my sense of curiosity as a writer. The phrase became an image and questions such as “Who is this girl?” or “What happened in her life for it to be made into a fictional text?” passed through my mind. Ideas for the plot of the novel were changed many times. I began making notes, jotting down any ideas that I'd get. With encouragement from Professor Green I signed up to do my MA in English (Creative Writing) with the sole intention of writing this novel.

When I registered for my MA I was living in Vryheid, a town in Northern KwaZulu Natal, where my husband was doing his compulsory year of community service as a doctor. The experience of living in a small town after having lived in the bustling area of Grey Street was very different. It is from these experiences that I got ideas for the story of my novel.

Using the image of “the muezzin's daughter” and the idea of living in a remote part of the province, I came up with the most basic storyline – a love story between two young Muslim people who come from different races and social classes. Although the title suggests the female character, Salma, would be the protagonist, I found it difficult to write from her perspective because she is a Black Muslim and I am an Indian Muslim. Therefore I chose Imraan as the protagonist because it would be easier for me to relate to him and see through his perspective. I believed this would make the story more plausible.

This idea of a romance had deeper connotations in the context in which I chose to write it. The Muslim Indian community of Durban is a very specific group of people with a mindset that originated thousands of years ago with our ancestors in various parts of India. Not only would the “Indianness” of the story need to be emphasised but also the religious aspect of my community. The religion of Islam advocates unity and peace between fellow brothers and sisters in and out of the religion but one of the most striking characteristics about my community is the racism factor. This community venerates people with a fair complexion, and grants respect to people depending on their wealth and lineage – which part of India the person’s ancestors hail from.

This contradiction emanates from the caste system, still practiced in India today. It is associated with the religion of Hinduism, and ironically has nothing to do with the ideals of Islam. Yet the people of my community fail to realise this and continue to mix religious beliefs with cultural ones, resulting in a brand of Islam that contradicts the most basic Islamic principles.

I also wanted to be able to depict the contemporary lifestyle of Indian Muslims in Durban as it is a subject that hardly appears in local fiction. I chose a specific group of Indian Muslims – the Gujarati speakers. They are the more affluent people in my society and tend to have a different outlook on life than the middle-class Indian Muslims.

Rayda Jacobs’s *Confessions of a Gambler* (2003) is a South African Muslim-centred novel, based in Cape Town that focuses on issues of identity and religion. Ahmed Essop’s *The Hajji and Other Stories* (1978) is a collection of short stories based on the lives of Muslim characters in the apartheid era in Johannesburg. Both these works have a strong Islamic presence in the form of their characters’ devotion to their religion. Their identities are intrinsically linked to their faith. There are a fair number of South African Indian works of fiction that focus on the idiosyncrasies of Indian people. Aziz Hassim’s *The Lotus People* (2002) is one such novel. It is an epic saga spanning three generations of an Indian Muslim family that came from India at the turn of the century. The importance of cultural traditions is emphasized and I found Hassim’s characters easy to relate to as a Muslim Indian. In my novel, my protagonist comes from a well-known and fairly religious family in Durban. Imraan’s upbringing was a concocted form of Islam (fused with Indian culture) and he finds himself in a situation where he begins to question his religious identity, after he discovers he is in love with a Muslim from another race group. Also, in my novel, I wanted to show the details that make Indian people who they are. For example Imraan’s mother, Farida, is determined to find a “good family like theirs” for her son to board with whilst in Thembelani. She won’t settle for anything less. This is not

so much because she wants her son to be comfortable, which obviously she does, but more because she is concerned about what the rest of the family and her friends would think.

I have read numerous works of fiction that feature intercultural relationships but what interests me most is when Muslims of different cultures form a relationship. This is simply because I am a Muslim. Ishtiyak Shukri's *The Silent Minaret* (2005) is about a Muslim boy, Issa, who goes missing whilst studying for his PhD in London. I found this novel particularly interesting because Issa didn't come from a conventional Muslim family. In fact, his mother was a Hindu and he grew up with his maid's son, Kagiso. It was during the height of apartheid that Issa grew up, yet his mother, an Indian Professor, bore no prejudices towards her maid or the maid's son. This was quite refreshing to read since I know of very few Indian people from that particular era who are not racist towards Black people. In my novel, eighty-two-year-old Dada is one such person. He does not harbour any feelings of prejudice towards Black people, contrary to those of his son.

Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999), is a novel that very beautifully tells the story of a Sudanese Muslim woman, Sammar, who falls in love with a Scottish academic, Rae, whilst working at a university in Scotland. Rae is not a Muslim and Sammar ardently wishes he would become one. Her devotion to her religion is so strong that she chooses to end their relationship. Rae eventually accepts Islam. However, Aboulela's novel features a Muslim Sudanese who falls in love with a Christian Scot, whereas in my novel, both Imraan and Salma are already Muslim. They just belong to different race groups.

### **Setting**

I created a fictional town in northern KZN called Thembelani for my novel. It is a rural town similar to Vryheid, where I spent a year and half with my husband. The Zulu name Thembelani means to have faith in God.

"Setting is not merely scenery against which the significant takes place; it is part and parcel of the significant; it is heritage and culture; it is identity or exile, and the writer's choice of detail directs our understanding and our experience of it." (Burroway, 2007: 131). This is apt in the context of my story where the town is almost a character in its own right.

Having lived in Vryheid for eighteen months, I learnt a few things about small towns: the different types of people, the narrow-minded mentality that some of them harbour and the general outlook on life of those from a small town. Burroway (2007: 140) says that “the potential for emotion inherent in place, time, and weather can be used or heightened (or invented) to dramatic effect in your writing. Nothing happens nowhere...setting and atmosphere impart both information and emotion.” I tried to negotiate the setting in this small fictional town with the narration so that the plot and story is propelled forward with interest and I hoped to achieve what Burroway refers to as “dramatic effect” in my writing. I did this by introducing a subplot in the story that involved Ahmed and his workers at GHM Wholesalers where they are unhappy with their salaries. Exploitation of workers is quite common amongst Indian traders, particularly Muslim traders.

I deliberately did not mention where Imraan’s family stay in Durban, although I wanted it to be in the Musgrave area. My reason for this was if the book were ever published, I wouldn’t want readers relating the Desai family to people they know even though they are fictional.

### **Structure**

This changed many times over the two years that it took me to complete the novel. I started off with (and have kept) a prologue at the beginning of the novel – a scene that I thought would evoke curiosity in the reader – where Imraan learns that someone close to him has passed away. Then for Part One, my plan was to have scenes from Imraan’s childhood and his current story (of him moving to Thembelani) placed in alternate chapters so that the reader can gauge what type of family Imraan was born and raised in. By the end of Part One I wanted Imraan to have realised that he was in love with Salma. Then in Part Two the question of how to deal with his situation would be answered. However it didn’t turn out like that.

I found that I had to introduce more subplots to the story since the most basic plot (the romance between Imraan and Salma) was one-dimensional. I felt it wouldn’t suffice for the length of the novel. The following subplots were added:

- Farida discovering that Ebrahim was married to someone else
- Ahmed’s confrontation with his workers at GHM Wholesalers
- Asif’s decision to drop out of university and return home

The subplots serve another function as well. They expose or extend the other problems that Indian people experience within their community, such as the confusion between religious and cultural traditions, the narrow-mindedness of people in smaller towns, parent's deciding what children should study at university, and the exploitation of workers by Indian businessmen.

Each of the subplots needed to have its own way of unfolding and this required alterations to the structure I had first planned to use. Eventually I introduced two more parts to the story and I found that having four parts helped with the pacing of the novel.

### **Point of View**

This was by far the greatest challenge in writing this novel. I started writing the novel from the limited third person: Imraan's POV. I found that this was very restricting. Only when I was almost a third into the novel, did Professor Green and I have a serious discussion about POV. My writing was flat and I was uninspired. I didn't know how to move forward and write about the other characters like Farida, Asif, Dada and Ahmed without having Imraan around. Then it was decided that I would write the novel from a multiple third person POV. I did this and Prof Green noticed a huge difference in my writing. He told me to continue in that way and that I could always go back and change the earlier chapters.

When I did go back and change the earlier chapters, which were Part One of the novel, I had to make a decision as to how I would arrange Imraan's childhood scenes. Professor Daymond, who became my supervisor after Professor Green had left, suggested that I incorporate Imraan's childhood scenes within the same chapter as the current storyline so that the pacing is quicker in each chapter. Initially, I was sceptical about this but only after I had tried it out, I realised it worked well.

Not only did the pacing sort itself out but I could now introduce different techniques that would keep the reader intrigued. For example, I deliberately mislead the reader into thinking that Ebrahim is buying Farida a new apartment when he is in fact buying it for his second wife.

### **Language**

My novel contains a lot of words in certain Indian vernaculars and I found that I could not translate the words nor, in some cases, insert the meaning of the word into the text, so after careful

deliberation I decided to include a glossary. When I first mentioned the usage of a glossary, Prof Green was against the idea since he felt that it could insult the reader's intelligence and that it wasn't always difficult to gauge what was happening in the context of the story. However Prof Daymond and I agreed that a glossary was required so that all of the readers could gain access to the religious and cultural practices that I've referred to.

I also had the difficult task of deciding whether to use the offensive word 'kaffir' (page 139). It is a very strong term and I initially used it when Farida discovers whom Imraan is interested in marrying. I was dubious about using it since family and friends who read a draft of the manuscript thought it was too strong and unnecessary. Prof Daymond thought that I should leave it as is if I felt that the character would use it. I did feel that Farida could have used a term like that so I decided to leave it in the novel.

The dialogue in the novel, more often than not, is not "proper" English. Indian people speak differently and I captured the way in which they speak authentically within the characters' dialogue.

## **Gender**

The Indian community is a patriarchal society and only recently have the women begun to take an active role within their communities and in their marriages. I think this is due to the increase in the number of Indian women attending tertiary institutions. This has boosted their self-confidence and has made them more aware of their rights, also giving them a chance to be independent and earn their own salaries. Two decades ago, it was different because Indian women were not encouraged to study further than high school and obtain a degree. So those women who found themselves within problematic marriages hardly ever sought help nor did they consider getting divorced.

My character Farida is in a similar situation. She has a troublesome marriage but will never consider obtaining a divorce. However, her reasons for doing so are not solely because she isn't independent (in the sense that she has no qualification that would allow her to secure a well-paying job where she would be able to support herself) but because of what the people in her society, in which she was raised, would say.

The only power Farida has is within her home. Therefore when she discovers that Ebrahim has taken on a second wife, she decides to make his life a misery in the only way she knows – to deprive him of

his homely comforts. She refuses to cool his tea, have his pants ironed properly, or to prepare the food that he enjoys.

### **Writing a Novel versus Writing a Short Story**

Another big challenge in writing *The Muezzin's Daughter* was whether I could successfully explore the novel-writing genre and produce a complete novel. The difficulties were immense. I have always written short stories and Prof Green told me from the outset that he liked the “concise” way I manage to write a story. So in writing this novel I had to develop very different ideas.

Firstly I believed that the length of the novel was most important. I constantly stressed reaching sixty thousand words, the general minimum word limit of a novel, and in doing so I began writing superficially. I hadn't realised this at the time but Prof Green commented on this when I had barely completed Part One of the book. He told me that I was writing in a very leisurely way and that I was going to have to go back and cut out large chunks of the story once it was done. Then he assured me that I shouldn't worry about the word limit at all. He said the story was far more important than that.

This way of writing descriptively caused the next problem – lack of high and low points in the story, or as Prof Green called it, “waxing and waning”. He said that I needed something to happen earlier on in the story to keep the readers engrossed. This meant I also needed to “show and not tell”. This old adage was absolutely crucial in my writing in order for me not to bore my reader.

I then began removing the unnecessary descriptive sentences and dialogue and thought of new ways in which to keep the reader hooked. That is when I decided to explore Asif and Ahmed's characters. I now had the freedom to do so as I was not limiting the narrative point of view to Imraan's perspective.

Other techniques that I employed to keep the reader hooked was to mislead the reader in certain instances (as mentioned in the example of Ebrahim buying his 'wife' a new apartment when in fact it turns out to be for his second wife).

## **Conclusion**

I had no idea how the novel was going to end, even on the day that a complete first draft was due. I knew I had to keep in mind, “show, don’t tell”, and allow the reader to read between the lines. After writing the confrontation scene between Imraan and his mother, when they return from the restaurant the night Mohsin comes home, I asked myself what I would do if I was in his situation. I would want to leave the house until I could calm down. So that is what I made Imraan do and only when he was on the way to Thembelani did the idea of his meeting with an accident spring to mind. I realised that it was a very plausible storyline since so many accidents occur in Northern KZN because of cattle straying onto the road in the dark.

I thought than an Epilogue from Salma’s perspective, a few months after the accident, would be apt since it would show the reader what had happened after Imraan’s accident, without me having to tell too much. Salma’s discovery of Imraan’s reappearance in Cape Town right at the end of the novel, literally the last line, was a deliberate decision on my part. I decided that open-endedness would work well in a story like this.

I have reached my target, as outlined in my proposal, of completing my novel of around 60 000 words (it comes to just over 57 000). When I first decided to write this novel, I truly had no idea what would happen. I have come a long way since then and have managed to complete a novel with not only one main plot but various subplots. I know that I can continue to work on it and with some fine tuning and perhaps additional writing, such as exploring the characters of Asif and Ahmed fully, it would perhaps read better.



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