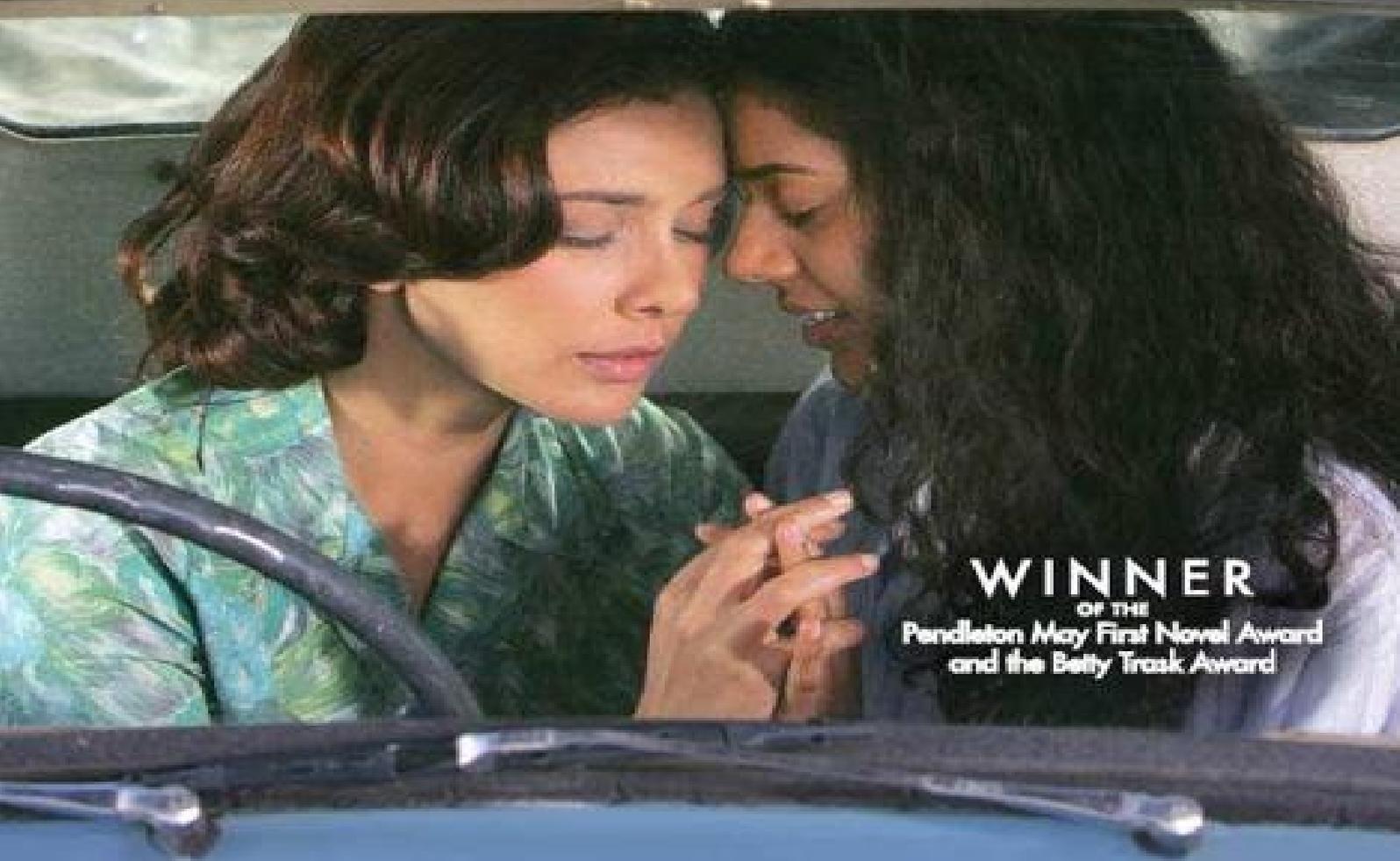


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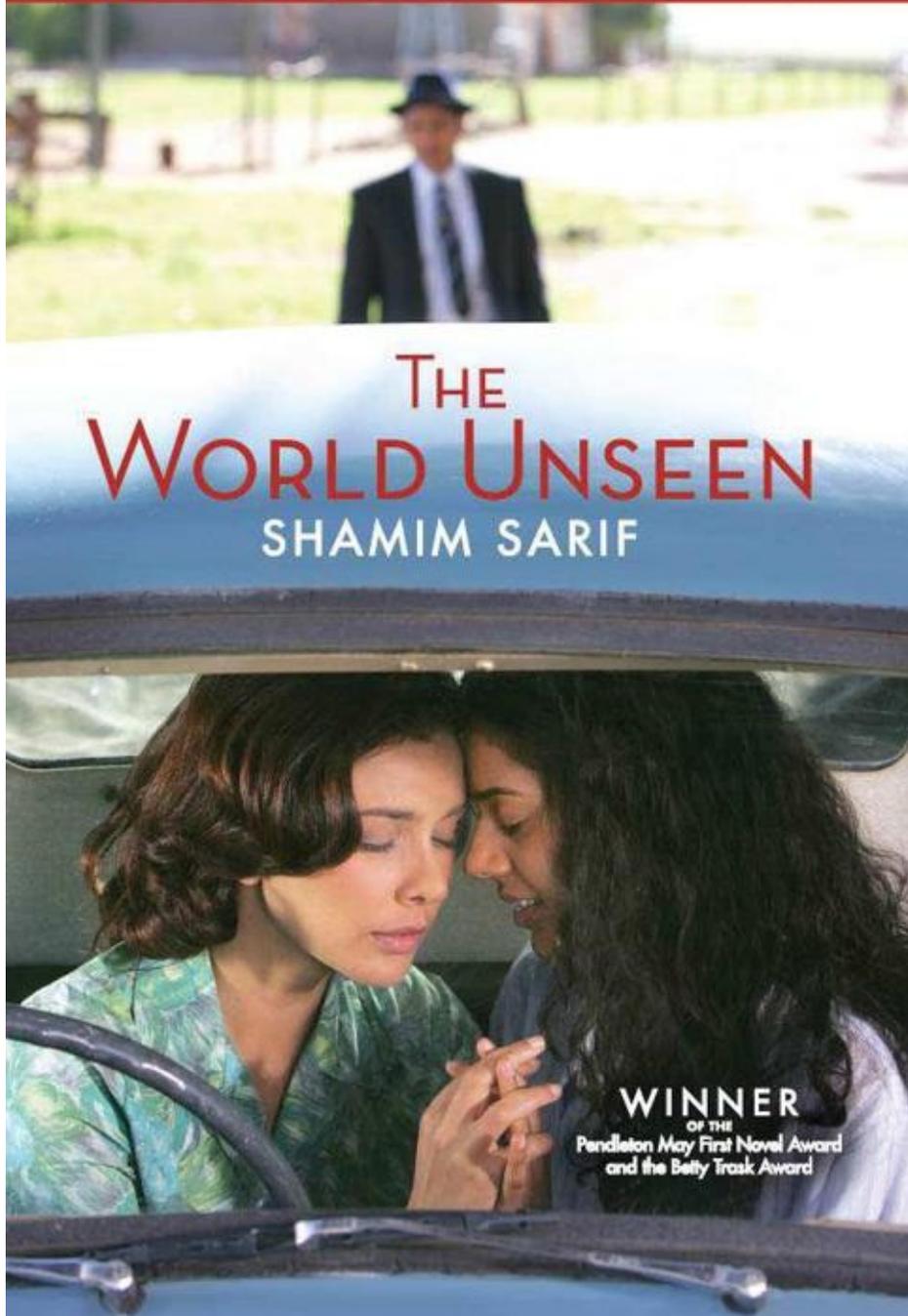
THE WORLD UNSEEN

SHAMIM SARIF



WINNER
OF THE
Pendleton May First Novel Award
and the Betty Trask Award

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First published in Great Britain by The Womens Press Ltd, a member of the Namara Group, 2001 Second publication in Great Britain by Review, an imprint of Headline Book Publishing, 2004

This edition published by Enlightenment Press, 2011

ISBN 978-0-9560316-0-0

E-Book ISBN: 978-1-4392-8136-9

www.enlightenment-press.com

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*For Hanan, who has given passion to my life,
clarity to my thoughts and a voice to my words.
With immense gratitude and infinite love.*

ACCLAIM FOR “THE WORLD UNSEEN”

“It is an impressive debut. Sarif’s story brings together the descriptive power of the novelist with the screenwriter’s mastery of dialogue.”

– The Times

“I read *The World Unseen* at a gulp, so entrancing is its style, so complete its tale of love and betrayal, and so accurate its depiction of the physical, social and political scene...”

– Johannesburg Star, Book of the Week

“Sarif’s elegant and understated debut eschews emotional fireworks, and offers an unusual insight into early apartheid... a novel that lives up to its title.”

– The Times, Play

“In the tradition of Vikram Seth, Sarif throws down a literary gauntlet that very few writers will be able to pick up and return with a conviction.”

– Pride

“A really wonderful book. Sarif’s writing is delicate and confident and the characters are real and very believable.”

– Maggie O’Farrell, Author

“Highly original...this is a stylishly written work. Sarif is near faultless...”

– India Weekly

“The characters shine with the beauty of Sarif’s deceptively skilful prose which keeps your eyes skating along the narrative in sheer enjoyment. I read this book in two long sittings, unable to put it down.”

– Dyverse

“If you only read one novel for the rest of the year, make it this one. Sarif is a new writer who deserves to win prizes.”

– Waterstones



SHAMIM SARIF is a novelist, screenwriter and film director. She recently wrote and directed the motion picture adaptation of her own first novel, *The World Unseen*, which was the winner of a Betty Trask Award and the Pendleton May First Novel Award. The film *The World Unseen* is the recipient of 23 international awards.

She is also the writer/director of the feature film *I Can't Think Straight*, winner of 11 awards, which based on her novel of the same name. ~~*Despite the Falling Snow* is her second novel.~~ She lives London with her partner Hanan and their two children.

T_{HE}
W_{ORLD} **U**_{NSEEN}

By Shamim Sarif

enlightenment press

Chapter One

EVEN LYING ON THE ROOF, with only the cheap slates in her line of vision, she could tell that it was a police car. There was a carelessness in the skid of the tyres over the sandy road, and in the way the handbrake was pulled up while the wheels were still turning, leaving a slight screech hanging in the heavy air. She stopped hammering, and peered over the edge of the eaves. They had parked so close to the restaurant door that they had broken one of the flowerpots that Jacob had planted only the day before.

“Bastards,” she said, under her breath.

She left the sign half-nailed and hanging, and climbed down the ladder. Her steps were measured, gaining her time to think. A year ago she would have been inside the café within seconds, running with her eagerness to grasp and fight whatever new obstacle was being thrown in her way. But many months of struggling against rules and regulations that made no sense to her at all had blunted her appetite for confrontation, and so she walked more slowly now, curbing her natural impulse, and when she looked over at the police vehicle, her brow showed tiny lines of concentration.

One of them, the driver, was still in the car. She knew many of the local police, but this one was stranger to her and she was taken for a moment by his looks – a square, handsome face edged with soft blond hair – until she met his cool, blue gaze, which showed only arrogance. He looked her up and down, and resolutely, she held his look for a moment.

“Never seen a woman in trousers before?” she asked, too softly for him to hear; but to her chagrin he wound down his window.

“What?”

She had no choice but to repeat herself. She spoke clearly, and his mouth gave a slight curl.

“Never seen an Indian girl in trousers, that’s for sure,” he replied.

She turned away and went inside, stopping just by the door. The place was more than half full, she noted, but she could still hear the *boerewors* sausages frying all the way back in the kitchen. Nobody spoke, and nobody looked up, but every pair of eyes was covertly fixed on the policeman standing at the counter. Jacob could see her, she knew, but he made no sign. He kept wiping the glasses, nodding occasionally. Officer Stewart had a friendly arm leaning on the polished wood and with the other hand he pulled thoughtfully at his trimmed beard.

“Listen, Jacob, I mean the two of you no harm, but these laws are making life bloody difficult for the police.”

“They’re not making it a picnic for us either,” Amina said, behind him. She saw Jacob give her a slight shake of his greying head.

Stewart turned, and touched his cap. “Amina. Long time.”

“Yes.”

“Guess you’ve been keeping out of trouble, eh?”

She gave a forced smile at his attempt at small talk. Walking behind the counter, she leaned into the squat ice box and extracted a bottle of Coke, holding it out, doing her best for Jacob’s sake.

“Can I offer you a drink, Officer Stewart?”

The policeman shook his head and watched as the girl drained half the bottle. She stopped, short of breath, and smiled.

“What about your colleague? Doesn’t he want to come in?” she asked.

“No, thanks. I prefer him to stay in the car. He’s a little overenthusiastic, *ja*? A little hot-headed. He has a problem with this kind of thing.”

He was gesturing to the back of the café, and as though she had no idea what he was referring to she turned and looked at the booth where her African workers took it in turns to eat throughout the day. Doris and Jim were sitting there now, and she saw Doris's chin lift defiantly, even while her fingers shook slightly as they held onto her coffee cup. Amina smiled encouragingly at her and turned back.

"What sort of thing would that be, exactly, Officer?"

"Now, listen Amina. You know what I'm talking about, and giving me an attitude isn't going to help you, *ja*? You and I both know that it's an offence for Blacks to eat in the same place as Whites."

She put the Coke down on the counter and looked around.

"There are no Whites here. Present company excluded, of course."

"As non-Blacks then. This is an Indian area. And Coloured." he added with a nod to Jacob. "That means no Blacks."

"They work for me."

"And that is fine by me," the policeman replied, pounding the counter for emphasis. "But they shouldn't be eating with you. It's illegal."

"Where should they eat?" Amina asked.

"I don't care! They can eat outside. Or in the kitchen, for Christ's sake. Or when they get home."

"Do you go without food for twelve hours at a time, Officer?"

Jacob ran a nervous hand over his cropped head and watched Amina go to her gramophone player. He wished desperately that he could step in and impose some calm, suggest some compromise. But that might overstep the bounds of his apparent role as manager of the café, and Officer Stewart had no idea that Jacob was in fact Amina's business partner. Coloureds and Indians simply were not permitted to co-own businesses together, but a helpful lawyer had assisted them in drawing up a secret power of attorney for Jacob, and the partnership was now widely acknowledged, yet closely guarded by those around them.

Amina was kneeling down, her back to the policeman, sorting through a short stack of records. Stewart placed his peaked cap firmly back on his head and walked over to the back booth where he stood looking down at the occupants.

"Passes," he said, holding out his hand. Doris and Jim looked instinctively to Amina.

"You know they have passes," she said.

"I want to see them. Now."

Jim took his from his back pocket. The cover was creased and worn from use and, even when unfolded, had a permanent curve in it from being often sat upon. Stewart turned it in his hands, and glanced down at the cook.

"This is only a travel permit."

"Yessir."

"Where's your pass?"

"I don't have a pass, Sir, I'm Coloured."

Stewart examined the permit for confirmation of this fact.

"You're Coloured?"

"Yessir."

"You look like a *kaffir* to me," commented Stewart.

"They said I was Coloured. At the board. They classified me."

Jacob had appeared at the policeman's side without giving anyone the impression that he had

even moved, let alone hurried.

~~“His grandfather was White, Officer. A Dutch. Like my father.”~~

“Okay.” Stewart flipped the permit back on the table, and turned, taking in the café with a glance.

“You understand what I’m trying to say, Jacob, *ja*? I’m not trying to be difficult. I’m doing my job.”

The crack of a gunshot electrified the room, the sheer volume of it freezing everyone for a split second before they all ducked. Kneeling by the gramophone, Amina could see Officer Stewart huddled behind the counter and Jacob doubled over beside him. The windows still held a residual rattle, though a train had just rushed through the café. Gingerly, Stewart drew his own gun, edging it over the counter as he slowly stood up. Amina rose with him. His partner was standing by the door, spinning his pistol on his middle finger.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Stewart asked.

The blond man grinned. “My job,” he said. “*Ach*, what are you *talking* to these people for?”

He stopped the gun mid-spin and fired another shot into the ceiling. Some plaster dust pattered down, and a high-pitched echo sang in the room.

“This is what they understand,” he said. He grinned again, and looked at Amina.

“You keep serving *kaffirs*, and we’ll kill the lot of them. Then you’ll have to find new staff.” He laughed.

“If you carry on like that,” Amina said, “we won’t need any. You’re not exactly good for business.”

His face darkened, but before the first curses were out of his mouth, Stewart was pushing him out of the door, and towards the car.

Amina looked around for Doris, but the booth was clear – every one of her staff had retreated to the kitchen or to the scuffed plot of land outside the back door. Those customers who had been waiting for take-aways had already left. Others were laying money on tables. Even the sound of frying in the kitchen had ceased. When she looked at the door again to check that the police had really gone, she noticed that the glass in the framed photograph of her late grandmother, which hung above it, was broken, the familiar defiance in her grandmother’s eyes distorted by a crack. That hurt her the most.

“Don’t ever be a slave to anyone. I was, all my life, and it ruined me.” These had been Begum’s final words to Amina Harjan. She had uttered them with a rasp of desperate conviction on a sunny Saturday morning in Bombay, while her granddaughter had sat by her sick bed and breathed in the scent of crushed cardamom pods that wafted up from the sweet-maker below. By nightfall she had been dead. Her passing had left her granddaughter floating in a strange pool of shock that slowed her energy trembling in her coltish limbs, and for the first time in her life, Amina had felt the wheels passing by without making any attempt to grasp them and make something of them. So when her father had once again raised his old wish of making a new life away from India, she had hardly noticed that the arrangements were already taking place. Mr Harjan had held an unspoken bond with his mother-in-law never to emigrate to South Africa, for she had been cast out of that country in disgrace forty years before, but that promise ceased to matter as soon as she was dead.

With too few men to steady the small but awkward corpse of her grandmother, the body had slipped into its grave with unseemly haste, landing with a thud that made those at the graveside wince. The earth was quickly piled over her, and Amina remembered being stunned by how quickly Begum had disappeared from the surface of the earth. She had been the only woman present; the others had gone back to the house after the funeral rites, as was the custom. Against her mother’s wishes, she had insisted on accompanying the men to the burial, and she had prevailed, because her father had not had the energy to argue with his fiery daughter, nor the will to deprive her of a final goodbye to her

mother-in-law.

Amina stared up at the broken glass of the frame now, and looked searchingly at Begum's face. She had to wait a long moment before meeting Jacob's look, and when she finally turned to him with a smile, he could not tell whether the brightness in her eyes was a sign of tears held back, or of anger.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked him.

"Oh yes," he replied. "I may be getting old, but I can still dive behind a counter when I have to."

She laughed, as he knew she would, and without another word, they began to clear up.

Delhof – outside Pretoria

Miriam stood still, a long way off from the new house, her hand raised to her forehead, shielding her eyes. The house had been a farmhouse once, and it was built long and low. Everything seemed low in this place - trees, hills, even the few buildings - low and flat and without colour, as though squashed down by the weight of the sky and its spreading blueness. The sun hit her hand with a red hot force that burned straight through the clear, veined skin of her wrist, and when she shut her eyes tightly and briefly against it, the heat still glowed under her eyelids like coals.

She opened her eyes abruptly at the cry of her son's voice. She turned, and the boy and his sister swam into focus, small and bony, on the *stoep* of the house, dwarfed by the stacks of boxes and upturned furniture that surrounded them. She watched, frowning, as though trying to recall who they were, and he called to her again and again, his shrill high voice bouncing across to her on the shimmering waves of heat that quivered between them.

"What is it? What do you want?" she called back. She spoke in Gujarati, even though her husband had instructed her to speak to the children only in English or, when she had picked up enough of the language, in Afrikaans. But she was preoccupied, and Gujarati was the language that she had been raised with, the language that her own mother had also used to discipline her.

The boy fell silent at his mother's tone.

"Go in, I'm coming," she called, and obediently they ran into the house. Her body was completely still, like that of a threatened animal straining to catch a single sound. When she breathed the hot dry air, she could smell a burnt dust smell that she knew would form a part of everything she inhaled from this time onwards; she could already sense the scent of it lying lightly on her skin. On the soft folds of her cotton dress moved a little against the heat, and a slow trickle of sweat trailed steadily from her forehead and down over the high plane of her cheekbone. Her hand came up and swept it away impatiently. She couldn't comprehend this place where her husband had brought her. She knew that Springs was no more than half an hour away, when the weather and the roads were good, and that it was a pretty town, but here there was nothing, nothing at all. There were a couple of ramshackle houses perhaps half a mile away, but they looked as though they had not been lived in for years. On the far horizon there were a few buildings - she thought they must belong to the farmer who were to be the customers for her husband's shop - but other than that there was only a railroad track, here before her new house, laid strong and bare against the rusty earth, lying all alone in the vast landscape.

So much land - she had never seen so much land, just lying there, empty. What were they to do with it? How were they to live so isolated? After the crowded existence with their extended families in Pretoria, the paper thin walls separating suffocating rooms always overflowing with neighbours and relatives? Miriam had not been unhappy to leave her brother-in-law's house, for she had been treated by her sister-in-law as little better than a servant. And this new business of Omar's was a fresh start: a shop that would supply everything that the local farmers could need. But she was afraid of the quiet loneliness of the countryside, and unsure of how to manage with only her taciturn husband for company.

She raised her hand again, and this time used the back of her arm to wipe across her face and eyes. Then, clasping her arms protectively about her body, she walked back to her family.

Chapter Two

THE FIRST TIME that her father's mother saw Amina Harjan she nearly fainted. The elderly woman's arrival in South Africa from India had caused a commotion in the Harjan household which seemed to affect everyone except her only granddaughter. It would probably have made a difference to Amina too, were it not for the fact that she was simply not there, and could not be found. She was away "working" for a few days she had said in the scrawled, barely legible note that she had left for her parents on their kitchen table, and since her family rarely knew the full nature or location of the various odd jobs that she took on from time to time, no-one could find her. This was not usually a cause for much concern to her father, who, unlike every other man of his age and background, had let his daughter do very much as she pleased since they had arrived in Springs several years ago. Amina's mother was a meek, stunted woman, and her worry was silent, spoken only by the permanent line between her eyebrows and on her small forehead. It was she who understood most the complications to their routine lives that her mother-in-law's impending arrival would bring, and she went to the unusual trouble of leaving her kitchen and asking for her daughter at the café in Pretoria, about a two-hour's drive from their family home in Springs. Jacob Williams offered Mrs Harjan some tea, and listened to her politely, but explained that he had heard nothing of Amina for three days, because she had taken a taxi job, driving two people on the long journey from Johannesburg to Cape Town.

"She'll be back soon, lady," he said, using the deferent form of address common to the Cape Coloured community. He smiled encouragingly at the worried mother. "She always comes back soon. Always."

Although she did arrive back soon, she did not arrive back in time, and so the old lady was picked up by her son alone; not the effusive, crowded family welcome that she had spent her long and often sickening voyage imagining. Mr Harjan was a worn, transparent-looking man, whose gaunt frame looked almost emaciated in his baggy work clothes. He met the train slightly late, and found his mother rooted to the end of the platform, surveying the dusty station and the milling Africans with distaste. He greeted her without much enthusiasm, as though he had just seen her the day before, and installing her in his rattling car, drove back to his house without expression, and with little awareness of his enormous mother's discomfort, as though he had just picked up a package of no consequence. Her repeated listing of her ailments passed over his head like a cloud of gnats, irritating, but of little ultimate concern.

During that first day, the old lady claimed her place in the household, effacing any remaining trace of her son and daughter-in-laws' personalities, and firmly imposing her own. She sat in the small parlour, in her son's armchair, as if sitting in state, and began to receive all her family and neighbours - graciously, but not without ensuring they understood the favour she bestowed by meeting them. Her concern at the absence of her granddaughter had been considerable, but her enquiries as to her whereabouts were met with such vague uncertainty from the parents that she had contented herself with a short lecture and left it at that. Two days later, Amina arrived.

The old lady heard an engine cut out abruptly outside the front door, and from her seat near the window, she pulled back the greying net curtain that hung limply over the pane and looked out. She could not make out much, but something made her stare hard at the girl who jumped down from the small pick-up truck that stood outside, and she watched as the mother hurried out of the back door and whispered urgently to her daughter and gestured to the house. She saw Amina nod and smile and watched her unload something - it looked like bags of flour - from the car and hand them to the maid Rosemary, who came out smiling to greet her. Amina then handed Mrs Harjan two dresses, holding

them out against her mother, who folded them quickly over her arm. The old lady frowned - what did she need new dresses for? She sat back in her armchair, a frown of consternation upon her round face as Amina strode up to the house, and through the screen door. She walked in and her grandmother saw that she wore what appeared to be a pair of her father's old work trousers, some braces and a collarless shirt. She wore also a wide-brimmed hat, pushed back on her high forehead so that it held back most of the long, black curls that otherwise tended to fall about her face. She looked like one of the Boer farmers who came to her father's filling station to buy petrol for their trucks.

"God forgive us," the old lady whispered to herself. The girl had never looked entirely demure and docile in India, but this was something else. The mask of horror hardened over her face, so that when Amina entered the room, tall and smiling, she stopped short, appalled at her grandmother's expression. She followed the woman's gaze and immediately understood, of course, that the offence lay in her clothing, her attitude, her way of carrying herself. Amina had spent the last six years of her life in this place living in accordance with her own wishes, and her parents seemed, if not understanding, then at least accepting of their only daughter's wish for freedom. They had been worn down over a period of years, their best efforts to contain Amina having come to nothing even when she was a child. As a toddler in India, her mother would lose her at least once or twice a day. The house would be searched, the maid and the nanny would be questioned, the small garden scoured, and eventually the child would be found, exploring some new place, smiling and nodding her curly head to the relieved women who surrounded her. Only one maid, a young bright girl of nineteen, who shimmered with as much energy as the toddler, could ever keep up with her. But she had only stayed with the Harjans for a year, before eloping with a neighbouring house-boy, and after that, no-one could control Amina. She was not a naughty child - any sense of deviousness or guile was alien to her; but her energy and curiosity were insatiable, and her quiet parents seemed slowly to fade away under the questioning mind and irrepressible movement of their growing daughter.

"You should have been born a boy," her mother had told her wearily, more than once, and this comment had puzzled the girl, and hurt her. She thought deeply about it, as she thought about everything. She liked to play sports with the boys at school, and she was good at her schoolwork when it held her attention - and she wanted to work at a business or a trade when she grew up. What were these attributes only fit for a boy? Finishing school in order to get married made no sense to her, nor did it hold much appeal, and as ingrained as it was into the consciousness of everyone around her, it was still almost beyond her comprehension. She felt at times that she was living in a different universe, breathing a different atmosphere from other people, and as she grew up she found her refuge in work and in books. She would do any odd jobs that she could find, though only within her parents' house - there was no scope for her to take on manual work elsewhere - and when the house and garden were in perfect condition, she read. Tattered old novels, poetry and biographies followed each other on a dancing course through her consciousness and imagination, and with each one her awareness of the world and its variety and breadth increased.

She had finally left school at the age of sixteen, because her father had decided to emigrate. For years, he had heard stories from other families of the great opportunities in South Africa, but even when he worked at a poor accounting job he despised, he dared not bring up the idea of moving there, not while his mother-in-law was alive. He knew well that she still carried the scars of her time there, the misshapen, bruised bones of her body, and in the brutal, battered memories of her mind. Amina had learned much from Begum, most of it knowledge or advice that few other women of her grandmother's age had dared to even learn themselves, much less impart to an impressionable young girl. Her maternal grandmother spoke to her of pride, of self-reliance, and of courage. These were the things to cultivate, she had told her granddaughter, and not a slavish attitude to duties and traditions that were built on subservience and pain and fear.

Amina knew this advice to be good, for it appealed to her natural sense of integrity and justice, but her admiration was as yet abstract, for she had never experienced the horrors of which her grandmother spoke. So, a few months after Begum's death, when her father decided that they should leave for South Africa, Amina felt no particular excitement at the idea, nor was she unhappy. The misery that her grandmother had endured was something she respected, but Amina knew that she could not hate a whole country on someone else's behalf, even Begum's. At the age of seventeen, the distant future was no more than six months ahead, and in six months all she knew was that she would be halfway through an ocean voyage to Africa with her parents.

On the morning that they had docked she had stood almost alone on the upper deck at daybreak and had watched the coastline rise up from nowhere, out of the ocean, as clean and as bright as the edges of a map, and she smiled to see it. She could make out little then except the golden rim of the beaches, but they seemed to be unending, and at once she had felt at home, released, able to breathe and her innate confidence had combined with this immediate empathy for the country they were now approaching, and had given her a strength of purpose that nobody could contain. Her parents had very soon stopped trying. The cursory, half-hearted attempts they had made in India to try to make the daughter conform to accepted conventions fell away completely in South Africa. The family went directly from Durban to Pretoria, but they did not remain among their own people in the Asiatic Bazaar; instead they chose a house and a business - a garage and gas station - outside Pretoria, Springs, where the pressures of conformity were largely removed from Amina's father. Her mother was thrown into a life harder than they had been used to in India. Her weekly housekeeping money had to be carefully counted now, and there were no live-in maids - only Rosemary, the daily help who would not always work as she should. And Amina, instead of helping her mother in the kitchen, usually ended up working with her father in the garage. Mrs Harjan could do nothing but wait worriedly as her daughter pumped gasoline, cleaned windshields, and generally fell into her own life in this new place. This untried and often wild country fitted Amina like a well-cut suit of clothes, and it was this ease and confidence of hers, that had by now been built up over a period of years, that disturbed the grandmother who now sat before her. Amina was entirely lacking in any semblance of the expected attributes of docility and of self-effacement - and although her grandmother understood none of this, and thought that it was the trousers and braces that appalled her, it was really her granddaughter's attitude and bearing that affronted her most.

The old lady did not actually faint, however. In fact, she recovered very quickly, with the main points of her lecture to her son and his wife (whom was mostly to blame, she was sure) already taking shape in her head. Right at that moment, though, before she could say anything at all to Amina, the girl extricated herself. She was, by now, quite used to these kinds of reactions, particularly from her elders, and her methods of dealing with them had gradually eased from anger and self-defence, until they had reached the kind of polite removal that she now effected.

Amina immediately took a step back, removed her hat, and welcomed her grandmother with a few formal and correct Gujerati words of greeting. Then her hat was back upon her head, and before the old lady could even respond, she was closing the screen door behind her.

"God forgive us," her grandmother breathed again, as though exorcising a horrible spectre. She stood up uncertainly and moved as quickly as she was able to the curtain over the door. By the time she had pulled it aside and peered through the hazy glass, her granddaughter was gone, and all that remained of her was a set of tyre tracks and a whirl of dust that sat for a moment in the air and then fell slowly to the earth.

During that first year in the countryside, when she lay in bed at night, Miriam's head would ache with the silence. It was so large, and it seemed to come sweeping down from the sky, like something cold and solid. Especially now, in the winter. No insects or crickets to scrape even a hollow hole in the wall of quiet. Then Miriam would close her eyes tightly, and force herself to listen to Omar breathing, to the deep, fierce sleep of the man lying beside her. The slow rasp, the sliding of a head on a pillow - in the long night she fell upon these sounds like a beggar on a shower of coins.

At five or five thirty she would rise from the bed, often awake before the early morning light or the insistent crow of the cockerel on the farm next to them. She had always woken early as a girl in India, but this pre-dawn habit had only formed after she had married and come to live with her in-laws in Pretoria. Although Omar's strong self-assurance meant that he generally took charge of his family, his brother Sadru was older, and so Farah, his wife, took precedence over Miriam in the subtle hierarchy of women in the house. Omar's sister would have been above them both, but she was slow-witted and sick, and Farah easily controlled her by slapping and hitting. Miriam disliked Farah's bossy attitude and lazy ways, but she had had no choice but to accept them and to make up for her *bahbhi* shortcomings by working even harder in the kitchen. Every morning she was forced out of bed at five o'clock to start preparing the dough for the breakfast *rotlis*. With a shake of her head Miriam put aside the recollection and slipped out of bed.

She had to make no effort to be quiet - she was naturally light in her movements. Anyway, it was time for her husband to get up, and he knew this, and slowly reconciled himself to the subtle shifts of his wife's movements through the room, out into the cold bathroom and back through the hallway again, when he would hear her stop at the door of the children's room, before she descended the stairs. In the early morning gloom of the kitchen, she could see that Robert, the boy whom Omar had hired for help in the shop, was already loading with coal the fire that would burn throughout the day in the stove. Robert looked around with a smile, the hessian sack of fuel still in his arms. It was mined nearby in Witbank, and was plentiful and cheap. Miriam wished him "Good morning" quietly, and not without some self-consciousness. She had been used to having help in her mother's house while she was growing up, but that had been somehow different. Omar's attitude to the Africans was always a little patronising, and often harsh. Giving sharp orders did not come naturally to Miriam, but he had told her to be firm with them, and she felt she must try.

The back door opened then and the night watchman came in. They had soon discovered that he was not enough in the country, just as in parts of Pretoria, a guard was necessary at night.

"The *kaffirs*," Omar had said. "They would steal anything."

So each evening, just as the shop was closing for the night, John would arrive, tall, heavy, his close-shaved hair almost completely grey. She would see him approaching the shop twenty minutes before he actually arrived, having appeared over the horizon from some unknown place where she knew all the African people lived together. He would help Omar pull the display tables back into the shop from the porch, and his long, lean arms, though much older than her husband's, made light work of securing the various padlocks. He would nod with deference at Miriam, but he was always consistent in politely turning down her shy offers of a drink or some food, until she came to see that she should not ask any more. He would settle down for the night then in his chair, on the edge of the *stoep*, before an old corrugated tin cylinder, in which several coals burned in an effort to stop him from freezing. Sometimes, if she was up late, sitting before the kitchen range sewing, Miriam would

watch John as he paced before the window, and she would see the red of the coals, which hissed and spat now and then, especially if the wind blew. At intervals during the night, John would unwrap a cloth parcel, and take out a portion of *mealies*, the ground corn which she had found was as much a staple here as rice was back home. This he would turn slowly over the heat before eating it.

“How are you, John?” she asked.

“I am fine, madam, fine.” He watched Robert load the stove with the air of an interested uncle, and once he seemed satisfied that the boy was doing the job correctly, he turned to open the back door.

“I see you tonight, madam,” he said, and Miriam raised her hand goodbye.

Robert stirred at the coal for a moment more, before shutting the heavy black door.

“Shall I fetch the flour, Madam?”

She turned to him. He was fifteen years old, with a slight limp from some accident in his early childhood - when she had asked him about it, she had not been able to understand much of his English, which accented in a different way to hers, and the details had been lost to her. He was a little smaller in height than she and had very shiny white teeth. She nodded and watched from the corner of her eye as he bent to the sack and measured out two cupfuls, and she marvelled again at the fiercely tight curl of his hair and the deep coffee colour of his skin, such a different shade to the ink black of John's. She had never seen a black person in the first twenty years of her life.

“You must not be friendly with them,” her husband had told her. “If they think you are soft, they will take advantage. Make them work. That is what they are there for.” She had listened, and had had a hundred questions about “them” that she had not dared to ask her new husband, and so she had only nodded and agreed with him. Upstairs, she could hear the occasional creak of a floorboard and she knew that Omar was up, and that his unthinking, heavy steps would wake the children.

At least it was better than it had been in Pretoria. There had been no quietness there, early in the morning - or at anytime. At the very least, her *bhabhi* would be up with her, and the sound of her and her neighbours' talk and their childrens' wailing would penetrate the thin walls and come up from the streets outside. And then she had to feed and wash Omar's sister Jehan, whose manic chatter and laughing always seemed to begin before any of them had fully woken.

She took the flour from Robert gratefully. At the front door, the boy found the milk which Mr. Morris, the Coloured farmer whose smallholding was nearest to them, left there each morning. It was still in the darkness of the early morning, foaming and still a little warm. Robert carried in the big urn with small quick steps, struggling beneath its weight. The milk smelt fresh, not sour, like the stale milk in the bottles they had shared in Pretoria. One of Miriam's last tasks each night, after cooking, serving and clearing away the evening meal, after putting her children to bed, and after ironing Omar's shirts, had been to make Jehan drink a glass of milk. Her brother-in-law had asked her to do it, in his blundering but well-meaning way, for he believed it would settle his sister's mind before sleep, and his own wife had rarely bothered to do as he wished. But Farah would always pour out the old dregs for Jehan, and Miriam had learned not to protest, or her own children would also be slipped the stale milk when she wasn't looking. The smell of that milk, in Jehan's darkened, stuffy room used to make Miriam feel sick. At those times, nauseous from lack of sleep and light-headed with hunger, she would remember what her mother had said when Miriam had been hesitant about Omar's proposal of marriage.

“His parent's are dead,” she had told her. “That will make your life easier, because no mother is ever happy with the girl her son marries. Go to South Africa with him and be thankful that no mother-in-law will ever make you work like a slave.”

No mother-in-law, perhaps, but Farah had worked hard at making her life miserable. At least now John and Robert smiled at her now. Miriam watched the milk as it heated and recalled the time in Pretoria when no one had smiled at her for ten whole days.

Pretoria, September 1951

She had known it was ten days because she had been counting in her head. The last person to smile at her had been the halal butcher when she had gone to his shop the previous Thursday. She had not been back since then, and had hoped that the butcher would break the run of days that she had counted, but the man had been busy hacking at a fresh lamb carcass, and had barely acknowledged her.

Farah smiled now and then, but never, it seemed, with pure pleasure. There was inevitably some sense of superiority or a hint of triumph in her face whenever she smiled that made Miriam discourage any show of teeth from her *bhabhi*.

“What are you doing with that meat? There won’t be anything left.”

Farah’s voice cut into her reverie and brought Miriam’s attention back to the pile of cubed mutton that lay before her. With deft strokes and pokes of her knife, Miriam was cutting away the edges of fat and removing all traces of sinew.

“My husband likes the meat to be clean,” Miriam replied. She had been scolded the previous week for leaving too much fat on the pieces of lamb that went into the curry.

“My husband likes it clean!” mimicked Farah. “Well, *my* husband likes to eat all the meat that I have paid for, and not to have it all cut up so there is nothing left.”

Miriam immediately put down her knife and began to pile the meat into a large bowl to be washed, before it was added to the onions that were already browning on the stove.

“Don’t worry,” she said quietly. “There will be enough for them.”

“Yes, but what about you and me?” asked her *bhabhi*.

Miriam rinsed the meat. She knew that Farah had never gone without her portion of anything, and that if there were a shortage, it would be Miriam herself who missed out.

“Maybe,” Miriam said quietly, “we should buy more meat and more flour for the *rotlis*...”

“We don’t have money for anything more,” Farah said. “It’s amazing that I manage to put enough food on the table at all with what they give me.”

Miriam began to skin and chop the rotting tomatoes which Sadru brought back from the market and which were too soft for anything but cooking. She knew that Farah was lying and that she took part of each week’s housekeeping money to buy clothes and trinkets for herself and her children, but there was no way for Miriam to protest. Omar had refused to give his wife their share of the money, it was Farah that ran the house, he told her, and he did not want to cause problems.

Later that evening, while the men sat down to eat together at the table, Miriam quickly rolled out balls of loose, elastic dough into perfect circles. She picked them up lightly, passing them back and forth between her open palms, and placed them onto the hot cast iron pan. She waited patiently as they cooked, shifting from foot to foot to try and ease the pain behind her knees. She had been standing up since five thirty that morning. Only her few trips to the bathroom had given her a moment to sit down. She turned the *rotlis* now and then with fingertips that had long ago become accustomed to the heat of the stove’s flames. As soon as brown patches began to form and spread across the surface, the bread was removed from the pan, placed onto a plate, and the surface rubbed with butter. Whenever two or

three were ready, she would carry them in, still hot, to the men, and to Farah, who had by now joined them.

“Come and eat,” Omar told her. Miriam nodded slightly, but before she could sit down, Jehan began calling out from her room. She screamed loudly, long delirious streams of words. The men looked up, but Farah continued eating.

“Have you fed her?” Omar asked. Miriam nodded, and went to see what hallucinations or dreams had disturbed her husband’s elder sister.

Jehan was easily placated for once. Miriam stayed with her for ten minutes, stroking her forehead and murmuring vague replies to the nonsense that she spoke. When she returned to the kitchen, Farah had already placed the empty dishes in the sink for washing. The serving plates were empty, and Miriam stood at the pot, and wiped the remaining sauce from the sides with a cold rotli and ate. Once again, nobody had smiled at her; not Omar when he arrived home from work – not even Sadru, who had a kind streak beneath his large, uncouth exterior, and who was often the most deferent to her. She pressed the aching lower part of her back. She had carried her son too much today, but he had been scared of Farah’s girl, older and tougher than he. She dreaded having to bring up Sam and Alisha amongst her sister-in-law’s badly behaved children, but she saw little way out. She had learned, though, through listening to the talk of other women, and from Farah herself, that there were ways to stop becoming pregnant, at least for a while. Omar’s demands on her had lessened as they both became more and more exhausted, but nevertheless she had been trying these since her second child had been born.

The following day, the oppressive atmosphere of the windowless bathroom was making Miriam feel nauseous again, as she moved over the floor with a scrubbing brush, her knees cold against the tiled floor. She worked quickly, and was almost at the door when it burst open, nearly hitting her in the face. She looked up. Farah’s eyes were wide, and her hands clapped together as she spoke.

“They said we can go! To the Bazaar café. For lunch!”

“Both of us?” Miriam asked, hardly daring to believe that she could be included in such a piece of good luck.

“All of us,” Farah replied, rolling her eyes. “They made me promise to take that lunatic. They want to give her an outing.” She turned to leave, stopping to glance back at Miriam once more.

“Hurry up!” she said. “Go and get her ready. I want to change.”

While Miriam dressed Jehan, she sang her a tune, a Hindi song from a film that had been popular years ago in Bombay. She smiled when she was finished, and Jehan laughed too, sensing a lightness of spirit that had not been felt in the house for months. For it was the first time since she had arrived in South Africa that Miriam would be eating a meal that she had not had a hand in preparing herself. She would be outside, without having to go shopping, or listen to the gossip of the women who were Farah’s friends and neighbours. And she would finally see Amina Harjan, the subject of so much of that gossip, for herself.

Miriam knew of her, of course; everybody did. For despite her lack of conformity, she was still Indian, still a very young unmarried girl, and her seemingly unlimited freedom and lack of concern for propriety was of great concern to everyone in the Asiatic Bazaar. Her way of dressing, the fact that she had just opened up her own business (“with a Coloured man”), even Begum’s photograph hanging proudly in the café - all these facts only fed the interest of those around her. They were appalled and horrified and shocked, but many began to patronise her café because they liked the food, they liked the atmosphere, and they liked the prices.

Miriam’s general attitude to Amina that day was one of curiosity, with an underlying sense of

disapproval. For Farah's friends came to the house at least twice a week to gossip. They would bring with them boxes of hard-skinned, green mangoes to cut up for pickles, or a week's worth of dry garlic bulbs for peeling, and over their work they would talk. Looking down at her own heap of peeled cloves, Miriam had seen only the smart flashing of ten or twelve blades in the still air around her as they chopped and scored, and she had listened as they had made thorough work of blaming Amina's dead grandmother for the sins of her granddaughter.

"She steered that girl wrong from the start. Taught her to be too proud and above herself. What does it get you?"

"But Begum had a hard life..."

"If you mess with the blacks, you can expect a hard life..."

"She didn't even feel any shame. Imagine. No shame. And this girl is exactly the same. Her poor mother!"

Miriam finished dressing Jehan and together they waited for Farah to appear. Her *bhabhi*, almost sick with the excitement of eating out, had dressed as though for a wedding, in a fiercely pink *shalwaar kameez*, while Miriam herself wore a simple printed skirt and blouse. At first, Jehan could not be persuaded to come out of her room, and chattered continuously while Farah shouted and cajoled, and finally slapped the girl to stop the flow of meaningless talk. At the sting of the hand on her face, Jehan was silent suddenly, and then she laughed, loud and long, as though sharing a private joke with her attacker. This unexpected laughter had long ago ceased to surprise Miriam, but its incongruous nature, the way that it spilled out without reason or warning still chilled her. She had heard it first on the night that she and Omar had arrived in South Africa. She had entered her new brother-in-law's house, nervous and shy, a little way behind her husband, with her head down and her heart pounding, and she had found herself in the middle of a screaming argument.

Two small children sat silent and scared on the floor beneath the table, and watched as the parents, Miriam's new in-laws, screamed at each other. Or rather, Omar's brother shouted - Farah attacked pointedly and venomously with a sarcastic comment now and then. Omar had turned and glanced at Miriam briefly, with eyes filled with embarrassment, and then he had shouted to his brother to be quiet, he was here, and what kind of a way was this to behave? The room was silenced, and his new sister-in-law had turned at once to look at Miriam, and at the same time she had smiled, a sly smile of triumph directed at her silenced husband. He was incensed, and had shouted at her again, "So you think this is funny? Now you laugh at me?" Miriam had watched appalled from beneath lowered lids as he continued to shout, with a voice that kept catching, that nobody would ever laugh at him, but she wouldn't allow it, there was nothing funny, nothing to laugh about, did she understand? And it was then Miriam had heard it first, that long, low laughter, maniacal and strange, issuing from a back room somewhere, with impeccable timing, in the middle of Sadru's warning speech.

It was her first introduction to Omar's elder sister, Jehan, the one whose inherent mental slowness had been partnered with a kind of madness after a bout of syphilis some years before. The word 'syphilis' was whispered with a significant nod by Farah, but the word and all its associations were alien to Miriam; she thought perhaps it was a peculiarly African disease, though she could not grasp how it was contracted, and she prayed privately that she would never catch it.

Holding Jehan between them, Miriam and Farah left the children with a neighbour, and they walked the several blocks to the café, beneath purple-blossomed laburnum trees and past the leaning rows of houses, from whose windows a few people waved at them as they passed. Jehan waved back with much windmilling of her arms, chattering all the while, and Farah walked a few paces ahead of them, itching with irritation.

When they entered the café, they were supremely self-conscious, but few people seemed to show

any particular interest in their arrival. Jacob Williams waited behind the counter for a few moments while the three women arranged themselves in one of the booths that ran along the walls. Then he walked slowly over to the table, one leg a little stiff from the arthritis that was slowly invading his body, and nodding politely, he placed down three menus.

“We have mutton stew today, and fresh *koeksisters*,” he said.

Jehan clapped her hands in approval. “*Koeksisters, koeksisters, koeksisters*,” she said.

“Shhh!” said Farah.

“What are *koeksisters*?” stumbled Miriam, half to Jacob, half to her *bhabhi*.

“Here, try for yourself,” said a voice by her side, and she looked up to see a long fork held before her. A small golden fried doughnut sprinkled with coconut was impaled upon it, and Amina Harja held the other end.

“See if you like it,” she suggested again, and shyly, Miriam took the *koeksister* from the fork. Breaking it in two, she passed one piece to Jehan and placed the other in her mouth. The warm, sweet doughnut tasted ripely of yeast and melted away in Miriam’s mouth.

“Do you like it?” asked Amina, smiling

“It’s delicious,” said Miriam.

“We’ll have some,” said Farah.

“**KOEKSISTERS!**” screamed Jehan, and Miriam blushed crimson.

Everyone in the cafe, it seemed, had turned to look at their table. In the sudden silence, Jehan shouted out again, an unintelligible word this time, and from the table behind them came a snort of laughter, a derisive, mocking sound. Amina looked around, and stood watching the occupants of the table for a long moment. When she finally asked Miriam and Farah what else they might like to eat, she was still watching, and she turned away only to nod briefly to Jacob. He nodded back, and by the time Amina had walked back to the kitchen with the new lunch order, he had given those customers their bill, taken part of their money, and the people were leaving. That they had not yet finished their lunch seemed to be irrelevant, and Miriam marvelled at the power this young girl, younger even than she, seemed to wield over those around her.

The three women sat, without speaking, and waited for their food. Over the murmurs of the other diners, they could hear from the kitchen the sound of Amina’s voice, and that of the cook, and the sizzle of hot oil, and then the bounce and scratch of a record being placed upon the old gramophone behind the counter. The straining strings started up, wavered and then righted themselves to form the opening bars of “Night and Day”. This was not a song Miriam had ever heard before. She listened to the radio often in the kitchen at home, and she knew many of Cole Porter’s and other American melodies by heart, though she could not really put a name to any of them. Miriam looked over at the record sleeve propped up on the counter. It was hard for her to make out the details from where she sat, but she could see the outline of a man’s face. The cover was lifted away as she peered at it, and she realised that it was being brought towards her, under the arm of Jacob Williams. He stopped at the table and deposited a bowl of steaming mutton stew, a platter of baked pumpkin, and a plate of bread yellow with corn grains. Then he removed the record sleeve from under his arm and offered it to Miriam.

“Amina says you might be interested to see this, ma’am,” he said, and Miriam thanked him and took it. Farah stared and raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Why did he bring this?” she asked, putting a piece of bread before Jehan, who ate hungrily.

Miriam shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe they saw I was looking at it.”

“Maybe she likes you,” she said, but without any kindness, and with a laugh that Miriam could

not read. She ignored Farah and looked down at the record cover. It was, as she had thought, a portrait of Cole Porter. Miriam listened to the record as it skipped along. "In the roaring traffic's boom, in the silence of my lonely room, I think of you, night and day..." Even that name, Cole Porter, seemed to be invested with such glamour, and such a sense of the debonair. The picture was black and white and grainy, but there he sat, hair slicked back with Brylcreem, leaning in towards his piano, eyebrows raised at the camera, a slightly sardonic expression on his face.

When Miriam looked up, Farah was still watching her. But for once, Miriam did not care. Her ten days of counting, of watching for some sign of concern or pleasure or kindness, had finally been ended with the smile Amina Harjan had given her.

Chapter Three

THE LAST DAY of each month was pay-day for the scores of Africans who worked on the farms that surrounded the shop, and the day that the overseers, or occasionally the owners themselves, would drive their workers to the shop, clutching their small amounts of tattered cash, so that they could buy whatever dry supplies and clothes they might need for the following month. They started to arrive early, usually just after Sam and Alisha had left on the bus for school in Springs, and it was always the busiest day of the month for the shop. As usual, they had all been preparing since very early the morning. There was plenty of fruit, enough bags of *mealies*, and the dark wooden counters were clean. Omar stood checking his stock and making the occasional scratch with his pencil on the pad of paper that lay next to the till. He looked up for his wife. Squinting through the sun that glanced off the window panes, he could see her outside, hanging washing out to dry.

Everything she was clipping to the line was white. He could see Sam's tiny vests and his own bright, white shirts, almost blue under the unrelenting light of the sun. He shut his eyes against the glow, and for a moment the shop ceased to exist. He was not here, out in the African wilderness; he was not the father of two small children; he was not a struggling shopkeeper; he was not married to a woman he hardly spoke to. In his mind, he was transported. He was in Bombay for a visit, young, eager, fresh from South Africa, feted by his uncle and aunt. He saw himself, as though he were watching a documentary film, standing out on his uncle's tiny balcony, smoking a cigarillo, and listening to an unknown girl chatting on the balcony above. His curiosity had risen so high that he had leaned forward and looked up. That had been his first glance of his future wife. Then, as now, she had been hanging out a basket of washing, a waving line of pure white against the whitewashed walls and the sun bleached sky. His eyes had swum with red outlines for a moment, and when he recovered he had to squint to see her. She had also been wearing white, as though she were part of the conspiracy of light that glowed against him. But she was attractive - he had seen more beautiful, more conventionally pretty girls, but this one was tall and lithe and laughing, and he had liked her.

"Shall I make some tea?" Miriam asked, her voice small in the large, quiet space of the shop. He looked up and nodded, and she went into the kitchen. At the range, she stopped abruptly and gripped the cold edge of the stove, and waited while a surge of dizziness passed over her. She closed her eyes for a few moments, and then looked out through the window for the first trucks. There was no sign of them yet, but she could see Robert walking slowly towards the shop from the store room, carrying two huge squash in each arm. At the back door he bent very slowly at the knees, so that his bony legs almost buckled, and lowered the vegetables gently onto the ground. He had dropped one earlier, and Omar had shouted at him not to be so clumsy - who did he think would buy a bruised squash? Robert had not been able to think of anyone who would, and had therefore accepted his admonishment with good grace, and now he carried the squashes with utmost care, cradling them in each of his thick sinewy arms as delicately as if they were chubby children. His boss shouted at him frequently, and although there were often times when he was sure he had not done the thing he had been accused of, he bore all the shouting in silence and apologised where necessary. It had never occurred to him that he might defend himself - it was not his place.

Anyway, no amount of shouting could make him unhappy to be working for these people. Although his wage was small, his mistress would often send him home with leftover food, or bits of material for his mother to use in sewing clothes, and she treated him well. She trusted him with the children. He knew about children - he himself was the second of seven surviving brothers and sisters. Robert's eldest brother was in Johannesburg, working in the mines. His family had celebrated when

his brother had left for the city, for they were hungry for income, and Johannesburg was where the jobs were. But his brother lived in rough conditions, and worked in even worse ones. Robert had been the one to visit him, and had had to share with his brother a tiny bed in a concrete building that housed more than one hundred men. The beds were so crammed together that Robert felt the raw breath of the man in the next bunk upon his face for most of the night. His brother was thinner than he had been at home, and his face was worn and creased with dust. He coughed almost all the time that he was awake. The mines were dark and cramped and the air was bad, his brother said, and the hours so very long. Robert had left after three days, sorrowful at having to leave his brother there, but unable to contain his own relief at the realisation that if that was how life was in the city, he would be happy to remain in the countryside.

The kettle began its high-pitched whine, and Miriam spooned two heaps of the crushed dried tamarind leaves into the pot, then carried a cup in to her husband.

“Thank you,” he said, but he did not look up.

For a short while they went about their little tasks, and though neither one spoke, Miriam sang softly to herself, a tune that had begun as an old standard but which was being improvised into something longer and sweeter. Omar glanced narrowly at her, being careful not to move his head, for she would see him and stop singing, assuming that she was irritating him. This singing of hers was another thing that he remembered from that balcony in Bombay. He frowned at himself. He was not a man given to sentimentality or nostalgia, but today these memories kept pushing back into his mind. He had gone out on the balcony on the second day to smoke and she had been above him again, singing quietly, unaware that below her someone was listening intently. With a sudden burst of decision, and with the soft tones of her voice still lingering in his head, he had gone back into the apartment and had demanded to know who that girl was.

His aunt had raised her eyes from her sewing. “What girl?”

“The one that lives above us,” he had said. “The one that sings and hangs the washing.”

His aunt had shaken her head. “She is a very pretty girl. But she is not for you.”

He had waited, with impatience, for her to explain herself.

“Her family is very humble,” she had added at last.

“Humility is a good thing.”

“Very poor,” she had emphasised.

And Omar had waved his cigarillo dismissively. “Are they our people?”

“Yes.”

“Then I want her.”

When eventually they heard the approaching rumble of the first truck, they looked up at each other and Miriam moved with the practice of routine out across the shop floor to prop open the door with a small bag of flour.

The truck was driven by Mr Wessels, the foreman of the Van Wingen farm, and he ground the pick-up slowly up the track to the shop. The back of the truck was fully weighed down by his workers. There were perhaps twenty or thirty men crowded onto the back-sitting piled high and hanging over each of the sides, draped over the back like banners, their bodies moving like fluid with the rough movements of the truck. They jumped off lightly when it stopped, a slow overflowing of bodies mostly clad in worn trousers and shirts. Mr Wessels was already in the shop, shaking hands with Omar, tipping his hat to “the missus”, and telling them it was “hot as the breath of hell out there” before handing over his own list of groceries to be boxed up. Miriam set to work on these, while the foreman bounded out to the porch and beckoned his men inside.

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