COME LISTEN QUICKLY

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by

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Contents

Come Listen Quickly

Lorinda didn't want to tell us at first. She knew we wouldn't approve. I mean now, it was 1982, and he was a white man. But you can't hide something like that. Not when you used to come home on the bus but suddenly there's a red Ford Grenada standing outside your mother's gate and a white man with a snor and a boeppens is opening the door for you. No man, then you mos making the thing obvious.

And you know what? It wasn't even two years before her own boeppens followed. She hid it at first. Lorinda was mos maer gewees. Altyd met die hoë hakke en die kleine rokkies wat net so sit. Ma' innie selle maand wat An'Katie wat innie voorste kamer geslaap het oorlede is, sê Lorinda vi' ha ma sy is swanger.

Yhuuu! Sarah – ha' naam was mos daai jare nog Sarah, sy't noggie slams gedraai nie – Sarah het omgekeer! Lorinda was mos die slim kind. Sy't matriek behaal en 'n goeie werk gehad. Om so 'n disgrace oppie familie te bring… 'n Valkind by 'n blanke man! Sarah get ha' lelik uitgeskel, binne en buite die huis. Die hele Schauder het kom kyk. Ouma Annie se helper Antie Betty moes kom keer, want anners het Sarah haar kind morsdood geslat. Toe almal geophou huil het en nadat Sarah gedrink het annie suikerwater wat Antie Betty gemaak het, het Ouma Annie ma' mooi met Sarah gepraat. 'n Kind is a segen, sê Ouma Annie. Ons het mos plek innie huis en in ons harte. Ons kannie die nooi uitstuur nie. Wie gaan na haar omsien? En wie gaan vir haar kind sorg? 'n Kind is 'n segen. Al is dit 'n valkind by 'n blanke man wat al klaar getroud is.

And then Mike Said

We could get married in Botswana. It’s legal there. As we approach the border post you can lie flat on the backseat under a blanket, just don’t come out until I say so.

To which Lorinda replied

A man who marries his mistress immediately creates a vacancy.

Lorinda

I don't like loud noises loud noises of any kind make it difficult for them to get through to me. This is why I don't listen to music. I don't like music because it drowns out what they're trying to say. Music fights them. Superimposes what they want me to listen to over what I am meant to hear. The doctors say I have schizophrenia, but I don't I know I don't my mother says I don't. She says I am not crazy. Everyone in our family hears voices. It is perfectly normal.

My mother isn't really my mother, she's just the vessel that birthed me. My mother is actually my grandmother. My real mother is my grandmother but not actually my grandmother but my actual mother because although I am not from her body I am created in her image and have her name am her name live her name. Anne. I am Anne. That should make my mother my sister but she is not my sister she is nothing to me she is dead to me. Dead to me. Nothing. Less than nothing. A blank page in a book. I am the book and she is a page in the book but she is not a page she is just a piece of blank paper. Nothing.

I nearly died when I had my daughter. Not the process of birthing her. That was easy enough even though I had her at the Livingstone Hospital. They tried to make me lie down on my back and threatened to put my feet in stirrups when I refused to comply. Doctors, midwives, nursing staff, even orderlies came by to investigate the source of the expletives echoing down the corridors. Expletives that sounded like they were in tongues but not tongues. Is it tongues when you don't recognise the voices of your ancestors speaking in the language of your roots? It is not tongues. I am speaking sense, such sense. I know what I am saying. You don't know what you are hearing. I learnt to speak from my mother who was not my mother but actually my grandmother but who treated me like hers because I looked like her and bore her name. My real mother. Who was there when I birthed my daughter. Who helped me off that undignified hospital bed with its coarse KPA linens and showed me how a woman is meant to give birth, how a real woman gives birth, how a Bushman woman squats to give birth. My mother who was not my mother but my real mother waved the midwives away with workworn hands and pursed lips on a stern face that brooked no argument. She positioned my knees and pointed my feet outwards, the words of encouragement murmured by her lips strengthened my spine and firmed my resolve. My mother who is not actually my mother but my real mother caught the fourth Anne as her placenta-covered being finally freed itself from my body, her red and yellow squirms landing faithfully in dark brown hands. Hands that positioned the new Anne on my chest and clapped with fervour as I bit the cord.

The near-dying came after. After having made what they considered to be a spectacle of their delivery room simply because I refused to bow to their will and birth their future queen on steel and plastic-covered foam that had been died on and then covered in bleached white with chequerboard navy blue KPA that still bore the stench of lingering spirits. Oh yes, spirits stink. That's why the Chinese burn miyang. They do it to drive them away.

They drove me away. They called the police to investigate me, this brown-skinned woman with a black-skinned mothering non-mother and a yellow-skinned child with a bald head and slate grey eyes. A child with a birth certificate stating UNKNOWN in the area where her father's name was meant to be. They added one and one and arrived at two, but in the winter of 1983 he and I came together and together, we became three. Not UNKNOWN. KNOWN. Very well known. Michael Young. Born 30 August 1940. Napier Road, Bristol. Son of Delia Mary Young née Fudgell and William Henry Young. Narcissist. Bigamist. Cheat. My accomplice in contravening the Immorality Act of 1950. Had we been caught he would have been deported and I would have been sent to jail. I would not have survived the post-birth haemorrhage there.

But I knew they were coming. The whispers inside told me they were coming. I gathered my things. I tied my child to my chest and my mother who was not my mother but my real mother took my hand and guided me from the KPA and the stench of certain death, and led me to safety.

Sy Issie

Lorinda issie mal'ie. Ma' da's iets fout hier. Ons moet slag.

And they Asked

Ma’ Lorinda, hoekom is sy dan so spierwit?

Hiding

Her face says I did something wrong, I don't know what I did but I must have done something because her face is black with rage. She squints as she takes a final drag from her cigarette. Her eyes remain narrowed as she puts it out in the ashtray next to her.

Come here, she says. I shrink back. I said come here. I look at her, beautiful even in her fury. Frilly purple floral dress and matching high-heeled sandals. I am four and she is my whole world and I hate that I have upset her. Don't make me say it again. I approach. Slowly. She removes her shoe. I see the movement and start running but she is too quick for me. She grabs me by my plait and swings me around, her leather-soled sandal landing on my thigh. How many – dwah! – times – dwah! – must – dwah! – I – dwah! – tell you – dwah! – not to tell people my business? – dwah! - How many times? – dwah! – Do you want me to go to jail? – dwah! – Do you want me to go to jail? – dwah! She leans back against the wall, breathing heavily, and looks at me sobbing on the floor.

I will go to jail and your father will go back to England and you be put in a home and you will never see us again. The next time someone asks you where your father is, you tell them to ask me.

Happiness

I am happiest with a fresh tomato cut in half and eaten with salt in the sun on the voorstoep. I eat it slowly, making sure all the children in the neighbourhood know to envy me.

Waanie

Do you know the Catholic Church in Schauder? The one where they sell drugs? I grew up across the road from the Church, at number 102 – the cream coloured house with the enclosed stoep with the black rattan bistro set and too many pot plants. The house with the facebrick wall and the double security gate but we didn't always have the wall and the two gates. We used to have just a small wooden gate and a council-bossie hedge. I used to play Nine-den on the little cement pathway between the door and the gate. Nine-den, klip-klippie, skipping rope, I grew up watching them hiding their parcels in the gap in the church's vibracrete wall.

I was drawing a new den on the cement walkway with a fresh stick of white chalk stolen from Mr Yon's class when they pulled up in the blue Chico and shot Waanie. Right there, in front of the house. In front of me. Or maybe that wasn't me maybe that was my cousin and I've just heard the story so many times that I can see it unfolding. No, it was just Mason and Rashid. Waanie was meant to be watching them. *'n Nuwe blou Chico, seke' 'n ge-leasede kar, wan' haai China teef werk nou vi' Volkswagen. Die een dra so 'n groen Adida-lappie met 'n geel streep en die anne' so 'n denim Pepe overall nes die Somalians ha' oorkant die Mercantile ve'koop ma' die een innie overall bly innie kar. Die anne ene loop tot by Waanie toe en skiet hom net da' morsdood. En hy klim innie kar en hulle ry hier op, weg verby die kerk. Hoekom het Waanie hulle nie gesien nie? Hoekom het hy nie weggehardloop nie? Ma' ek is so dankbaar dat die een uitgeklim'et. Hulle hettie net geskiet nie, hulle het seker die kinners gesien. Hulle was darem ordentlik.* No, it was just Mason and Rashid. I wasn't there because when the cops came we knew nothing, no one heard anything or saw it happen. But I remember it like it was yesterday right down to the loose yellow thread on his bottle green Adidas tracksuit pants. But of course I don't actually remember it because I wasn't really there I was at school of course I was at school I was meant to be at school in my brown gymslip with a white shirt and yellow ribbons in my hair.

Not three kilometres away hiding behind a hedge pretending not to see my classmate's father getting out of a blue Golf and walking up to my neighbour and pulling out a gun and repeatedly shooting him in the chest.

Auntie Millie

Auntie Millie who lived around the corner in the circle always stopped to chat to my grandmother if my grandmother was sitting in the doorway. That was my grandmother's perch. Her floral upholstered single seater chair was directly next to the door, positioned to face the TV, but her face was always watching the world pass her front door. Auntie Millie was a favourite. She shared all the news about what was happening in the circle, and if some of that news was made up, did it really matter?

Catherine

When Leigh-Anne started Sub A she was boarding with Catherine who used to go to St. James. Catherine man, Cathy. She was one of the Jacobs sisters, daai lig van kleur mense met die grou oë. They mos moved to Third Avenue, there in Windvogel next to St. Kevin's by that orange house with the white wagonwheel where they like to steal the spokes. Now mos Cathy had the husband who used to like to take a drink, do you remember him? What was his name now? Oh, I can't remember. But they had all those children. Two were in the police – no wait, yes, three of them were in the police, that's right. And the oldest daughter was a nurse. Jacqueline. She's mos the one who had the child with that Chinaman. But the other children are suiplappe, just like their father. Now that's who Leigh-Anne stayed with after Sarah converted to Salwa and kicked them all out.

Ingenuity

We only used Colibri towels, growing up. My grandmother had a connection at the factory. If the ink ran or a print run was off or the fabric didn't meet the quality standard, they'd hack the fabric into squares of about fifteen centimetres by fifteen centimetres and throw it away. They also threw away the end of the bolt of fabric. The factory workers would scratch in the bins and collect these seconds and remnants and smuggle them out past the security guards and sell them at home. My grandmother was always so excited to get them. The largest squares would be given to my mother who would neaten up the edges with blanket stitch and we'd all celebrate having new facecloths.

The rest would be laid flat on Ouma Annie's dining room table that she was given by the Bekkers when she still worked there. The table became Ma Salwa's sewing table because we didn't have a dining room, just an extension to the kitchen. Ma Salwa and Auntie Doreen would sit and fit the pieces together like a fabric jigsaw hier 'n bietjie, da' 'n bietjie, vat mooi so and pin them and then Auntie Doreen would sew them up on the Empisal.

I buy my grandmother towels now. Proper big fluffy towels from Boardmans and @home with the seams at the edges, not as stripes running down the middle acting as speedbumps on the road to getting dry. But sometimes when I visit I still see the laslappie towels hanging from a nail on the backdoor.

Claudia

People are always surprised to learn what I do for a living. I don't know if it's because they don't expect it from someone like me or if it is because of my frankness, or perhaps it's a combination of both, but after I drop the bomb, there's invariably a widening of the eyes and conversation falters. The daring ask me if my work scares me. Old ladies tell me I'm very brave. Ag sies tog, toe maar. The worst is from other women, book club women with fake tan and acrylic nails and high pitched voices going, oh, no, I could never! Ek gril my morsdood om aan so iets te raak! Easy to say if you have a choice. Did I have a choice? I suppose I did. It didn't feel that way at the time. I wasn't forced, but I was drawn to this in what felt like some preternatural way.

Does that mean I was coerced? I don't know. I was right there when the position became available and the money seemed too good to refuse. That's usually the other question, and yes, the money is good. Very good. Especially in a cash-based economy like South Africa, and even more so if you're a woman.

The life of an undertaker isn't an easy one, but I've been intrigued by all aspects of the job since I was a little girl. I remember my excitement watching the insurance man going door to door on Saturday mornings. His brown station wagon would cruise through the neighbourhood and stop at houses of clients. He would drive right past Mr Lai Wing's house and park in front of our house, but he'd always wave at Mr Lai Wing even though Mr Lai Wing used the Chinese insurance. Everyone knew the Chinese insurance was cheaper, but they only insured other Chinese or Chinese coloureds. My aunt used to say it was cheaper because after they bury you the Chinese insurance people go back to your grave, dig up the casket and dust it off again for the next person.

The insurance man's name was Mr Swart. It suited him because he was very dark, but coloured people can't take anything seriously, so we called him Whitey. Only grownups though, we had to be respectful, so we called him Mr Swart. But only to his face, the rest of the time he was Whitey.

I wait at the front door for Whitey, my face smashed between the bars of the security gate. He comes down Brown Street in the station wagon and parks outside Auntie Glynnie's house, leaving the engine running. This is ok because everyone in the street knows his car, and even the gangsters know not to touch it – who would bury them if they stole the insurance man's car? Whitey walks to each house, knocks on the door, collects your money and stamps your book. If you don't have your insurance

money ready you can just pretend you aren't home. Whitey grew up in Couldridge Road, so he understands these things. He only knocks once before moving on to the next house.

Sometimes people take too long to come to the door and he starts to leave, and they call for him to wait and run to the gate to meet him. Mrs Felix often does this. Whitey knocks once and gets no answer and starts leaving, then Mrs Felix comes running towards him, a cigarette dangling from her lips and her hands clutching at her dressing gown while trying to hold on to two brown notes.

Djou robbish, she screams, Djy waggie eens vi' my sheld'ie! Dé! Vattie sheld! Vat dit! And she thrusts the money at him and runs back inside for her book so he can stamp it. She berates Whitey for not knocking twice, but he never does because he knows that sometimes she hides in the second bedroom pretending not to hear him. Whitey never lets on that he knows. His steps in this dance are well-rehearsed.

After Brown Street Whitey pulls into our street and stops at our house. As he engages the handbrake I yell to my aunt to get the books ready, Whitey is here. My aunt has her own book, as does my mother but I am on my mother's book and my uncle is on my aunt's. That's because my gran has her own insurance now that she is a Muslim. It is cheaper than our insurance, but they don't recycle your casket, they just bury you in a long piece of lap. My granny says it isn't a lap, it is a shroud, like Jesus was buried in and when I ask why Jesus was buried like a slams I am told to shush, I ask too many questions.

My aunt comes out of the bedroom and closes the door so that Whitey doesn't see the pis emmer. She tears off her swirlkous and tries to fluff up her hair but she's been working short-time so there's no money for relaxer and the kroes at her scalp makes her shout at me. Hoekom warn djy my nie? Djy sit heel môre voor'ie deur ma' djy sê fokkol.

I don't know why she always takes it so seriously. My mother keeps telling her Whitey isn't interested, he is too dark to be interested in someone who is also dark. She says he is looking for someone who can add some milk to his coffee, that's why he is always nice to the Lai Wings.

Geraldine has two loskinners already but when she washes her hair she just sits in the front yard and combs her hair in the sun until it's dry, and even though her children aren't as light as she is she smears

enough Vaseline on them that they fry in the sun. That's the sort of person Whitey wants, my mother insists, even though Geraldine has those two loskinners already and weighs twice what Whitey does.

Every time I prepare a fat person's body for burial I am reminded of Geraldine. This woman is also a Chinese coloured mix, so maybe that's why I think of Geraldine today. She has curiously straight pubic hair and I stroke it. She's dead, after all. It's not like she'd mind. The hair feels flat and unnatural, like a streetwalker's weave and that's when I realise that I'm not wearing my gloves. I wash my hands. I put on a fresh pair of gloves. I finish my preparation and start applying her makeup. I try not to make the makeup too obvious – some base, some blush, just something to add a bit of colour. As I start blending colours for the foundation I realise that the corpse's scent is still lingering on my fingers. I am not wearing my gloves again. I wash my hands. I put on a fresh pair of gloves. I finish the makeup and I try to make it look natural. I have a hard time contouring some semblance of cheekbones, the face is just too fat. It's a pity really because the face isn't unattractive and I can see that she put in some effort with her appearance – her eyebrows were recently microbladed. My base brush smudges. I wipe. Part of the eyebrow comes off as a scab. I try to stick it back on but I don't quite manage and have to fill in the eyebrow with black pencil. Where did my gloves go and what is that godawful smell?

I take a whiff of the eyebrow scab but it's not that so I place the eyebrow scab on the shelf next to my makeup kit and wash my hands. This is the last one for the day, I can go home now.

I go home via the Stanford Road cemetery. I need to pay my respects to Mrs Louskieter who was buried last Saturday. Saturdays are busy days for me, I don't go to funerals unless I'm working. I've warned everyone close to me that if they want me at their funeral and I'm not burying them, they need to have their funeral on a weekday. They always laugh. They don't think death would ever happen to them. My grandmother was the same. She died on a Friday night and was buried on a Saturday morning. She was thinking of joining the Seventh Day Adventists but she was still Muslim when she died so she was wrapped up in her lap and buried for cheap. I didn't go to the funeral. I couldn't go to the grave until the following week because ever inconsiderate my grandmother died while I was on my period. You're not supposed to go to a Muslim grave while you're on your period. They say the ieblies can smell the blood.

I drive slowly through the cemetery. The roads aren't tarred and it's nearly maghrieb so visibility isn't great. I arrive at Mrs Louskieter's grave just as the Ah Tows arrive at a fresh grave two rows down. I lift a hand at their greeting and note that they're in two SUVs this week. They start digging and I look

for a rock to place at the head of Mrs Louskieter's grave. I take my time in choosing a good one – not too big, but it needs to be a good size and colour. I finally spot one at the headstone of a Dearly Beloved Wife and Mother Mrs Campodonico who leaves behind a distraught husband, three loving children, five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, and the stone is a perfectly smooth nearly oval river stone in a beautiful shade of biscuit. I place it at the top of Mrs Louskieter's grave, near where her head would be expected to be.

I chat to her for a while and fill her in on what's been happening in the neighbourhood since Saturday. I tell her that I heard she had a beautiful service and the church was so full that people had to park halfway up Dinsmore Road. An engine starts and I suddenly realise that it's dark but I'm not afraid of being alone in the cemetery, I work with dead people every day. I know Mrs Louskieter isn't going to answer me, and besides, I'm wearing my gloves. I take them off and I promise Mrs Louskieter that I'll visit again soon, the very next time I'm burying someone near this row I'll stop by to say hi. I arrive back at my car just in time to see the Ah Tows struggling to get the casket into the SUV. I shine my headlights at them so that they can see what they are doing. I take off my gloves and rub my hands together. It's cold. The Ah Tows slam their boot shut and give me a wave and I drive off. The rubber of my glove squeaks against the steering wheel when I hoot at them as I pass.

Baas Mike

My father ran the Engineering Department at Rhodes University from 1982 to 1997. He took early retirement at 57. He quite earnestly defended his decision by telling me, Once the blacks came into power, no one called me sir anymore.

Uncle James

I spend school holidays with my mother's friends, Uncle James and Auntie Mildred. Uncle James has a wasting disease and is in a wheelchair. Sometimes when I visit his skootlap falls off and I see his penis. It's just a pap thing that lies slightly to the one side and doesn't do anything. Not like that other one.

I'm a teenager before I wonder if Uncle James drops the skootlap deliberately.

Sarah

My grandmother still eats only twice a day, and slowly. Nearly seventy years of security can’t make up for a childhood of deprivation.

Mary-Anne

Mary-Anne lived up the road from us in an unextended council house with the original small metal window frames and a green enamel painted door that had paint peeling all the way up to the door handle. They were so poor that even the door handle was the original round brass thing that came with the house. They lived right across the road the shop that burnt down in the 1990 riots, but when asked about them, she had to confess that she didn't know what happened in those riots. Her grandparents kept her inside and told her to stay away from the windows.

No one quite knew if Mary-Anne's grandfather was black or just a very dark coloured. He spoke Afrikaans, but not like us. He sounded like a plaasnaar, and his vocabulary was so outdated it made us laugh. He didn't go to our churches but sometimes on a Saturday he would get dressed in a brown check suit and put a hat on his grey pepper-corned head. He'd walk down to taxi rank near the Mercantile Hospital and disappear into a taxi filled with what my grandmother called Bantus and my father called natives.

Mary-Anne's grandmother wasn't much lighter but she'd grown up in South End and had been head girl at St Thomas. She went to St James every Sunday and even if she never took communion she was still one of us. My grandmother was fond of Mary-Anne's grandmother, and even had time for Mary-Anne's grandfather. She said they were dark, but very clever, and whenever she ran into Mary-Anne or her grandmother while doing her shopping in Durban Road, my grandmother would stop and speak English to them, and come home and tells us, Ennie mense verkyk hulle so aan ons. Ma' is niksie, ons kan ook Engels praat, al lyk ons ma' so swart.

Currency

My mother sees a light-skinned woman with a dark-skinned child. She asks, And what does your husband do?

Auntie Doreen

I knew my uncle's marriage was in trouble when my grandmother started complaining about his wife after Sunday lunch. Until then, my aunt-by-marriage could do no wrong. She was light of complexion, spoke English, worked in an office, and dyed her hair such a convincing shade of red that my grandmother could tell everyone whether they wanted to hear it or not, Sy't ha' eie rooi hare.

My uncle arrives for Sunday lunch in his white BMW with his wife and their daughter and a wicker basket filled with VHS cassettes and Pyotts crackers, and a stale whiskey stench that precedes him up the freshly polished red front steps to the door. My aunt-by-marriage keeps her sunglasses on and my little cousin immediately wants to play with my brother. Everyone sits down on the brown floral three piece in front of the Indian show on TV and my grandmother, who has been Muslim for longer than she was ever Catholic, starts berating them for arriving too late even for second mass.

Mammie, laat rus, asseblief, my uncle says.

My aunt distracts with a Mammie, dit ruik lekker, is dit Antie Gayroe se resep?

Resep! Resep! Nes 'n boermeid, my uncle starts, as if he didn't first approach her in the club because he thought she was a white girl. Sê recipe, jy hou jou ve'niet so lekker, jy is nou in Schauder en ek het jou in Bloemendal gaan kry.

This is where I take my place. Auntie Dor, Auntie Dor, I say, in my best Model C English, thank you for the typewriter, it really helped with my touch typing. When I did my homework last week my teacher had to pull out her magnifying glass because she thought I had done my homework on the computer! But I'm still struggling to balance my sheet, please can you help me with my accounting?

And my Auntie Doreen follows me through the kitchen to the back of the house and she sits at the table with me and shows me how I made a credit a debit and overlooked something else and as if by magic I balance. Twenty minutes later we go back to the lounge and her sunglasses are off and she's smiling and laughing and you would never guess that her eyes were red when she walked through the door.

Boeta, I balanced! I announce. And my uncle and my grandmother beam at me, proud of my English and my light complexion, and I know they see a future Leigh-Anne who works in an office and dyes her hair improbable shades of red and blonde.

Kom skep op, my grandmother interrupts this fortune telling. Daa's Hong Kong chicken innie oond en skwashie ennie roas'potatoes is oppie tafel ennie slaai is innie fridsh innie bak langsaan'ie jelly. Ek moet nog custard maak, ma' ek is moeg. Ek hettie baie gekook'ie want ek hettie geweet of julle gaan kom'ie want julle bel nie, julle sê niks. And she stands at the stove and her anger stirs the pot. She mops up the sides of the pot with a vadoek that hints at once having been white with a green pattern.

Ons hét probeer, my uncle's wife attempts, but my grandmother gestures towards the phone with a dripping opskeplepel and talks over her, haai ding se keel is af, ma' julle kon langsaan gebel't.

Jammer Mammie, my uncle's wife says, and wisely holds her tongue.

Later, much later, after the Nostradamus movie has been dismissed as duiwelsgoed and the movie about the American in uniform chasing the blonde has been accused of being kwooigoed and the animated movie about the Disney princess has been ignored by all, my uncle and his wife and their daughter leave.

My grandmother and I walk them to the gate. She waves at the neighbours walking by. She keeps my aunt-by-marriage talking outside as long as she can so that passers-by can admire the red hair blowing in the wind. Eventually they leave, and my grandmother waves them away with my uncle's promises to bring a DVD player next time struggling to be heard over his music and the hooter and my cousin crying for my brother.

We go back inside. I start tidying and my grandmother starts her tirade. That woman didn't dish up properly. She used the same spoon for the rice as for the curry, and now there are ryskorreltjies in the curry. Ryskorreltjies! In the curry! What sort of house did that woman grow up in?

Verona-Louise

My mother often tells the story of how her sister broke her wrist as a child. Aunt Verona-Louise is sent to the shop to buy eggs, and because she is a bit of a dreamer and prone to clumsiness, she is admonished not to drop them. My aunt goes off to the shop, plays nine-den with her friends outside the shop and nearly loses the money. She runs into the shop, buys the eggs, and walks home carefully. She stumbles at the gate and falls, breaking her fall with her left hand. Her left wrist is broken, but the eggs are intact.

My aunt laughs at this story.

Another story is told. Aunt Verona-Louise is sent to the shop om twee lemoene te koop. The shopkeeper is a fair-skinned Indian with striking green eyes. He always flirts with my mother. He tries to flirt with my aunt too but leaves her embarrassed and stammering. She whispers her request in halting English, takes the packet, leaves the money on the counter and runs home. She doesn't drop the packet, but her mother smacks her anyway. My aunt was sent to the shop for oranges and came home with lemons.

My aunt says this never happened.

Boebertyd

Auntie Saadia was very fond of Maureen who lived up the road on the corner in Nicholas Road in the wendy house behind the Gardiners' house. She called Maureen her little black child, Want ons is ewe swart.

Whenever Auntie Saadia made mutton biryani or her special chicken curry with the yellow rice with raisins, she'd send a message for Maureen to bring a Tupperware bakkie to fetch her share. During the pwasa Maureen would stop at Auntie Saadia's gate and shout, Salaam motta! Hoevaarie pwasa? Hoeveel dae?

And Auntie Saadia would shout back, Hei! Moenie so skree nie! Ek skrik my so morsdood ek breek amper my pwasa! Jou boeber sal kom! Moenie warrie nie!

And come the 15th day of the fast, a messenger would be dispatched to Phyllis street with instructions to fetch some boeber. Boeber isn't for everyone, but I always say if you don't like boeber you need to try Auntie Saadia's boeber. She doesn't make it too thick, she isn't stingy with the sugar and when asked how she gets the vermicelli so soft, she explains how she starts the morning before and makes it on the stove, none of that microwave rubbish. You can't rush good boeber, she says. Good boeber needs time for the ingredients to get to know each other in the saucepan. That is why, she says, That is why my boeber is so good that even my daughter's supervisor at Eberspacher who is a white lady counts down the days to the 15th so that she can send a bak.

Ruwayda

Ruwayda was young when she met him. Young young, I don't think she was 16 yet and he was working already. They tried to keep it a secret at first but you know, you can't keep anything a secret here in Salt Lake. Everyone knows your business even before you do. Then when her focus started to go and she wasn't doing so good at school anymore her father sat her down and asked her what is going on. She denied it at first, said she was tired, her school is far, she had to share a room with her sister and her sister is always in her things, scratching and making nonsense with her homework.

So they sent her to go stay with her mother's sister Auntie Baby. Auntie Baby lived there in Gelvan near the school on the opposite corner by the house shop out the garage. It was ok at first. She seemed happy, she had her own room, no getting up early to take taxi, she could just get out of the house and walk maybe so ten fifteen steps and then she's at school. But she didn't want to go home over weekends and Auntie Baby never had children so Auntie Baby didn't know how to handle her. Then Ruwayda failed standard nine and the whole story came out.

They went to go and skel at Shaun's house. The whole family, my brother, his wife, his wife's brother, and they took Ruwayda with them. They all of them forced into my other brother's green Uno and drove here up to Shaun's mother's house, there up past Charlie's by those nice houses before you get to Tayoub. The must've pulled up with a helse noise because Shaun's mother came out of the house with her swirlkous still on her head, and the people at the shop turned around to look.

She wouldn't let them in the house. She said her husband is resting because he works night shift and in any case, Shaun is at work. They stood there outside the house skelling each other, and all the neighbours came out of their houses to see. She said she don't know Ruwayda, she's never even come the house, how can they say Shaun is her boyfriend? Shaun is a big man, he's 33 already, he don't have time for schoolchildren. My sister-in-law is crying, my brother and her brother is telling her to be quiet and my other brother is saying his child isn't a liar. If she says it's Shaun, then it's Shaun.

Her husband came out of the house then. He spoke nicely at first. He said he's tired, he works night shift, if they have something to say please can they come back at a decent time when he has had some sleep and something to eat, and he'll make sure Shaun is here. He really spoke nicely to them. You know, like a person. But then my sister-in-law, who never knows when to keep her mouth, really starts performing and says work, work? What work? They also work and she can't focus on her work and

that is why they are here now. Her daughter can't keep her focus on her schoolwork because Shaun is keeping her out of school, and look how she failed standard nine, what must happen now?

And at that point Shaun's father sommer stripped his moer and told them if they gave a damn about their daughter they would see that she was in school, not being so mannerig and chasing after grown men with her school skirt rolled up so high that the whole world can see her stêrre. Because yes, he saw them. She was there on the corner of Kobus Road, and what sort of house did she grow up in, because she was sitting on the wall oop lieste, and everything that was a taxi hooted at her as they drove past.

Then the skelling really got ugly and brother had to keer or else my other brother would have moered him. It was just ma se pees and ma se dees, and they had to pull my sister-in-law away while she was still holding on to the security gate. All the neighbours was laughing.

They didn't go back to that house. Shaun didn't even go to my brother's house to explain. My brother locked Ruwayda up in her bedroom and her mother only opened up for her so she could use the bathroom. We worried about her. Me and my daughter tried to go there. The first time they at least let us come into the house, but when we started asking questions about Ruwayda my sister-in-law started crying and my brother said it's time for us to go. After that whenever we tried to go there we were told they're busy. How are you too busy for your sister? How are you too busy to even make me a cup of tea? So I got the hell in and I didn't go back.

The next thing I heard it was January and Ruwayda was back at school. Back at school and doing standard nine again, and this time with a stomach. A stomach that came out to here and marks on her arms and legs that looked like someone got hold of her with a belt.

The talk probably came out by Shaun. Maybe his father forced him or maybe he does have a conscience, but one night my brother came home from work and there was a car outside the house and Shaun and his father were sitting on the couch, Shaun's teacup annie bewe on the saucer.

They must've talked. I don't know what they said, but they must've had a lot to say, because my sister-in-law phoned me after a number for Auntie Gayroe the dressmaker and Auntie Mariam's daughter who bakes cakes and did I also have a number for Imam Sarika and what happened to that book of Arabic names and their meanings that Boeta Salie brought back from when he went on haj?

But it didn't happen, not like they planned. Shaun's father said not a damn, his son is a Catholic, his whole family is Catholic and he doesn't want a slams for a child. Shaun's mother had to be booked in by Hunter's Craig for observation. So Shaun married Ruwayda without the name he chose for himself. Not even a Thursday night nikah, it had to be a court story with her parents standing as witness, Auntie Gayroe's ge-rushde cream lace dress getting dirty on the steps, and a three-tier cake waiting at home that no one wanted to eat.

A reflection

There was one other coloured girl in my high school who had a white father. But he was involved in her life. He paid her school fees, he gave her his name, and he gave her his nose.

He was a Slovak. Rumour had it that he'd defected from what was then Czechoslovakia to South Africa via Russia and then Afghanistan. He was tall and thin and vaguely bird-like with long arms and legs, and he loped rather than walked. His magnificent crescent-shaped nose is what I would one day know is called aquiline. But I was 12 when I met his daughter and her enormous nose so I just called it a boogneus.

I don't think she really minded the nose. She wore it well. Much better than his name. She had the feminine version of his Slovak name. She was Františka to his František, but where he was Kováč, she was Botha. Františka Botha. Climax anticlimax.

It didn't really matter much because all our teachers took one look at her tainted tinted skin and foreign nose and decided her name was Francesca.

Auntie Gadijah

My Auntie Gadijah isn't really my auntie, she's actually the wife of my grandmother's brother. He's not really even her brother, just another adopted child of the woman who raised my grandmother. But he and my grandmother called the same woman Mammie and when I think of my childhood I remember Sunday morning coffee with extra sugar, and koesisters with warm syrup and coarse coconut getting stuck between my teeth.

My Auntie Gadijah always used to save some coarse coconut in a special container for me. A genuine Tupperware container, a small round khaki one with a see-through lid with a bobbledot pattern that made funny sounds when I scratched my nails across it. That was my special coarse coconut container because I didn't like the fine coconut Auntie Gadijah usually put on the koesisters she sold on Sunday mornings. I always wanted something with more bite to it.

I was my auntie's favourite, because I was my mother's child. My mother was really the favourite favourite but favourite by extension was good enough for me, especially if it meant blue floral party dresses with real broderie anglaise and fabric offcuts for dolls' clothes and a special Tupperware container with my special coarse coconut.

Djy lyk al nes 'n coconut, my auntie would laugh as I took out my coconut container. En bly weg van my stove, djy ga'djou vinges brand.

My Auntie Gadijah was from Cape Town and a lifetime of raising other people's children in Port Elizabeth couldn't soften her accent.

Where are you from, Auntie Gigi? I would ask.

Gaan'aan! Ek ga'djou moer! she'd laugh in reply.

But where are you from, I would pester, until she'd finally reply, Um frawm Cape Taahn.

And I would snork with laughter until coconutkorrels came out of my nose.

Auntie Gayroe's House

Kaashif wants my house. Kaashif tells me this isn't my house, this is his father's house. He says I'm alone now and this house is too big for me. He tells me he knows I'm not happy in PE, he knows I've always wanted to go back to Cape Town. He says I must go home, and I must give him this house.

Sy moer man! I'm in this house 47 years already, he is only 35. This is my house. I paid for the plot this house stands on. I paid it from my inheritance I got when my father died; all my share from selling the business went straight into this plot. We didn't have money for a big house, so we first built a servants' quarters. Not big – a living room, a kitchen, one bedroom, and the jamang was just a jamang and a basin. We used to wash every day in the basin and bath once a week in a big zinc bath in the kitching. Water was expensive, so we would all get a chance to bath in the same water. At night, the girls would get a wipe down with a nat waslap and bath once a week on a Sunday, sommer at the same time.

My brother built first my servants' quarters, then this house. He was a bricklayer for many years working on big jobs. He worked away jobs for government contracts, months away and then home for a coupla weeks and then away jobs again. That's why his wife left him. My brother like to say it's because that other man had more money, but the truth is, who wants to marry a man you only see every few months and then he complain the whole time he's tired?

When we built this house, we were living in the servants' quarters at the back and my husband was working at Vella. He would come home from work and make abdas and catch up on his salaah, and maybe eat something quickly, then he would go out again to help. Salie, Salie, your hands! I would shout, but he didn't worry, he would help. He will inspect the day's work and maybe say this line is a bietjie skief or that doesn't look so lekka square, and then he and my brother would argue. But not an ugly argue, because Salie was always right. He knew about straight lines, he was mos a patternmaker all the years. After they moan about straight lines, they make right and then get ready for the next day. Salie used to mix the dugga. He used to say it was easier than mixing a cake. Then I would shout, wat wiet djy van koek bak? Watse koek krap djy in rond? And we would all laugh and laugh. We were naughty those days, it was our young days. We weren't married so long. We were still newlyweds, we only had two children. Salie and my brother would build, just the two of them, and Salie wouldn't come back inside until everything was cleaned and locked away in the houtshed. Then he would wash again and we would all make Eshaai together. Then we used to pull the curtain over the doorway and we would try to make a son.

The building work would go so stop start, stop start. My brother would go away and we would take a break for a while and put our money together for the next part. First it was the foundation, and that was expensive because we wanted a house that was big enough. It seemed like every year we lived in the servants' quarters, the front house got bigger. The more we overcrowded into the small space, the more room we wanted in front. At first it was going to be a four-bedroom place with a big kitchen and a lounge with a lot of windows for the light. Then we added on a bit more for a second lounge, and then after I started getting more orders for my sewing, we added a sewing room also. So it was a big house. We had to save for a long time for each part.

By the time our third daughter came, we were at window height. It took a bit longer because that's when my brother's wife left him the first time. He went to fetch her. The work truck dropped him at the house and it was locked. He went next door to fetch the key and Old Miesies September wouldn't look him in the eye. He said he knew then something was wrong. When he went inside, he found the house empty. Empty empty. All the furnitures were gone, even the ones our father made with his own hands. Alles net weg!

He came here. I still remember the look in his eyes. He didn't want to sleep, but it was late already so I boiled a kettle of water and told him to go wash while I made something to eat. Salie was at a rugby club meeting that night. He used to mos play rugby in those days; he had big legs and net sulke kuite that used to sit like so. But he used to walk slow even despite those kuite, which is probably why my brother was sleeping already by the time Salie arrived home. And then the time we woke up for Fajr, he was out of the house already. He did sieke only sleep for a few hours, because by the time we got up, the couch was cold already.

He never found her. He went to look for her, but he never found her. His whole two-week leave he went looking for her, here up to Walmer location, down there to Uitenhage. He evens wanted to catch a bus to Kimberly where her mother stays, but the Imam sent someone from there to her mother's house, and this someone said she wasn't there. That whole leave, he didn't do no work on this house. My stene het net hie' gestaan, sakke en sakke sement. Lucky the windows didn't yet come, but I still had to go and ask my neighbour from opposite the road if one of their dogs could sleep here for a few weeks.

When my brother came home from leave again, she was in the house, furniture and all, all the while like she had never left. But the children looked at him funny, and their daughter was told to shush

every time she asked where was her other daddy. We tried to put it behind us, because we all make mistakes and have things we regret, en my broer is my broer ma' hy is ma' wat hy is. But I could see my brother didn't feel so lekka about it. They used to fight ugly and in front of the children. Salie eventually spoke to him and said to him, if you want to talaq, then you must talaq. But if you don't want to talaq, then you must find a way to put this thing behind you and you must move on.

By the time my windows was in and we were saving for roof trusses, she left him again. By this time, my brother said she must go to that man and good luck to him. Look, her mother was mos a Moroccan woman, and you know they can sometimes have funny ways, and that man was also a Arab, so maybe it was for the best. And I could see my brother always had a question in his eye when he looked at his daughter. Tayba was her name. She was the same colour like us, but her hair was straight straight, niks krul, niks kroes, and fine as feathers. And she had blue eyes. Now look here, I'm not saying it is impossible, my brother's wife was half Moroccan and we mos not so dark, but I'm saying there's a question mark, en miskien lê die antwoord in daai anne man se grou oë.

My roof was on and the plumbings was in and then I had my fourth daughter. It was a happy time for us. When we moved in here, my brother moved in at the back. He never married again, and he didn't have visitors in that place. I mean, he had people coming over, but just to visit. He didn't have visitors visitors, if you catch my meaning. Niks lawwe meide nie, just people. It worked out nice for us, because when he went away to work on building jobs, we could keep an eye on his place, and when he came home he could drop off his washing and eat with us. So now and then he would do some finishing touches to the house, but that got less and less over the years.

My sewing was getting busier, and not just weddings and matric farewells. In those years, people used to have functions and dances and it was still a scandal if you went somewhere and someone was wearing the same as you. God Allah! The way the ladies used to go on! Auntie Gayroe, Auntie Gayroe, are you sure you didn't make so a thing for someone else? And I'd have to say, No my baby, I bought this material just for you, and when I'm finish I will hide away the pattern. Sometimes I didn't even use a pattern. It was the eighties, and we copied everything we saw on Dallas. Big shoulder pads, ruching, slits wat tot hie' kom, I made it all. Salie would look at me vloeking at the material spread out over the table and he would laugh at me. Let me make a pattern for you, he would say. Just draw me a picture and I will make you a pattern. And I would chase him away, Voetsek djy met djou pattern. Djy wil vi'djou lekka hou, die issie Vella Textiles hie'nie! Ek wiet van naaldwerk, ek hettie 'n patroon nodig'ie. Then he would laugh and laugh and chase me around my work table.

And some nights I would work late. I would work right through the night, because I was working alone and in those days the weddings was elaborate. One wedding would be a Princess Di dress with a three-metre train and a maid of honour and six bridesmaids and a miniature bride and groom en ushers en goed wat ’n cumberbund soek. Or a 21st with a dozen attendants. My girls can’t really sew. They don’t have the patience to sit on a machine, but they not so bad with a needle. From small they used to help me with tacking seams and packing away material, but that had to stop once they realised they could make Barbie clothes and sell them. Then suddenly my offcuts would disappear and I wouldn’t notice until someone got fat or a bride started to show and I was looking for a piece to make a las. Man, children can be for you naughty. But we always made a plan.

And then after four girls, Salie decided he wanted a son. It was my change of life and I didn’t have patience with him anymore. He was so like a child, play play play, en ek moet werk. Who keeps the lights on in this house? Who puts petrol in the car? Who is saving for hajj? Go, I said. Go have your son, I don’t begrudge you that. But you will treat us both right. So he went and he found a second wife and he bought a place for her, and he had his son. He was always fair with us. Everything half half. When he got his pay, half half. But maybe she saw my new car I bought from when I was selling samoosas. Or maybe it was from when my brother did the renovations and we extended the kitchen. I think somewhere something went wrong and Salie didn’t explain, but she started being funny with him.

Over the years, he went there less and less, and when my eldest daughter got married, Kaashif moved in here by us. He didn’t stay long. He didn’t like my rules. By his mother he could do anything. Here by me you wake up for Fajr, you go to school and then you go to Madressah. But he didn’t want to wake up for Fajr and he didn’t want to go to Madressah. He didn’t want to wear a koefiyah, just a cap. If I make him something to eat, he will just take it, not a shukran, not a kassie, just take. And he was so good with drawing. So good! But if you ask him to help you with a design for some embroidery, then he’s busy or he suddenly got things to do, or he’s going to his mother’s house.

It got to a point where I told Salie, Salie, die is my huis. Die issie ’n hotel nie, die is ’n huis. He can’t just come and go like it suits him. You need to speak to your child. If he’s living here, he’s living according to my rules, or he must go back to his mother. So he went back to his mother.

And now his father has died and he is back. My iddah isn't even up yet and he wants my house. A house he couldn't even live in the first time, but he wants it now. If he knew his Deen, he would know this is not his house. This is my house. He must go look for his house there by the house his father bought for his mother, and he will find it there by number 274 Third Avenue in Hillside.

Jenny

I used to see Sheratyn walking up and down here. Uitgeblowde hare en ’n stywe jean wat lyk nes dit gaan bars. But I never saw her alone with a boy, always in groups, and never at night. Then one day I saw her walking with Auntie Rosie’s grandson who lives there in Bloemendal with his other granny who used to work with me at Cadbury, and I said to my mother, hier kom ’n ding.

The Bloemendal granny’s name was Angeline. She got all her daughters in there at Cadbury, except the one thin one who used to work at Lennons. But Lennons was just next door, so the granny organised work transport with Auntie Rosie’s son Desmond. In those days Desmond wasn’t yet so busy so he used to drive the transport himself, and that was how he met Jenny. Jenny was studying at Russell Road at night. Desmond used to go and take her to college after work, and fetch her after work, but it looks to me like he did more than just fetch her, because she didn’t even write her first exams yet and she was already pregnant.

Desmond didn’t want to get married. He said he wasn’t sure if it was his child. I don’t know where he came by that idea, because Jenny wasn’t mannerig and it was her first year out of school. But when he eventually took Jenny to meet Auntie Rosie she already had a maag. Auntie Rosie looked at Jenny, and Jenny looked at Auntie Rosie, and no one said anything. Auntie Rosie obviously had her own ideas because she didn’t even offer Jenny a cup of tea or nothing. Jenny went home and cried by her mother and all her sisters and the next Monday that was all anyone could talk about at work. Even Mr Francis had something to say about it when he came to tell us all to shut up.

Desmond kept driving them to work and back, and still charged them the full price. When Jenny’s pains started they were on their way back from work. By then Jenny was complaining the whole day already about cramps, cramps, cramps. Jenny was one of those girls who didn’t have a lekker pregnancy. She acted like pregnancy was a sickness. She complained every day, her this is sore, her that is paining, dan is ha’ voete geswel. Wee’jy, ons het ha’ eventually uitgetune, want sy fokken kla die hele donnerse dag. So when she started complaining about cramps in the taxi home no one took her seriously. Until the bleeding started.

My seats! My seats! shouts Desmond. I don’t know why he was so excited about his seats, it was ugly old brown vinyl stuff that his sister put on the seats from seconds vinyl they bought in Harrower Road. Not even properly stitched, just sewn and put on top of the seats. Ma’ hy gaan aan oor sy seats. Angeline is shouting that he must turn around and take them to the Mercantile, Desmond is shouting

back so loud that he misses his turnoff and has to go through a red light at Aubrey Street and do a u-turn to come back.

Jenny had her baby at the Mercantile Hospital a few hours later. We heard afterwards that Auntie Rosie was the first person there at visiting time that day. Turns out the baby was born on Auntie Rosie's mother's birthday, so that's how Auntie Rosie knew it was Desmond's child. But by then it was too late. Jenny died when her baby was two days old, and because Desmond had denied and denied, Angeline refused to put his name on the birth certificate.

Angeline called the baby Tristan. She stopped working and brought him up herself. Auntie Rosie used to go and visit them in Bloemendal on Saturday afternoons and eventually Tristan heard the story of his father. Some weekends Tristan would come through to Gelvan and spend time with his granny here, but he never went to his father's house. Desmond married when Tristan was in primary school. By this time his father was living in Parkside. He had a big, double story house with a double garage and lots of parking for all his taxis, but Tristan didn't go and live with him. He was happy with Angeline, and if Desmond only remembered to give him money when he saw him, Tristan didn't care enough to make himself seen. He and Angeline managed somehow.

I stopped working at Cadbury when they were bought out in 2010. The whole management changed and it wasn't so lekker anymore. Mr Francis took the package and there was a new manager and we didn't see eye to eye, so I decided it would be best if I ma' also left. My mother wasn't young anymore. I had my houseshop by then, and my friends said they would still help me get stock from the floor. They did, but you know, priorities change, friends come and go, and in the middle of everything that was going on I almost forgot about Tristan and Angeline.

Until that day I saw him with Sheratyn, and I remembered Desmond and his vinyl seats and Jenny who would never see her son grow up.

Yusri

My wife worked for rich Indians in town. They had a fabric shop in Govan Mbeki Avenue and another one down near Norwich taxi rank that sold odds and ends. I always said I would never work for an Indian, they have funny ways and are too stingy. But my wife grew up with these people so when I was put on a disability pension and they asked her to come and manage for them, she said shukran.

They were good to her. My wife grew up in Malabar after her mother married an Indian so she is used to their ways. She started at Gelvan High but finished at Woolhope in the same class as the wife of the man who owns the shop. They not so bad. If she has to work late past when the taxis ride, their driver drops her at our front door and waits until she's inside the house before he drives on. If there's a taxi strike, they come and fetch her. They understand if she has to leave early to fetch school reports or to come with me to the doctor. Her pay is never late. So yes, they were good to her.

When Yusri, my eldest, was in grade seven, they approached us about him. Where do we want to send Yusri to school, they asked. We said we don't know, we're considering Newton Tech but with the fees and the taxi fare and my daughter inshallah also starting high school two years after him, we don't know if we will come right. Maybe Gelvan High, we want him to learn a trade, inshallah. They looked concerned. He's very clever, they said, very sharp. He sometimes waits in the shop on a Friday with his mother after mosque and he's twice already spotted a shoplifter even before the security did. Yes, we said, he's very bright, that's why we want him to learn a trade, inshallah you can go far in life with a trade. The husband made a face and pulled on his beard. Did we think about maybe sending him to an Islamic college? Gah! With what money, I nearly asked, but I kept my tongue in my mouth. My wife still tried to explain but I think the man saw my face and said don't worry, Allah will provide.

So that's why when everyone else in Yusri's class went to high school, he went to an Islamic College in Johannesburg to learn to be a hafiz. He was supposed to come home twice a year, once in June and once in December. Before the first June holiday he phoned us and said he was invited to his new friend's house in Umhlanga right there by the beach, the friend is also at the college but in the year above. The friend's father is going to fetch them and I mustn't worry, the friend's father is going to pay for everything, but kanallah can I send him five hundred rand so he at least has something in his pocket for when they go out? We also have a beach here, I wanted to say, and it's winter and your mother hasn't seen you since January, but I kept my tongue in my mouth. Go, I said to him. Go and have a lekker time with your friends but you must phone your mother when you get there. Jee Daddy, he said, Jee, and don't forget my money kanallah.

That jee like a koelie should've been a warning. Look, I don't have anything against the Indians. My mother-in-law's husband is an Indian, there were Indians living in between my mother's family from South End days. But they have funny ways, and the way they are with money is just one very small part of it.

I sent my son a five hundred rand. It was almost half my disability. Even with saving on his bus ticket home I still had to take something out of my Mecca tin to make it that month but my son was a good child and I didn't want him to look another child's father in the mouth.

Yusri didn't want to come home for December either. He said he must apply for his passport because his friend's family from Dar Es Salaam wanted to host him for the holiday and did I know that's where Freddie Mercury was from? He says he knows that kind of music is haraam and Freddie Mercury was a sodomite but how cool would it be anyway to see where Mummy's star was from and take a picture for Mummy to see?

Cool se gat, I said. Come home. Enough gallivanting all over the show, your mother hasn't seen you since January, she doesn't need a picture of no moffie house. Ek hettie geld vi' 'n passport'ie. Your bus ticket is booked and paid for. You must come home.

So Yusri came home. I almost didn't recognise him at first. He was taller. Almost as tall as me before the wheelchair. Thinner too, like someone had taken a putty of my child and stretched him out into almost a young man, their fingerprints leaving beard on his cheeks.

He was different in other ways too. I was expecting a kurta, or at least a koefiyah on his head, not a Nike cap and a jean that alone costs two months' pension. But he was here and we were happy to see him, even if it seemed like he was the hell in every time he looked at me.

I looked at him the next day, after he had slept out his bus trip and packed away his clothes in the cupboard. New clothes, everything with a name brand, three different pairs of takkies and not one thing that left this house with him. I wanted to ask him where this came from, but I didn't want to have to ask, I wanted him to tell me.

Yusri, you back at home now. I said to him. Take that cap off your head, you have the Quran in your head, you don't disrespect it by putting a cap on top. Come sit here at the table with me. And when he looked at me I saw my son again, the boy who left my house, so I tried again. I want to hear what you learned while you were away. Come sit here and batcha for me.

And then his phone rang, a phone we never knew he had, and my boy hid behind the man who answered the phone, and I wondered when I would see my child again.

You must check this bou

My laaitie came home from school one day and told me he wants to go on a safari. A safari? Where do you come on this kak, I ask him. He tells me the boertjie who sits next to him in class went to the Kruger with his family and they got all these pictures of lions and elephants and giraffes just like on TV, and now he wants to do it too.

I can see he really want this, and I don't lik to disappoint him, so say ok, when it's long weekend again we can go to Seaview Lion Park and you can see the lions and tigers and take pictures with them. I mos anyway wanted to make a turn there.

No, he says. Miss Loftie-Eaton says Seaview Lion Park is an animal rights violation, tigers don't belong in Africa, and you should never touch wild animals. Waa'de moer kom die juffrou aan die kak? This is the shit that happens when your wife wants to brag about sending your kids to expensive schools. Nou moet ek fokken hoor van animal rights violations. Ma' ok. We'll make a plan. I don't like to disappoint my kids. I always think to myself I must set an example.

I spoke to my brah and we decided to go to Addo. It's mos just here, not so far, so we decided to make a day of it. He came in the Jeep and I took the X5 and we rounded up all his three children and my two children and my mother-in-law and we laat ruk. Now look, Imma be honest with you. I don't like my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law is personally responsible for a good eighty percent of the kak that goes on inside my wife's head. My wife and I will talk, and I will think we have an understanding, and then she phones her mother and tchwee-tchwee-tchwee, and suddenly Gelvan Park Primary isn't good enough anymore and I must get up at half past six to sit in traffic for forty-five minutes to get my children to school on time. Vi' wat? But happy wife, happy life, so I ma' go along with it.

It's not so bad anymore. In the beginning the other parents used to look at me funny, but I think with time they got used to me, and it's lucky my son has my brains and is good on a sportsfield. And my daughter looks like her mother and that's orraait because we can't all be clever, we need pretty people too. With time the teachers got used to me and the parents relaxed, especially after I sorted out that other story for the one who wanted to emigrate to Australia but had a warrant of arrest for unpaid traffic fines. Boere ne? Dink hulle's fokken slim ma' hulle kan fokkol doen sonner 'n Hotnot'ie.

I can't stand my mother-in-law. She's besig and she's interfering and she's always in our business, but man, can that woman cook. I made sure she sat behind me in the X5 right in the middle, where she

could easily see my hand reaching, and my wife got more and more dikbek every time I asked why she doesn't cook like this for us.

Eventually we got there. There was a moment at the gate when the guard asked us if we had firearms with us, but he moved on to the next question so quickly I didn't even have time to think, and then he sent us all to go and pay. We get out at the reception and people look at us. Now ok, fine, people always look. My X5 isn't the latest, latest model but it's still new. I've got a nice big rim and I keep it clean and I personally buff the chrome every Sunday afternoon. My wife is hot and not afraid to show it. We don't flaunt, but my wife likes clothes so we all dressed for this safari. We're all in our camo pants and our Timberland boots, even the kids, and I've got my farlookers around my neck and my Oakleys on my head resting on my camo cap. My wife is in a crop top and her hair isn't wetlook but even so, she still looks like the hot one from TLC. Even my brah is in his camo pants and Timberland boots, but his wife is always droëbek so she's wearing a vaal pants and a white t-shirt that looks like it comes from Mr Price. As we're taking photos with the selfie stick, people are looking at us. Let them look, I say to my wife, and I make as if I can't hear them asking if we're making a music video.

Right. So we sort out the payment, we get a map and we get our drinks at the shop and we get going. Now listen, I don't know if you've ever been on a game drive, but that kak is now for you boring. You just drive around and around and around and you look at kak. And I mean literal kak. The animals are fuckin' dirty and they just shit there sommer in the road. The rangers don't clean it or nothing, because they want it like that. They probably think it looks authentic for the tourists. I'm not a fuckin' tourist and I'm driving around and around and all I can think is what this fuckin' gravel road is doing to my rims. But I don't say fuckall because my laaitie is in the back hanging out the window taking photos of him and his sister with the animals and they so excited they making so much noise I can't even hear my mother-in-law complaining about the car shaking.

We get to the top of this hill. They have a sign that says be careful, there are lions, get out of the car at your own risk. But they have benches right next to the signs? Sometimes I think being white is an extreme sport. There's a taxi parked on the hill and they're walking around outside. But they've darem got all the doors open for a quick getaway, so I know they can't be white so I look again and I see they all got moonbags and big cameras and yes, they're wragtiewaar Chinas. So I reckon it's orraait.

We park the cars. We get out. The children run wild. My mother-in-law is shouting at them not to go too far, don't they see the signs about the lions, and I'm grabbing the last bak of nachos and I realise

my brah is making like so at the one China lady standing by their taxi. He makes sure I seen him, then he goes and helps his wife get out of the car because that sturvy teef carries on like a fuckin' princess who doesn't know how to open a door. I put my Oakleys back on. They're mirrored, so I know anyone looking at me can't see fuckall. I take a long sip of my drink and as I tilt my head back, I look properly.

And yes. It's her. She made like she didn't see me, and that's all right, no hard feelings, but I know it's her. You see, a few years ago, yiss, it must've been 15 years ago, I was still living in Korsten and I didn't even meet my wife yet, so quite a few years, me and the China were in business together. Her cousin approached me about a property owned by another brah of mine, the old ice-rink down in town there near the Norwich taxi rank. I introduced them to this brah and I organised a deal for them and they paid me fair and square, and that was the end of it. Or so I thought. A few months later I open the newspaper and dwah, there's the ice-rink. Turns out the China teef and her cousin were in the perlemoen business and were using the ice-rink to store their merch. Fuckin' clever nah? Hiding perlemoen under ice. But me, I don't involve myself in shit like that. That's just looking for kak.

I don't remember all the details, but I think they got off, and last I heard she came back here on a different passport and was now in the rhino business. But that's unconfirmed. Just a rumour. But I look at the farlookers around her neck and the size of her camera lens, and I think to myself I wouldn't be surprised if it's true.

The children are taking selfies in front of the sign saying there are lions, they mustn't get out of the car. My mother-in-law is hanging onto the window and soebatting with everyone to get back in the car. I walk to my brah's car and make as if I'm looking at his rims. I laugh because they're poes dirty. His wife gives me an ugly look and takes the baby to go and stand by my mother-in-law.

Did you check that bou, my brah asks me. Yes, I checked that bou, I tell him. Must we say something, he asks me, and takes a chamois out of the boot and wipes at his rim. For what? I say to him. There's none of that stuff in this place, and anyway, say what to who? Then the Chinas drive off and my wife says it's time for us also to move on. My brah's eldest laaitie pounces near his mother and makes a sound like a lion and they all skrik and the baby starts crying. I take the remote out of my pocket and turn up the music.

Eventually we ma' all get in the car and move on. We drive around in more and more circles until we get back to the rest camp. We set up a nca picnic area for ourselves and we start the fire for the braai.

My mother-in-law takes even more bakke out of yet another cooler box, and the women watch the children kick a ball. My brah and I go back to the cars to fetch the speakers and somewhere we take a wrong turn because we end up at the visitor centre. What kak is this?

It's free, so we walk in. Not a lot of people, and I'm not surprised because it's just a bunch of museum kak. This is an elephant, it has tusks, it eats and it shits. That was a famous elephant, this was its tusk, this is what it ate, and this is what it shat. Nothing interesting, but the CCTV is on, just in case you get ideas. And then I got an idea. Now look, I'm a businessman. I do a lot of things I and I have a lotta fingers in a lotta pies, but I also own an armed response company and we the best in the whole northern areas. Electronics are not really my thing, but if you in this business long enough, you pick up a few things. My brah who is with me, he's the electronics guy, there's nothing he doesn't know about electronics, so when I see his eyebrows go up as he's also looking at the CCTV wires going nowhere, I sommer know my suspicion is correct. Do you check that bou, he asks me. Yes, I check that bou, I tell him. Must we say something, he asks me. I look at him as he takes the toothpick out of his mouth, sucks on the tip to straighten it out, flips it the other way round and puts it back in his mouth. For what? I say to him. It's not our problem they don't know what they doing, and anyway, say what to who? We leave the visitors centre and get the speakers and go back to the picnic site. The fire is going lekka and my mother-in-law has the meat set up on the table in the right order to braai. I call the two bigger laaities over to set up the speakers. None of that trap music kak, I warn them. It's a Sunday afternoon, I want slow jams.

So me and my brah are standing by the braai, watching the coals, waiting for it to cool down enough to braai. We just standing, having a smoke, not too serious. So now and then when a lekka number come on maybe I will throw eyes at my wife or maybe he'll go over and give his wife a kiss because he's mos ge-train, but we generally just having a lekka time. It's honestly not even been twenty minutes yet, because I was drinking a whiskey and soda and my glass was not yet by the line, and this ou comes up to me and tells me we need to be quiet. Or at least, that's what I think he's saying, he's a big ou, around my age, big but with a squeaky voice that sounds funny.

What you say? I ask him nicely, thinking maybe I'm not hearing him properly. He repeats himself, and this time I'm really not hearing him, because my brah is clicking his braai tongs like he always do when he's tense and he takes a big sluk of his drink and suddenly his glass that also wasn't yet by the line is almost finished. This ou tries again, and I shout to my laaitie to turn the music softer so I can hear this

ou, because by now he's going red in the face and my brah is just so red because he never listens when I say to him he mustn't drink whiskey, he must stick to beer.

Thank you, says the ou. Thank you. Then he does this thing white people do to say thank you where they shake their own hand in front of them and it just looks like they making frikkadel but don't know how to do it properly. And he walks away towards this African girl who was looking very worried but is now suddenly smiling, and I realise he doesn't mean to sound funny. He's a German.

Wat de moer, says my brah. Did you check that bou? Yes, I check that bou, I tell him. My wife comes and asks us what happened and I tell her that German brah – because he's my brah now, you see, he mos got a African kin' – say our music is too loud. How do you know he's a German, asks my mother-in-law, because she's ewe bis, and just can't stay out of a thing. Look at the girlfriend, I say to her. And my mother-in-law, who's got no skaam whatsoever, just turns around and looks at them.

Don't look! My wife hisses at her. But my mother-in-law looks, niks gewarrie nie. My brah – not the German one, this one here by me – puts the chicken wing sundowners on sticks on the braai. But how do you know he's a German, my mother-in-law says, and this auntie don't have a volume control button, and the music is now soft. Maybe he's a Norwegian or a Dutchman, you can't just make so assumptions about someone, she insists. We flip the chicken wing sundowners sommer with our hands as we argue and my mother-in-law gets a plate ready. She puts four on the one plate and the rest on another plate and before I even know what she's doing, she's taking my chicken wing sundowners with that lekka garlic and lime marinade with the habanero chillies that she makes especially for me, and she's walking over to the German and his girlfriend where they sitting at a picnic table under the tree.

Wat de… Starts my brah. And the way that German poes is smiling at my mother-in-law and my chicken wing sundowners, he's definitely not my brah anymore. I turn around. Just in time I see my brah – and now he's my only brah here – move to pour himself another drink. Stay out of my whiskey, I tell him. This shit is expensive and you got a heavy hand. Even when you drink you got a heavy hand. This is not a tequila body shot you must drink quickly from the stripper's tits before she turns ugly. This is a single malt. Respect it, please.

His eyes go just so big and he looks to his wife but lucky she didn't hear me, she's just so fuckin' invested in what's going on under that tree. But it's not even two minutes and my mother-in-law is

walking back, just so noors. En nou? I ask her. He was German, ne? Yes, she says. And they both vegetarian. And she sommer moers the plate on the table, with all four chicken wing sundowners still on their sticks.

We finish the braai and we eat lekka. While we pack up, my brah's wife takes the kids for a last drive in the Jeep around to look at more kak. I'm loading things into the X5 and I'm feeling like maybe my own hand was too heavy with the whiskey today because suddenly I'm not so steady anymore. I put my brah's things in his parking and as I look up, I see those Chinas coming out of the visitors centre. And maybe they also had a heavy hand with their whiskey, because suddenly they carrying very heavy on their bags, and the one ou is taking strain as he picks up that lens bag. It's a big lens bag, even for a China. And suddenly I know. I look at my brah. Yes, he say. I check. Must we do something? he asks. Do what? It's mos not our business. And just then his wife pulls up in the Jeep and the kids split and we load up the Jeep as well.

We drive out. My laaitie is so happy. His memory stick was empty and now it's almost full. My daughter got sommer a whole lotta pics she can't wait to get home and filter for her Instagram, and both children are smiling from here to there. My wife is driving so I have a lot of time to think. I flip down the sunvisor to see if my eyes is red, and I see yes, they red. But there's also white, and it's that taxi we saw on the hill by the benches next to the signs saying don't get out of your car, there are lions here. I don't know what I must do. My whole life I try to stay out of things, and so far it's been a successful strategy. If you don't involve yourself in kak, kak can't find you. I catch a glimpse of my laaitie in the backseat. But what kind of example am I setting for my laaitie if I just stay out of kak? Sometimes a man must take a stand. My laaitie sees me looking and he smiles. He puts his hand on my shoulder and he tells me I'm the world's best dad.

We get to the gate and I know what I must do. My wife lowers the window to give our exit ticket and the guy smiles at her. Mfwethu, I say. He looks at me, but he don't answer. Mfwethu, I say again, but harder. He comes closer, and this white guy comes out of the guard hut like he thinks I'm just another drunk Hotnot looking for kak. Gents, I say to them. Gents, you check this white taxi behind me? They nod like they don't know what I'm talking about. Go open the boot, I say to them. You see that black camera bag that looks like a moerse big camera lens bag? They nod, but they still don't know what I'm talking about. You check it, orraait? You check it good. Understanding flashes on their faces. The guard takes my wife's exit permit paper, and we drive off.

Baking

I knew there was going to be trouble when I told her to take off the jersey and put on an apron. I've been baking all my life, ever since I was big enough to see what I was doing on the table, and the one lesson I learnt from my mother was you don't bake in house clothes. Jy ga'haal jou voorskoot, jy was hom mooi uit, en as hy droog is dan stryk jy hom. Only then you are in the right frame of mind to bake. But my granddaughter didn't listen, she never blerrie listen. She insist the jersey is clean, and you know, I don't have krag anymore to fight so with people, my bloeddruk medisyne is al klaar so duur.

So I told her to roll up her sleeves, put a doek on her head, and wash her hands with that green Sunlight soap from the cupboard under the sink. But this one is cheeky, so I had to watch her the whole time while she does it to make sure she do it all in the right order. Jy kannie eers jou hande was en dan aan jou hare raak'ie! At least she didn't grumble about the scarf. She knows how I feel about that, her hair gets into everything.

And then we started. Well, actually, we started yesterday already. Last night I put the eggs and the butter on the kitchen table so that they could get to room temperature. People wonder why their baking don't come out right, but they don't start properly. You take out your ingredients the night so they not cold when you start. Then you wait until your house is quiet and you can clean your kitchen. Then it's the right time to start.

More Baking

We'd know it was coming a month in advance. First my aunt's shift schedule would be consulted, because it was always best if she wasn't around. 14h00-22h00 was the best shift, because then we could give the boys an easy supper and get straight to work after doing their dishes. In the weeks leading up to it my grandmother would scan the specials. A tray of eggs at Shoprite because they're the cheapest. A two point five kilo bag of flour from Desai's because it's not too far to carry. One tub of red glace cherries this week, a tub of silver balls the next. Butter from Checkers – real butter, not margarine or that baking spread she despised.

And the day before she'd consult her recipe books to confirm ingredients. I'd be summoned with my calculator to confirm quantities – if she doubled up on this, by how much would she need to increase that? Ennie klapper! Ek't ve'geet om klapper te koop! And I'd be instructed to stop off in Durban Road on the way home from school the next day to buy coconut. En onthou, medium asseblief, she'd admonish, as if I was an idiot who would buy fine.

But nothing would actually start until my apron was on, my hair was stowed away under a scarf, and my hands had been washed with the green Sunlight soap from the cupboard under the sink. Sharp black eyes would watch me as I readied myself, making sure I followed every step, and in the right order.

I skipped the apron once. My hoodie was fresh off the washing line and I tried to convince her that it was the same as an apron. She didn't argue, just looked at me and told me to roll up my sleeves past my elbows. I couldn't keep them there, and I boiled in the heat of the kitchen. She pursed her lips when I excused myself to take off the hoodie and put on an apron. Ja ne, she said to me, jy dink mos jy's slim.

My grandmother, the drug dealer

On her way to buy our morning milk and bread my grandmother finds an envelope outside our gate. It is buff coloured like a government document and has a black KPA symbol on the front rendering it exempt from postage. It is neatly folded and refolded and when she opens it, she finds dagga inside. My grandmother shoves it into the pocket of her pink and white check housecoat to deal with it later.

She tells my aunt about it while I am getting ready for school. I am concentrating hard on making the perfect samoosa knot with my tie so I don't hear her at first. But eventually I realise that she and my aunt are talking about the parcel that she's found, and how she intends to get rid of it.

Ve'koop't aan Moira se broer. Mammie sien mos, hulle bly ha' langsaan'ie shebeen innie circle.

Nee man, ek willie so very loop'ie, en wie sê hy't geld?

En wat van Denise se man ha' oorkant Miesies Phielies?

Wie's dit nou weer?

So 'n lang skraal outjie, hy loop elke dag hier ve'by om têxi te vang. So lig van kleur ma' met 'n pittekop. Ma' hy't altyd 'n cêp op.

Ja ok, gee dit vi' hom, ma' jy maak seker jy kry eers die geld.

And just like that, my grandmother becomes a drug dealer.

Lying fingers

Do you see her? Sitting there with the other private school girls drinking their overpriced coffee, talking about their overseas holidays? The coloured one with the relaxed hair. She's also talking about Paris, and maybe she isn't lying, maybe she has also been. But you can see she doesn't quite belong.

Look how she holds her cup. Her hands cradle it like something precious. Her fingers fold around it for warmth. The caress speaks of reaching for a blanket in a draughty shack.

But the real giveaway, her true sin? She doesn't remove the teaspoon from her cup.

Melissa

The bed is in the corner but it's not really a bed, just a mattress. A standard poverty-issue blue single mattress decorated with white and yellow flowers and donsies that agitate against my skin as my brown hands fidget peekaboo with the blue and white and yellow mattress. The bedding is tangled. But the donsies are there, donsies growing on the mattress like little flowers on top of the flowers. He fell asleep long ago. He can sleep through the tweak. I lie awake and the outside light filters through the sheet pegged against the curtain rail. PVC pegs and a polycotton sheet. It's all plastic. It's all fake. The fake moon outside light shines through the fake curtain and lands on the single mattress bed. Hair roughened dark brown legs are warm against my stubbly light brown. The shadows of my fingers dancing in the fake-moon light fall against him but he sleeps. My fingers find the tear in the sheet and abandon their shadow dance. They slip through the tear to the mattress beneath rubbing scratching fiddling fussing. Breaking off donsies with my nails like a primate's mate searching for nits. Blue nylon tingles against searching pink tipped fingers. Fingers collide with protrusion. Extraction ensues. Fingernails click against each other as they pull up a protesting donsie, snot-like nylon strings refusing to let go of the mattress. I win, eventually. Of course I win. I always win. I roll it between my fingers. It squashes. Not interesting. Flick. Repeat. My middle finger traces a bald spot on the bed. It is almost big enough for my middle and index finger side by side. Have I been tweaking that long? Surely not. It must be the side effects. I'm losing weight. I'm getting thinner. It's because my fingers are smaller.

My hand finds my head. I rake my nails over my head, soothingly. Soothing. It's meant to soothe. Fingers pointing backward, nails following the growth. Back, forth. Fingers going sideways, hair tangling nails tangling hair. My scalp tingles. I imagine the pink lines on my scalp, rows and rows of soothing perfection. I ride the wave. My fingers find a wave. This one is curlier than the rest. Kroes. Kroes nes jy. Pull out. Remove. No room for coarseness. I flick. I need to sleep or I'll go to work tomorrow with dark circles under my eyes like some sort of tik addict. I don't use tik I use crystal meth and I smoke it from a lollipop because I don't use a lightbulb because then it would be tik and I don't smoke tik I smoke crystal meth. He sleeps on. The bedding abandoned in the heat of the night. His legs cool against mine.

I have little bald spots now. I don't get high. It's just a little tweak. It's been four months and I've only lost three kilograms but I have two little bald spots. I used to have three but the hair has started filling in again. It's baby soft, wispy, almost feather-like but I have to let it fill in because it's near the front and I have to comb my hair just so for it not to be noticeable. Shampoo then hot oil treatment then

blow dry then flat iron. Two hours twice a week. Jou hare moet glad wees as jy in Humewood reception werk wil doen, jy kannie soos ’n hotnot lykie.

I’m late for work most days. It’s the tweak. It keeps me up all night scratching the mattress and my scalp and then the mattress again. As I ride the wave my eyes roll back in my head because it’s just so fucking good and I feel so whole and on a good day like today it’s even better than sex but by the time I come down it’s six AM and I need to get ready for work. Some days are easier than others. Some days I can go without. No, really, I can. I don’t because I don’t know how anymore but if I wanted to if I really wanted to I could. I could go without some days. Other days are two straw days. Three if you include my lunchtime walks to the beach but on those days I just have two hits. Just enough to feel normal. Just enough to get through the afternoon. Don’t want to make it obvious. Don’t want their fingers pointing at my fingers. My fast fingers riding the tweak, flying over the switchboard *Humphrey and Associates Melissa speaking, one moment please* fingers freed from fidget by folding A0 plans down to A4. *It’s a life skill Melissa, you’ll thank me one day. Yes, sir, thank you, sir.* Clinique dark circle corrector two shades carefully blended cappuccino to latte applied after my last hit of the morning and finished off with a Revlon smile. He doesn’t wake up. One last hit. He wasn’t sleeping. The concealer cracks. I blend again. I flick my hair as I answer the call. Posh voice, posh voice *Humphrey and Associates Melissa speaking, one moment please* don’t let the dark show through.

Jurgen

When Auntie Gertie who lived in Jameson Road there up the road from Preston's son moved to Jo'burg we all thought it was because he was going to try for white. Auntie Gertie them's grandfather was mos German, that's why they all so light with that grey eyes. Her son's name was Jurgen, and maybe his father was also a German, because Auntie Gertie never married.

He had her German grandfather's full name, Jurgen Muller. And he looked like a German. Big and tall and strong and even lighter than his mother, met net sulke potblou oë.

It was only when he came back from Jo'burg that first time that we realised he didn't go and try for white. He actually was a white German. Because when he came home he had a boyfriend, and the boyfriend's name was Siya.

Vanessa

I knew there was a story there when Vanessa came home from hospital with the child and she wouldn't let anyone see him. He was her fourth child already and with the others she was quick to say, come over, but you must bring your own eats, I'm just making tea.

With her first one they were renting a separate entrance in McManus Crescent, so I didn't go, but my cousin who went said the baby was very pretty with a bush of straight-straight black hair. He was just so light like her and navy blue eyes. And then when they moved in here in Gemsbok Street, she had the next one. Brown eyes but also nice hair and the same light colour. Even the third one - nice hair, navy blue eyes, and also light.

So where did this coffee colour baby with the kroeskop come from?

She says he's maybe a throwback and I remember the story from when those white people in Jo'burg had that black child who ran away to Swaziland to marry a garden boy, but what happened here? Such things don't happen to people like us. Not when you and your husband are both from families where everyone can try for white.

She won't say what happened. But I promise you, I'm sure something did.

Auntie Rachel

My grandsons had just finished their supper and were waiting for my cup so they could do the dishes when I saw on the news that GM has pulled out of South Africa again. I gave them the cup in a dwaal, because all I could think was the last time GM pulled out was in 1982 and I never thought I'd see this happen again.

I'm not too worried for myself, I'm a pensioner now and don't have too many years left, but my children all work in the automotive industry. How is this going to affect them? My son is at Eberspaecher – they do the catalytic converters for the diesel engines. My daughter is a supervisor at Tenneco – they do everything from suspensions to aircons. My two grandsons just started at Continental and even my granddaughter in Cape Town is at Extrusa – they mos make the plastic mouldings for the seats. Sy dink sy's grên' – ha'kloop weg Kaap toe om te gaan studeer, sy wil'ie in 'n fêktry werk'ie. Toe sy ha'oë uitvee werk sy innie automotive industry. Automotive industry is in our blood. It's what we do here in the Eastern Cape. You can't run away from yourself.

Did I tell you about my son? My son is clever, he is a qualified electrician. He has worked all over – private contracting, domestic jobs, other factories. He even went to Detroit in America, where he worked on the motor vehicle lines there. They promoted him to a team leader. They wanted him to stay on because he is a fast learner and a good worker, but he refused so he came back. He said to me, Mammie, issie reg wat hulle da' doen nie, hulle hét mense wat wil werk ma' hulle het unions en rights ennie management bypass die deur om te outsource. Hulle stuur ons da' want ons werk lang ure vi' min'er geld, ma' 'is dollars so ons dink 'is worth our while. Ons dink ons gaan ryk word. Issie waar nie, ons maak net swaar vi' mense wat wíl werk, en dis net die shareholders wat ryk word.

I told you, my son is clever. He sees everything. But even he doesn't know how this new GM story will affect us. They say the Chevrolet plant will be taken over by Isuzu, ma' hoeveel bakkies kan 'n mens ve'koop? Evens die boere wil'ie meer bakkies ry nie, en hulle word so op hulle plase ve'moor hulle het dit seker'ie eens meer nodig nie. Ennie gowwerment doen niks! Niks oor die plaasmoorde nie, niks oor die werke nie! Hulle sing "One settler, one bullet", ma' hulle vergeet is almal blerrie settlers, wit en swart! Hulle gaan nie vi' my ve'tel nie, hulle het my kom kry hie'sô. Evens die boere, hulle sê hie' was niemand toe hulle innie Kaap aankom nie. Hulle sê hulle het eers oppie Groot Trek 'n Bantu gesien. Ja nee, fine, ek stry nie met dit nie, ek wassie da' nie, ma' wie was Harry die Strandloper? Autshumato? Wie was hy? Toe hulle hier aankom het hy hulle ínnie Nederlands gegroet. Ma' hulle sê hie' was niemand nie. Hierie blerrie mense lieg almal.

Nee, moenie my so kykie. Jy weet dis waar. Jy wéét! One settler, one bullet. One settler, one bullet? Wat vannie Chinas? Ek worry nie eens oor die koelies nie, hulle is al jare hier, en hulle contribute darem, evens die Guptas. Hulle is kôrrup, ma' hulle maak darem werk vi' ons mense... Ma' die Chinas? Wat exactly doen hulle?

Drive a new hatch for R999! Drive a new SUV for R3 299! Goedkoop is duurkoop, ma' jy vind dit eers uit na' die warranty ge-expire is, en jy spares moet koop en jy kry nêrens jou spares nie. Hulle maakie spares vi'hulle krokke nie, ma' hulle het allover winkels. Everywhere wat jy nou kyk is da' 'n China winkel wat hulle robbish ve'koop, en 'is alles fake. Ma' die mense koop, so die China's gaan aan met hulle fake Louis Vuitton, fake cutex, fake lipstiek, fake hare, evens fake melkpoeier virrie kinners. Alles is fake en gemors, ma' ons dink hulle karre sal anners wees. Dit issie. Dis dieselle kak ma' ons koop 'it. En nou sit ons sonder werk, ma' ons hou nie oppie. Ons koop nog steeds die China-strond.

An’Sophie

An'Sophie didn’t have children of her own. She’d been married many years ago, but her husband left her when his girlfriend had their second child. She still wore his rings – a thin, flat yellow band next to a big grey diamond held up high and proud by little silver leaves. I married him in the Catholic Church, she’d tell anyone who cared to listen. That woman is committing adultery and no matter how many children she gives him, he’s still my husband, and those children are all bastards.

Her piety was as fake as the diamond in her ring. Her beady little eyes saw everything, and she always knew which mother’s daughter was pregnant even before the daughter did, and could point a finger at any one of a dozen potential fathers.

That wasn’t always An’Sophie’s house, that Smartie-blue house with the wooden windows and the facebrick front wall with no gate. It was actually Auntie Gertie’s house. An’Sophie first moved in there to look after her mother’s cousin Auntie Gertie when Auntie Gertie first got sick, because Auntie Gertie only had one child. Jurgen. The one who moved to Jo’burg when it became too obvious that he was a moffie.

Auntie Gertie was lonely, and she liked that An’Sophie took her places. Mostly it was around the corner to have tea with the nuns who still lived at the church, but sometimes they would get a Hurter’s taxi and go to Greenacres and An’Sophie would push Auntie Gertie around the shops in one of the free wheelchairs they give you at the information counter to entice you to come in and spend your money with them.

An’Sophie pushed Auntie Gertie around the shops, looking at all the things you could buy if your husband hadn’t left you or if you weren’t on a state pension or if you had children who sent you money from time to time. Whenever An’Sophie saw someone queer she’d point them out to Auntie Gertie, Ma’ Auntie Gertie moenie worry nie, hulle gaan ammal hel toe.

When Auntie Gertie finally died Jurgen didn’t even come down for the funeral. And it’s just as well he didn’t bother, because she left her house to An’Sophie.

An'Salwa

Yhuu, om so vroeg innie oggend wakker te word van maag senuwees. Ma' dis die water. Ha' issie water nie. I always told my children, you can be poor but you don't have to be dirty. I would wash them myself in that enamel basin over there, the one that is on my stoep that has a hen and chick plant in it now. You must take a cutting, that thing grows quick. Take a cutting and put it in a wet tissue and just put it in some water when you get home. It's nice hey? It just makes so lotta babies but that's why it's called a hen and chick.

I washed all my children myself at night and my grandchildren too, until they were big already, probably so here until they were at school already. I used to boil the water in the kettle and add it to the skottel first. Just a bit, and then add tap water with the dieper. First the hot water, then the tap water, because if you put in the cold water first and you overestimate, then you must boil more hot water en ek hettie tyd vi' so geld mors'ie.

But it was different in those days. In those days I could wash my children in the basin because there was darem water. Now you open the taps and there's nothing. It's still darem not so bad here by me, but whenever I come back from visiting my family in Cape Town then it's this maag senuwees story. Every time. En dis op en af jamang toe.

My son built me a nice en-suite toilet when he got his payout from the Road Accident Fund the year before las'. It's got a proper shower and a bottom tap for when I must take abdas, and tiles all the way up to the ceiling. Ma' die ding raas innie nag as mens moet flush. En jy moet flush want die ding is binne innie huis en hy stink sommer net hier by jou neus.

Ricardo

I always knew Ricardo was going to do big things. Everyone liked him. Even white people liked him, and it's not just because he had green eyes. He was charming. A happy, easy go lucky child.

Ricardo didn't do so well at school. The principal said he wasn't a stupid child, he just wasn't very academic. He was good in woodwork, and they said I should send him to Gelvan High. He could learn with his hands at Gelvan High, then maybe get an apprenticeship or maybe even go to Russell Road College. You can go far with a trade.

But I didn't want Gelvan High for my child. He was my only child, you see, and I wanted more for him. I thought maybe Newton Tech or Cillié, and then PE Tech or maybe even UPE. Why is it if you're a poor coloured people think you must go learn a trade? Maybe he could go for accountancy or engineering or maybe he could start his own business. People are so quick to push you into a thing, they don't look at what you can do.

So I sent Ricardo to Cillié. He wanted to go to Newton Tech but it was full and they wanted a one month deposit to go on the waiting list. He said maybe he should go to Gelvan High first and then maybe transfer if a place came up at Newton Tech. It won't be so hard to transfer from one technical school to another technical school, he said. But I didn't want my child at Gelvan High, there's always shootings and things there and I know the school does their best and the teachers are good, but their boundary stops when you leave the school gates and every week you hear of a shooting in Gail Road.

He was happy at Cillié. Charming. Always charming, my child. He stayed away from those rough children from Schauder and Katanga, and made friends with other children. Everyone liked Ricardo. People would see him get out of the taxi, his green school blazer always on, his tie always neat and his shoes always polished and they'd shout his name and he'd always smile and say hello back. Sometimes he used to come home from school with his boertjie friends, speaking like a boertjie and looking like a boertjie with those green eyes that came from nowhere.

Ricardo was never embarrassed to bring his friends back to the house, not even his white friends. I used to wonder what they thought of us, six people in the front house, two bedrooms and a toilet shared with four people in the Wendy house at the back. If his friends asked him, he never told me, but every so now and again he would come and sit with me when I come from work and rub my feet,

and I could see he had something he wanted to tell me. But I never pushed. If he wants me to know something, he'll tell me.

Ricardo failed grade eleven the first time. But he passed it the second time, and he got 82% for woodwork. This child of mine, always so good with his hands. He passed matric the first time round, and when I saw his number in the newspaper I couldn't stop crying.

This is his second year out of school now. He's trying to get in at Volkswagen, or maybe Continental, but they're not taking people on right now, everyone is looking for work now, especially after GM had to shut down. I don't want him to go and work just anywhere. Every now and then says maybe he should go and give out his CV by Cleary Park or Greenacres, even just a weekend sales job so he can buy his own toiletries and have something in his pocket to go to the movies with his friends. But I always say no, not yet, what if you get a job and then Volkswagen phones you for an interview? No Ricardo, stay at home. And I pay Edgars short sometimes so he can have something in his pocket but Ricardo is my only child. Edgars can wait. It's been almost two years but I know that phone call is coming. I just know Ricardo is going to do big things.

Mike

I grew up calling my father Mike so that no one would guess.

When people see us together they assume I’m a prostitute, or at the very least, a good time girl.

They jab each other in the ribs and joke, Do you think that guy has money?

Ruth

I'm in the clothing section of Pick 'n Pay looking for flip flops because this is Grahamstown so what else are you supposed to do? I run into a woman I vaguely know from pub quiz and we start chatting, as one does, because, well, Grahamstown. The woman tells me she's just returned from visiting her son in the UK and she can't wait to go back. She's tired of Grahamstown, she says. Tired of Grahamstown and tired of Rhodes. She says she's had enough and it's time to retire.

Yeah, I reply. My dad said the same, that's why he took early retirement in '97.

Oh, who's your dad, she asks, clearly only half interested.

Mike Young, I say.

Mike Young? She asks, and startled brown brows beetle together. She studies me intently. Mike Young, the Englishman? she asks again, just in case there's a different one.

Yes, Mike Young, the Englishman, I reply.

Still convinced this can't possibly be true, she checks again, Are you sure?

Maureen

The wendy house is in Schauder but at least it's in Nicholas Road so it only takes her a half-hour to walk to work in Pickering Street. She says it's not that bad. Once she is past the Dyke and in Newton Park it's easier. If it's raining people give lifts. They can see she's walking to work.

Her son lives in Fort Beaufort with his granny and he gets a new pair of Nikes every Christmas when she goes home. A month's data on his phone is the same as two Lux soaps and a Nivea lotion, and in any case all she really needs is a strong roll-on. A nine-pack of toilet paper is forty rand, so one pack must last her for the month. After that she keeps one roll on the windowsill in case she gets a visitor and the rest of the time she uses last week's newspaper taken home from her boss's desk. Her boss laughs at her newspaper-wanting but she always reads the headlines before tearing it up, just in case he questions her. Her mother's grandfather was an Irishman so sy hettie die tjoepie nodiggie, so that is also a saving. No, really. Sunlight green bar, Vaseline, Colgate and a strong roll-on. That's all you really need.

Café work is hard work. She's on her feet all day and the oil smell gets into her clothes and her hair and she doesn't think her fingers will ever stop smelling like onions. But she enjoys it more than being a girl in a white woman's house. Her boss keeps his hands to himself, there's always someone to share a laugh with, and in any case it comes with free lunch and sometimes a Styrofoam bak to take home.

The wendy house is enough. It has a flush toilet and the people in front are decent. They don't charge extra for electricity and when it's raining they take her washing off the line too. She repays their kindness by emptying her wasbak underneath their avocado tree.

Mohammed Zain

My son phoned me yesterday to say slamat for Labarang. Except he didn't say slamat for Labarang, he wished me Eid Mubarak. Watse kak is die?

This all started when he got that bursary to go to UCT to study music. Mohammed was fine before that. He grew up here in the street, played cricket with the other boys and went to madressah up the road by the sheikh who was in the newspaper for what he done to those two girls who were so mannerig. He was always musical, my son. Always. When he was small and he heard the radio he would start dancing. We stayed with my mother-in-law in those days when we first married, and she was very very saligh, always complaining about the radio and the dancing. And on a Friday morning you don't put the tv or the radio on until you come out of the masjied. My son didn't like that, but it weren't my house, what was I supposed to do?

His grade one sub A teacher said we should send him for music lessons. She said it would help him focus in class, because he was hyperactive and always trying to make a noise when they had to learn. So we sent him sommer just there in Aubrey Street around the corner from the masjied with a lady that was recommended by the teacher. Just once a week at first, and then when he was in standard one grade three we found out that he was missing madressah in the afternoons so he could go twice a week. He was paying for it from his Labarang money. When that finished he collected empties from the people here opposite the road who used to drink so much – that was before they got bekeerd and joined that church in Stanford Road next to where the Nando's used to be. I heard afterwards that Mohammed Zain used to take the empties and walk past the tavern in Martin Street all the way to the one in Liebenberg Road because they gave a better price. Godallah! What did the people think?

We wanted to buy a car that year, but we postponed it. My husband bought a Casio keyboard from this white lady at work who was moving to Australia. It was a second-hand thing but still in the box, because you know, white children look after their things. I still remember my son's face when he walked in here and saw the box. He was so happy. He was crying snot en trane and took the khoefiya off his head to wipe up the tears. Not even my husband could say something, we were so happy to see him like that.

So my husband didn't buy a car that year. I made koesistas on a Sunday morning and samoosas during the week. If the samoosas was quiet I baked biscuits. Nice ones – Romany Creams, melting moments, karamonk scraps, proper Eet-sum-mores with real butter. I packed them pretty in a styrofoam plate

and wrapped them up nice and tight with cling wrap and gave to my neighbours to sell on the factory floor for a cut. I baked wedding cakes and birthday cakes and if there was two functions on one day then all my children would have to help. Sometimes if my lights account came and I didn't have money I would make roetie with mince and go and sell outside Desai's, there by the library side. But I couldn't do it too much, that old man always had something to say.

And you know what hey, with the kudrat of Allah we made it through. Even if there wasn't always money for extras and we were permanent in arrears with the school fees. When my daughter finished matric and wanted to do a cheffing qualification there was no money. She had to had to take gap year at home for a few months and help me with the baking until we had enough for her deposit. When my other son finished matric and wanted to do IT we had to explain to him he must wait first, at least until his sister's fees is paid. But Mohammed Zain's music lessons was always paid for, even if sometimes the teacher had to wait a few days for her money. But Alhamdulillah we made it through.

And people helped us a lot. The Irish nuns there by the convent at the Catholic church in Schauder heard from Auntie Salwa who grew up with my Boeta Salie that my son is musical, so they made arrangements for a violin to be sent for him all the way from Ireland. They said a child who can play a violin will never go hungry. It was more money for violin lessons but when someone gives you a blessing like that then you say Alhamdulillah and you must make a plan.

When he could play the violin nicely he could do functions. A smart black trouser, a long sleeve school shirt with one of his daddy's ties, his school shoes nicely polished and he was dressed to impress. Weddings, anniversaries and twenty-firsts, he had something on almost every weekend. The first time he performed at a wedding they paid him a two hundred rand. He took that whole two hundred rand and he gave a hundred to me and a hundred to his daddy and said shukran for everything we do for him. Can you believe it? No, my Mohammed Zain is a good child.

Then in matric he applied for this bursary for UCT. A music bursary. His teachers said he must apply. So a big thing, they say. Prestigious. He applied for the first round and when he made it through they invited him to go and audition. We were all so happy, even my saligh mother-in-law who would make so a thing with her mouth every time we had to borrow money from her for music lessons or to buy ingredients for biscuits.

We all went to Cape Town for the audition. All of us. Mohammed Zain said it was too much pressure on him, he rather wants to alone on the bus, ma' wat weet hy van pressure? Het hy al ooit met Telkom gesoebat ommie phone aan te hou? Of probeer 'n koek ice to the tune of do re me fah so lah tee do? Nee, hy weet fokol van pressure. So we all drove though in the Venture. Me and my husband in front, my mother-in-law in between my two big children and Mohammed Zain alone at the back with all the luggage.

We drove down in one day only stopping to put in petrol. We were tired by the time we pulled up in front of my cousin's house in Belhar. It was dark already and I was drained of the fighting between my children. Tart, tart, tart, die hele dag se tart. But we finally got there.

I don't even know how the audition went the next day. He didn't want to tell us. He just said the compositions were hard and the professors kept asking him who his teacher was, no one knew her name. I tried to speak to him nicely but he wouldn't listen, he just wanted to be left alone. So we drove home on the Wednesday just like that, with him dikbek in the back, in between all the luggage and the packets of clothes my cousin makes that she gave me so I could at least have something to sell to make up some money to cover the petrol.

The letter came, eventually. Mohammed Zain got into UCT on a full bursary to study music. It even covered hostel residence, and they put him in Smuts. Can you imagine? Me, Mariam Abader, I have a child at UCT living in a residence named after Jan Smuts.

My son came home that first long holiday in June. He had long hair with a wave, and manners like a moffie. He was always a graceful child, very refined, Mohammed Zain, with arms that would beduie when he talks and the fingers that would stretch out like so because of the piano. But the UCT thing made it worse. And he'd open his mouth and an accent would come out. And I'd ask him why is he talking like that, who is he trying to impress, and he would laugh at me and give me a drukkie and tell me to stop being so old fashion.

Mohammed Zain Abader started at UCT. He graduated as Mo Zain, he even came home and showed me the poster of his undergraduate performance. So 'n black 'n' white ding met 'n spotlight op hom wa' hy sit by die piano. Mo Zain, ennie plek ennie datum. Ma' hy sê niks. Hy wag totdat die ding oor is voor hy 'n dêm ding sê. Sieker bang ons gaan hom kom embarrass. Ma' ek het niks gesê nie. Die ding lê nou nog opgerol ha' onner in my wardrobe.

And now he is doing a master. This Mo Zain child of mine. He phones me to wish me for Labarang, but he doesn't feel like my child anymore. He feels strange, a strange stranger. Different. Not even a cuckoo in my nest, because he is my child, he looks like my other children, all my children all look just like me. But no one else wishes me Eid Mubarak.

Ebrahim

Ebrahim's mother stayed at home to bring him up because he was her only child. Maybe she was overprotective, but they lived in Cannon Street in Hillside, and Barcelona was just there on the other bult. Brown paths crisscrossed between the two hills, connecting rich and poor.

Ebrahim didn't play in the street with the other children. Sometimes he looked at them through the patterned wrought iron fencing on top of the boundary wall, but he was an inside child. Over weekends he visited his cousins in Parkside, other weekends his cousins came to visit him. Both his parents were from large families, so his parents told themselves he had enough friends. His father played cricket with him after work. His mother sat on the floor of the playroom that should have been a sibling's bedroom, and taught Ebrahim his letters and his numbers. She didn't trust a crèche. He is a highly intelligent child, she said. He needs individual attention.

He started grade one at De Heuwel Primary School just after he turned six. He was a December baby, so his mother wanted to keep him at home for one more year but there was only so much she could do, she wasn't a teacher. The budget was tight and her cousin said she could help out at the shop. Mornings only, she told her cousin, and I have to leave at twelve sharp so I can be waiting outside the class when Ebrahim finishes school.

She went back to work full time when Ebrahim started high school. She needed to because they wanted Model C for their child, he was their only child, and the fees were expensive. Every morning she dropped him off at school on her way to work, and they'd laugh at the way her Mazda struggled up the hill. Mummy when I'm a chartered accountant I'll buy you a new car, he'd promise. Other mornings he'd say, Mummy when I'm a doctor I'll buy you a BMW. She would laugh and try not to ruffle his hair.

After school Ebrahim walked down Mount Road to take a taxi home. The gaadjie would shout, Schauder, Gelvan, Cleary Park, and Ebrahim would get in and sit right at the back, because he was a slams who lived in Hillside. Sometimes the taxi would drive up Third Avenue, but only if the girls in the rolled up skirts sat next to the driver and asked nicely. Other times he'd have to walk from Stanford Road but as long as he kept his mouth shut walking past Hillside Secondary and stayed on the other side of the road he was safe.

And one day keeping his mouth shut is not enough. One of the Katanga children – or perhaps it was a Windvogel child, they never found out – from Hillside Secondary takes offense to Ebrahim's red and yellow striped school tie and his blazer and his clearly new Karrimor without a single Tippexed chappie. And Ebrahim, who only knows to keep his head down and keep walking, ignores the shouting and the anger and the warnings, and keeps going.

They phoned Ebrahim's father first. His mother knew as soon as she saw her husband at her office door.

Charl

I used to see Charl walking up and down here in tight jeans that looked like it belonged to his sister and always a top with a flower or a strikkie around the neck. At first I thought miskien kry hulle swaar, GM is on short-time, and clothes are expensive to keep buying for your child who looks like he grows every time you see him. But then when he finished school his mother's cousin Angeline got him in at Cadbury.

Maybe it's because he grew up in a house full of girls, but Charl was always a bit in touch with his feminine side, if you know what I mean. He used to play soccer for the club that practices there on the other side of Stanford Road but you never saw him in a soccer strip unless he was playing. The rest of the time he was always neatly dressed, with his hair always ge-wetlook into a Michael Jackson-hairstyle that falls into his eyes. He used to read a lot. I used to ask him, How can you see the words with your hair in your face like that? Put on a damn Alice band. And he would laugh and laugh. Because he had beautiful manners, Charl. Always beautiful manners, even when he was small. If he walked past my house always a wave and a, Hello auntie, how is auntie today? And if he's coming from the library and he sees me at Desai's and he sees I'm carrying heavy with my parcels, he takes the heavy ones and walks with me. He walks me all the way home, no matter how slowly I have to go, because that Gail Road uphill is a steep uphill and you have to keep your eyes and ears open all the time for when they start shooting again, or when someone tries something funny with your bag. But Charl didn't worry. He'd walk with me.

And sometimes he would take my packets and I would see there's cutex on his fingers, or sometimes he would stop before we turn into Gail Road and quickly pull up his zip on his jacket to hide his necklace and the flowers on his top, or maybe he would wipe off the pink of the Lip-Ice, but I always made like I didn't notice.

Charl was more and more moffierig every time I saw him, met die broek wat so sit ennie hemp wat tot hie' toe kom sodat almal sy naeltjie kan sien. Now listen here, ammal weet moffies issie bang vi' klere nie, but there must darem be a limit. Vi' wat om so aan te trek? Gedra jou darem. It was like he spent his whole pay packet on clothes, and the more elaborate the better. And sometimes it looked like he was wearing eye pencil, and sommer also lipstick ook. But it wasn't my business, so I said nothing, not even when I saw him parading around Greenacres in a red halter top, nes 'n hoer wat werk soek.

And then one day I was coming back from Desai's and I stopped there by Rosie who lives in Springbok street. I heard Rosie's neighbour's family from Salt Lake went to go and make a performance there by Moira in Bell Road because their daughter was running after Moira's son who works at Continental. I heard from my cousin that the Salt Lake people's daughter was still at school. Moira's son was an altar boy at St Martin de Porres at the same time as my cousin's child, and my cousin's child is married already. Surely Moira's son is grown man? If that Muslim girl could catch him then surely he wasn't running very fast at all. He wanted to be caught. Hy is seker die een wat agter haar aangehol't.

But anyway, I wanted to hear what Rosie said. Rosie had a lot to say that day, and none of it was about Salt Lake. She asked me if I'd heard about Charl who lives in Gail Road, there near the top on the Katanga side. Charl who is a moffie. Did I know about him? I said to her yes, I know Charl, but why does she have to be so ugly, their house isn't in Katanga, it's on the Gelvan side and anyway he and his sisters were extending the house, didn't she see the bricks that were delivered?

She says to me she's not worried about the bricks, did I know he was a moffie? I say to her how can I not know, do I then not have eyes in my head? She tells me she heard from her grandson whose other granny is Charl's mother's cousin that Charl isn't a moffie anymore, he's sommer a gender bender now.

A what? I still want to ask her, but she talks over me. She tells me she heard from her grandson that Charl is up to these funny things, and she didn't want to believe it because Charl is then always with the girls and didn't he used to play soccer? She didn't believe it, she says, until her grandson took out his phone and showed her. And there was Charl. On Facebook. But his name was Charlotte Sometimes and he's in a picture wearing a wig and a red halter neck blouse and she didn't want to look too up close because it looked like he was wearing a bra with socks in it. And then she saw the other pictures, because yes, there were more pictures, and they were all of Charl, some with a wig and some without, and some even with a dress. And in the ones with a dress he was definitely wearing a bra because he had net sulke tamaaie grootte pramme that came out to here. And she asks me did I know about it?

No, I say. I didn't know about it, but what does it matter? If Charl wants to be a gender bender, let him go be a gender bender, los hom uit, he's not hurting anybody. And I can feel my blood pressure start to go up, so I get off the couch and I pick up my packets. I say to her maybe someone must talk to Charl about his clothes because sometimes they look like they can attract a Nigerian element,

especially that red halter neck blouse, because yes, I know that blouse. I saw him in that blouse, but I didn't say anything because it's none of my concern.

She was still wanting to say something about the socks in the bra but I was at the door already and when she opened it her son was pulling up outside. The son who had the child by that girl who died. And I wanted to say something about that, about how can Rosie sit so in judgement about Charl and his moffiegeid when her own child carried on like that, two children before he got married, and I hear he doesn't pay a cent in child support. That same Desmond doesn't even hoot at me when he sees me walking up Gail Road, never mind give me a lift, but his mother has time to spread stories about a moffie child who never did nothing to nobody. But I kept my mouth shut. I didn't even open it to say something to Desmond's hello. I just slammed the gate as I walked out.

Imogen

I didn't know where to look when I heard my husband's cousin's daughter was pregnant again. She has three children, all on grant, and a husband who doesn't like to work. But she is pregnant again. They live in a servants' quarters there by her husband's parents in Bethelsdorp. I only went there once, that time when they had their second baby and they moved in there, but even then I could see the place is small. I don't have a problem with a servants' quarters, we must all start somewhere, and it's nice to stay with your mammie as she gets older. But that place wasn't so nice. It was there deep in Bethelsdorp, so far you almost in Uitenhage, and it was just one big room with an open-plan lounge and kitchen and a bed on the other side. They had an old curtain hanging across to cut the bedroom from the lounge, and the curtain wasn't even clean.

Her husband says he can't keep a job because they live so far. He says he has to take two taxis, one to Cleary Park plus another one to town. He says the fares are too much and then if you wait too long for the taxi to fill up then you are always late. I said to my daughter that's a rubbish excuse. Look here, the Bantus live in the location and they take a taxi from deep in the location to Njoli Square and then from Njoli Square to town, and they can keep a job. What is wrong with him?

I don't give them money anymore. I used to, but I can't anymore. Look, my husband used to work at Shatterprufe, so they all think we have money. They don't realise my husband was just a general worker not a school principal like her mother, and he didn't get a golden handshake when the Bantus came in. Her mother was a principal at that primary school in Schauder… I can never remember the name, but the one with the blue uniform? Not the one there at the bottom in Highfield Road by the Union Church, the other one. She was the principal there for 20 years, and when it came time for the new dispensation, she got golden handshake. I don't know how much it was but when my husband worked it out he said it was almost half a million rand. Where is that money now? Why don't they ask her mother to help them? They don't ask her, they ask me, and I'm on a widow's pension. It's not right.

My husband and his cousin Margie the school principal were very close. They grew up together in South End like brother and sister in the same house, both raised by their granny. Margie was her mother's skaamkind. When her mother got married she left Margie in the house with the granny and moved to Cape Town with the husband, but of course the husband wasn't Margie's father, so that's why they left Margie behind. She used to come back so now and then, but not a lot. Sometimes she sent money, but most of the time my husband's parents would support her because they both worked.

We never knew who her father was ma' Margie was pik donker met gladde hare nes 'n koelie. No one else in the family looked like that, so we reached our own conclusions.

When they were removed from South End and put in the northern areas my husband's parents built a house in Korsten, in Rabie Street, around the corner from where the Alabama is now. In those days plots were cheap there, it was a native location and they were trying to get the natives to go to Motherwell and New Brighton. They built a big house, and that's where they were living when I met him.

His parents didn't like me at first. The Septembers are all light people – not try for white, but still lighter than me – and they're all hare bewus. They surely thought he was going to marry someone their colour with long hair, not me with my Boesman features. Margie used to tease him about my eyes and ask my husband if I was family of the Chinese traders in South End. She'd talk about my small nose – wa' sit sy ha' bril? Ennie hare! Het ha' ma ha' niks vannie tjoepie geleer'ie? And she'd wave her straight black hair around as if she wasn't darker than me. I know I look like my father's people and I can't help for it, it's just how it is, and at least I can point to a picture and say that is where I get my nose, waar kry Margie daai hare? But they eventually came round and by the time I had my second child his parents said we should marry.

Our children looked like them, so they couldn't deny it. You could see they were Septembers. Big babies, very big. I carried so heavy on my last days, with the first one the hospital thought I made a mistake with my dates. The sister said to me I must walk more so that the baby will come. Gaan stap daai baba uit, she said, as if I didn't walk to the hospital from my house.

All my babies came out with my husband's father's big nose and my mother-in-law's yl fyn haartjies, so they couldn't say anything. My youngest daughter is darem not so big built but she but she has that same big nose that both my other two have. Not one of my children have my small features, but they at least have my manners. My children are good children, they all finished school and are working, and my son and his wife are going to buy a house next year, they just need to save a bit more for the deposit.

My husband left school after standard eight. In those years he was interested in law, so he started at the law courts as a messenger. His school principal helped him to get in. But being a messenger is not the same as being a lawyer, so when we were courting he had to do something to make money. You

can't raise a family on a messenger's wage. So he got in at Shatterprufe as a general worker, and he worked there for thirty-eight years. He didn't go up. He wasn't ambitious, my husband. It's like when he realised he was never going to be a lawyer he just gave up. But he didn't stop working. He went to work every day, even that time when he caught pneumonia, and that's why he ended up in hospital.

I stayed at home to bring my children up. So many times people would tell me to find someone to look after them or to send them to their granny so that I could go and work. Why don't you want to work? They taking on people at Cadbury, must I bring you a form? They used to go so on and on, but me and my husband decided I must stay at home at least until the children were at school. So my youngest daughter wore my big daughter's old clothes when she got big, and my son used to run around in a pink shorts sometimes. But it didn't matter, the shorts were clean, his hair was brushed and he didn't have a vaal line of old dry snot running from his nose to his mouth.

Margie wasn't like that. Margie didn't want to raise babies. She wanted to be a person people looked at and spoke about. She went to study teaching, and even on her first day she already told everyone she was going to be a principal. She finished her studies, she started working, and she married another teacher. I don't want babies, she said. Always, I don't want babies. They're dirty and they make you fat and they take all your time, and they leave you no money for yourself. Margie was selfish. Always selfish. I don't think she liked children very much. I don't know why she had a child at all, but at least she stopped at Imogen.

I think she was expecting me to take Imogen when she went back to work. They lived in Jackson Street and we lived in Elkana Street so it would have been easy for them to drop Imogen off in the morning and fetch her at night. But I didn't offer. For what? I didn't lay down to make that baby, and everyone always runs after Margie to make nice for Margie because Margie had a hard life. Wat se hard life is die? Margie was ge-spoil. Vanaf die dag wat Margie se ma weggehardloop het is Margie gespoil. That is why she is that way and I wasn't going to make it easy for her. So Imogen went to live with her father's family in Bloemendal and only came home over weekends. Kan jy dit glo? A schoolteacher who didn't want to bring up her own child.

Then she'd talk about sacrifice. I made sacrifices for my career, she would say. Sacrifices. As if it was a hardship for her to go to bed late at night and only make breakfast for one person. And after her husband left she talked about how hard it was for her to be a single parent. How are you a single

parent when your child lives with her father and her grandparents and you only see her every second weekend? But that was Margie for you.

She didn't have much to do with Imogen. I probably saw Imogen more than she did. My husband always made sure I invited her if the children had a birthday party or if we had a function or something on. Sometimes she would come, sometimes she wouldn't. Then she finished school and was working at Edgars in Greenacres and met that man and fell pregnant and married him. My husband and his parents were gone by this point, but I heard that her father and other granny had tried to soebat her not to marry him. They could see right through him. But Imogen was just as stubborn as her mother so she married him.

Perhaps she thought her mother would help her. Perhaps she thought her mother would give them a deposit for a house or something, because that's when Margie retired. But Margie took her golden handshake and bought one of those townhouses on the other side of Makro, there where the rich people live, and didn't even give Imogen something towards the wedding. Imogen's father paid for that whole wedding, even Imogen's dress, and Margie just showed up like a guest.

And now Imogen is struggling. She's alone on that side, so far from her own people, and it's just me in this house now. Sometimes I think I should tell her to come and stay with me. I like babies. Maybe they'll take her on again at Edgars, she was a good worker when she worked at Edgars, surely they'll take her back. Or maybe she can try Foschini. I can look after her babies while she works. But I don't know about that husband of hers, and not a damn am I going to give her money anymore.

Delia Mary

Every coloured family has a story of an Irish grandmother. My own is no different. But my dad is actually from the UK, so when he spoke of his Irish mother from Clonmel Tipperary I knew he was telling the truth.

She was just a tiny little thing, he'd say. Not quite five feet high but very glamorous. She loved her jewellery just like you do, and she was always beautifully turned out. But she would be, you know, and he'd wag his finger at me. Her own mother was a McMahon, and the McMahons were kings of Ireland.

Whenever other coloured girls would talk about their Irish grannies or their own grannies' Irish grannies I would keep quiet. No one likes a showoff, and you don't get much more pretentious than an Irish princess for a grandmother. But I'd always smile smugly to myself, knowing my Irish granny was the real deal and a princess to boot.

Fast forward to 2019. Brexit is looming. The crimson cruiser that once commanded the respect of any immigration official is now a shadow of its former self. But Ireland is still in the EU, and while the harp is not quite as imposing as the lion and the unicorn, doesn't everyone love an Irishman?

So I decide to send off for a copy of my Irish grandmother's birth certificate. I'm somewhat alarmed that it isn't kept in a secret underground vault in a file next to Queen Elizabeth's, but they are only German after all, so my Irish princess granny's birth certificate is obviously kept somewhere special. After an interminable wait it arrives. No silver platter, regular old Royal Mail, but it is austerity and we must all do our bit. I rip the envelope open, and to my abject horror I see she was born in Sheffield.

And the bloody woman wasn't even a princess.

Bushman Senses

I can smell money. It is said that my ancestors could smell water. Me, I can smell money. They never bathed, my ancestors. They lived in the desert with sand and bush and so it makes sense that they could smell something they hardly ever saw, something precious. I grew up in the ganglands with shootings and stabbings and muggings and I never saw money. Money was neatly folded in exact amounts that disappeared into convoluted handshakes. Clasped hands and leaned-into hugs. Lingering backslaps. Conspicuous contact camouflaging an exchange. But that wasn't really money not real money not serious money. I didn't see it but I couldn't see it because it wasn't real.

As a young woman I attracted money. The money was usually attached to a man, an older man but a man with money. I didn't realise it at first – *What do you do? I sell vegetables* – but the men I attracted invariably had money. Serious money.

I didn't go looking for it – *My horse just won the Durban July, why don't you help me celebrate* – not at first. But it always found me anyway.

I can smell money and I can smell success. You'd think that they smell the same but they don't. Money doesn't always come with success and success rarely comes with money and when the two come together it's a pyrotechnic explosion at the back of my skull. But mostly I see part measures of each. Half a measure here and a few drops there. *You're on the South African ice-hockey team? That's nice*. See smile dismiss. *Oh, you're in telecommunications?* See smile lean forward engage wide eyes wide eyes look away look back smile look away look back again and hooooold it. *That's fascinating.* Wide eyes. Half smile. *And where is your accent from?* Lean in. Smile. Got him.

Tayba

My surname is Jabaarudin. They say it's a corruption of Bahaaruddin, the Royal House of Malaysia. The family story goes that Sultan Nabier angered the Dutch, and they exiled him to the Cape as a slave under Jan van Riebeeck. He was forced to leave his religious books and his papers behind on the gangplank, and by the time he arrived in Cape Town he had nothing to identify himself. But his people knew him, and even when he arrived in Cape Town as a slave they recognised him as their king.

I never knew if I could believe these tall stories about my family. Especially about my father. He has curly hair. Not kroes, just very wavy. My auntie also has wavy hair, but she used to say it's because their grandmother on their mother's side used to be Christian. She had native blood and was raised by the Moravians in Genadendal, that's why our branch of the family has wavy hair. And then she'd quickly say, But they were decent people, and very clever, even though they were Christian and had native blood and wavy hair.

But I don't have wavy hair. My brother has wavy hair, but I don't. Mine is stick straight and just hangs there, no wave or life or motion. So maybe that part of me is Javanese. But I have blue eyes. Bright blue eyes like my stepfather, but my mother changes the subject when anyone brings it up, and when I press the issue she says her Moroccan grandfather's mother was a French woman and also had blue eyes, these things happen and why do I always ask so many questions?

I don't know my father's side of the family, I haven't seen him in years. I know my mother left him, I remember the shouting, I remember the plane to Pretoria when I was four. I remember holding my brother's hand when this strange man with the eyes like mine hugged my mother, touched my mother.

He took us to his house and introduced the maids to their new madam, and wagged his finger as he instructed them to look after us. He showed us the whole house, and I remember the pink bedroom with the balloon poster on the wall and a mountain of teddies on the bed. He had a swimming pool as blue as his eyes and a net over it because my brother and I couldn't swim. His big voice told me to call him Baba. He said it was my house now, he was moving out for a few weeks but he would come and visit us every day and soon we would share this house with him, and he laughed and he hugged my mother again. When he spoke to my mother he sounded like my grandmother and my mother was happy and smiling and called him habib. Later my brother told me they were speaking Arabic, and he wasn't going to call another man Daddy.

The fighting came with us. My mother, crying. My mother, angry. My mother, threatening to drown us in the swimming pool. My mother, threatening to go back to PE. Please can we go home Mummy, please? My brother begged. He was seven already so Baba had enrolled him at school. My brother didn't like the school. He said it was a Muslim school and the other children were all Indians and they teased him about his wavy hair. Mummy and Baba fought about that too. Baba said my brother could go back to PE, she could go too, but I had to stay in Pretoria. Baba loved me.

Then one day we went to the shops but only we didn't. We got on a plane and went back to our old house, back to my old daddy. I remember how small our house was when we arrived. It was still our house, the number 9 was still on the wall, and the nail was still missing, so the number had fallen down and become a 6. My mother would shout at my father to fix it. You're always at your sister's house, you'll do anything for your sister, what about us? What about your children? You're a builder but you can't even put a nail through a number so that our post doesn't get lost.

And my daddy would shout back, I would fix it if the postman could see it but when last did you take some Brasso to that number? That thing is filthy, this whole house is filthy, you are not in Kimberley now where your mother had two girls to clean up after you, clean this damn house and I'll see about fixing the number. And my mother would shout back that she isn't his girl, why should she clean this house when he could afford a girl if his sister paid him for the work on her house? And my daddy would say, She is my family, how can I charge her? And anyway, at least she can make a plate of food for me, which is more than you do, and you're supposed to be my wife. And he would walk out and slam the door.

And sometimes my mother would make an effort. Especially right after we came back from Pretoria. She swept the lounge and took the rugs outside. She hung them over the washing line and beat them with the broomstick like she'd seen her mother's maids do. But she forgot that the pot was on the stove and burnt the stew. She bought Brasso and cleaned the upside down 9, but left brown smears on the beige wall. The shouting continued.

Her mother tried to help. My grandmother felt guilty about this daughter they had spoiled. This much loved and longed for only daughter after three sons and a miscarriage. A daughter they had loved and coddled in their double story house with a cook to prepare their meals, and two live-in maids to keep everything clean. Every month my grandmother sent a driver all the way from Kimberley with an

envelope stuffed with notes, and cooler boxes of frozen meals prepared by the cook, and instructed the driver to leave at sunset and drive through the night so that the food would keep.

My grandparents felt guilty. They'd had their reservations when he had started courting my mother. He'd met her at a wedding in Cape Town. One of her cousins had married his niece or perhaps the other way around, no one remembered anymore, that marriage also failed. But my parents met at that wedding. My daddy, scarcely taller than my mother's 5'2, brown skinned and curly haired with cement under his nails and adoration in his eyes. My mother accepted the adulation as her due. She was beautiful. Half Moroccan and half Cape Malay, she was small and fine boned and had long black hair down her back that gleamed without the need for Amla oil. Then my mother heard the story of Sultan Nabier, and she fell in love. She'd always known she was destined to be a princess.

But while my mother was meant to be a princess, she should have chosen her prince with more care. Amira, it's just a story, my father would plead. I'm a working man, can't you see? I'm a builder, my father was a carpenter, these stories don't mean anything, what do you mean you don't know how to make a bed?

My father swallowed his pride and allowed her parents to buy them a house as a wedding present. My grandfather said he understood that my father was a builder and would want to build something of his own later on, but this would do for now, just something modest. Only three bedrooms for now but on a double plot so that my father can extend later, when the babies come and they need more space. But it would please him if my father accepted this as a wedding present. My father accepted. What was the alternative? My mother would not have survived a servants' quarters in someone else's backyard.

My mother's mahr had been nearly half my father's inheritance from his father. He'd been saving it to buy a small truck and go into business on his own but my mother came first. The other half of his inheritance was frittered away, bit by bit, by a wife who didn't know how to budget and couldn't understand how anyone could wear satin scarves when French silk was so much softer on your hair. The fighting continued.

Less than a year later my mother left him again, this time for good. Baba was waiting at the airport but this time it was me he ran to and picked up and swung around with joy. He shook my brother's hand like a man and nodded at my mother and he stroked his beard but he didn't let go of me. This

time she didn't call him habib. We went back to Baba's house, our house. My bedroom was still there, still pink, all my dresses still in the cupboard and even more dolls and teddies than when I'd left. My daddy had given her three talaqs by then, so as soon as her iddah was over Baba married her. My brother and I learned Arabic, we finished school, we went to university. We joined Baba in the business. The fighting lessened.

My name is Tayba Jabaarudin, but I don't know if that really is my name. Sometimes I look at Baba, and I see the love in his eyes, those blue eyes that look so much like mine, and in my head I practice, Tayba Al Khoury, Tayba Al Khoury, Tayba Al Khoury, desperately hoping that if I say it with enough of me it will be true. And when I ask him if he's really my Baba he says of course he is, why would I want another one? Can't I see I look just like him?

That’s a lot for her

I’m in Jo’burg on business and while I’m there I visit my former manager. He’s a ginger Jew with a receding hairline and his birth certificate says 30, but his gut says 42. He’s fun and engaging, with a clever turn of phrase. He hasn’t yet admitted that he’s gay so he has a girlfriend. She’s tall and slim and beautiful with brown eyes and a mass of dark hair she relaxes at a white hairdresser who overcharges her horribly and actually does quite a kak job. She has a bad postnasal drip and a thick Jo’burg Jew accent and the resultant speech impediment renders conversation so difficult that a colleague once asked, with sympathy, Is she a bit retarded? But her father is rich, and they live in a mansion in Atholl with an infinity pool and authentic Louis Vuitton keyrings dangling from keys in every door, so I suppose he overlooks the hair and the voice and the koek.

My former manager tells me he’s late because the maid came that morning and he had to take her home. She lives in a flat on his girlfriend’s parents’ property with her sister. Her sister works for his girlfriend’s parents. He proudly shows me what a good job she did, with a flamboyant gloveless white glove test. And she doesn’t steal, he says, wagging his finger. Zimbabwean cleaners are the best and they don’t steal. They’re very respectful and so grateful. Just look at all of this! In one morning, so quick! And then he tells me he paid her thirty rand.

Thirty rand? I ask. Thirty rand per hour?

No, he says. For the morning. That’s a lot for them, you know.

I am reminded of this, a few years later, when asking a friend for advice. I suspect my domestic worker walks to work and pockets the ten rand I give her for taxi fare to work each day. I ask my friend if I should confront my helper or let it go. My friend is Zulu and has an afro and a Master’s degree from Stellenbosch and is woke. Let it go, she advises. Ten rand a day, fifty rand a week. An extra fifty rand is a lot to her, you know.

This sticks in my head. Years go by and I return to this statement. I turn it over and replay it in my head. I revisit it more frequently than I probably should, and I turn it around in my head and I take it out and weigh it in my mouth but the words are heavier than the letters say they should be.

It’s a lot for her.

I test it out in my mouth. It's a lot for her, I practice.

It's a lot for her.

What is it about the black woman that makes money more valuable to her than anyone else?

Thirty rand is thirty rand; fifty rand is fifty rand.

If you're a poor black woman and your Edgars account comes can you walk into Edgars and tell Grant Pattinson that your account came and you know it's actually four hundred rand but here's a hundred and he must be satisfied with that, because your madam said that's actually a lot for you?

Hugo

When my first child was born we went to my grandmother's house so that she could meet him. We were fresh from the hospital and he was only a few days old, so I didn't tell her I was coming. I wanted it to be a surprise. I didn't want her to have time to call the neighbours over.

She inspected my son from all angles. His skin was declared to be not too dark, his hair was pronounced glat, his navy blue eyes were sufficiently alert, and his penis was appropriately circumcised.

My aunt was thrilled. She told me to stay with my grandmother and ran off to call her friend who lived in the cul-de-sac nearby. I started packing up but my c-section wound slowed me down. The influx started as I reached the security gate and I was sent back and told to sit down.

Ma hy's so spierwit! announced Delphine from the green house opposite the church, as if none of us had eyes.

En An'Salwa is so donker! added Helen from next door, with no sense of self-preservation.

Is niks'ie! countered my grandmother. A black chicken can lay white eggs.

Teresa

I phone up my sister to let her know that for me to take my non-EU husband and our two non-EU children to live in the UK I would need either a highly paid job or seventy-eight thousand pounds in savings.

Seventy-eight thousand pounds, my Brexit-voting sister shrieks. Seventy-eight thousand pounds! But why?

I explain that the law states that I need to demonstrate that I am able to support my family without resorting to state funds.

That's preposterous, she tells me. Utterly preposterous.

Well, that's the law, I say.

Do you know, she tells me, in full middle-aged white woman fury, Do you know that this morning I had an African doctor in my office collecting housing benefit forms?

No, I try to reply, but the self-righteous indignation is fully engaged, and she continues right over me.

This African doctor earns forty thousand pounds per year and she was in my office collecting forms to go on housing benefit! Housing benefit! They come here, they go on all the benefits and they send their money back home. That's why this country is in the state it's in. We need to take a hard line with these immigrants. A hard line.

Imagine that, she tells me, and I can almost see the spittle flying from her lips, Imagine this foreign doctor coming here and taking all the benefits and you, you, a British citizen! have to prove that you don't need benefits before you can come home with your family. This is ridiculous! You're British! How can they do this to you? Do they know your grandfather fought in the War?

What I said

So I said to him, djy vat my vir ’n poes, and I walked out.

Hugo’s Bookshelves

My son’s bookshelves are overflowing. At three he already owns more books than I did in my entire childhood.

All I am

I am a quarter measure and a few small drops. No fireworks here.

I don’t miss his money. I miss the peace of mind that came with it.

A semi-circle is just an empty horseshoe

I grew up in a council house with no bathroom, an outside toilet and a council-bossie hedge.

Now I live in the suburbs in a mortgaged house with two and a half bathrooms and a Miss Hartzenberg down the road who tells me that my hedge with the vuvuzela-shaped orange flowers is called Cape Honeysuckle, and makes outraged noises when I talk about digging it up and replacing it with a proper fence.