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Mum is making small talk. She's awful at small talk. All she talks about is work, work, work. The old lady is talking about how well Greg is doing, asking if Mum's married now. Everything in the house is shiny. Looks like someone went crazy with Mr Min. Against the wall in the foyer is a display case with trophies and photos. I wonder which one is my dad? Above the display case are large paintings of kids, all in their baptism gowns. Must all be hers. Six in total - four boys, two girls. I can tell because of the blue and pink backgrounds. After a long while of tea, biscuits and talking about nothing at all, Mum gets up. "Lorraine, thanks so much for inviting us. We have to go now. It's a long drive back and it's a school night."

"Yes, you must come again. And René, you must come to my birthday this Saturday. Then you can meet your daddy, hey?" She gets up and squeezes my arm. "Dan kan ek lekka my kleinkind afshow," she says, winking at me.

That wasn't too bad. We get into the car and Mum puts on the radio. "So, what did you think?" she asks, looking straight ahead.

"It was okay, I guess."

We drive back in silence, past the slums and marshes that lined the South Peninsula. It's still light as we get back home. I walk into the house and everyone is watching TV. *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Everyone knew where we'd gone, but no one asked me anything at all. Mama was in bed already, reading, Dada said. I get into my pajamas and go to eat dinner. Biryani. I hate Mama's biryani. Wish I was young again so I could tilt the plate on the arm rest of the couch and be sent to bed without dinner after I let it fall *accidentally*. I shovel the food down, excuse myself and go to bed. I stare at the ceiling for a long time, looking at the black mould that's started to form in the corner. I wonder what he's like. His mother is quite a good looking woman. I hope he likes me.

I've been waiting all week for today. Chesney's at the door. He's taking me. Mum said it's okay if I go to the party with friends. I think she just didn't want to have to deal with Greg. Chesney's my closest friend. He asked if he could bring his brother Wayne. They can be my

protection if anything goes wrong. It's dark outside at the yellow house, and a couple of guys are standing out in front, smoking cigarettes and talking about cars. One of them is sitting in a souped-up Toyota Corolla, revving it loudly. Stupid guys. One of them motions to the garage door and says, "Party's round the back. Everyone's in the yard." My heart is in my throat. Maybe I should've stayed home. I'm cold, should've brought a jersey.

"You must be René," I hear a woman's voice behind me. I turn to see a tall, tanned woman with thick black hair and dark green eyes. "You look just like your mother," she says. "I'm Louise. I spoke to your aunt, Patty, about you coming to visit. I'm glad you could make it."

"Hi, I'm Brendan," I hear from the other side. "I guess I'm your uncle." Damn, he is fine. Wish he weren't my uncle. "Come," he says, taking me by the hand. "Let me introduce you to your dad."

Everyone seems so friendly. It's actually not so bad. Brendan walks toward the garage and then steps aside, motioning for me to go in, I think. An old drunk guy is in my way. He looks like he's lurching forward, about to fall. I give way and try to jump forward to see inside the garage.

"En nou?" he looks at me, laughing. "*This* is Greg," says Brendan pointing to the man in front of me.

No, no, no, no. This can't be him. He looks like a bergie. For the first time I pay attention to the man in front of me. I take all of him in: short, with dirty grey, dishevelled hair and poor dress-sense. I go numb. He's like some horror from the 80s. I can see him moving his lips, but can't hear what's coming out of his mouth. He looks like he's wearing someone else's hand-me-downs. The green and purple tri-acetate tracksuit looks like he'd had it since his school days and his shoes look at least two sizes too big. The laces are pulled so tight they can cut off circulation. He sticks out his hand and as I shake it I see a tattoo. I can't make out what it is. A prison tjappie I'm sure.

Brendan says, "Come and sit on the chairs on the lawn. Have a chat. I'm sure you have a lot to talk about," and with that he turns around and walks away.

I suddenly hear the old ladies sitting at the table talking about me. "Ja, sy is mos Greg se dogte". They look like kerk anties – floral viscose blouses, thick makeup and heat-set

hairdos doused in so much hairspray one can smell it from here. They're eating peanuts and talking about everyone that passes their table.

Chesney and Wayne sit down with me and Greg. Chesney raises his eyebrow at me, but says nothing. I blush, embarrassed to be seen with this man. But then my dad gives me a wink and touches my hand.

“So, you must be the boyfriend?” Greg says to Chesney. “You better take care of my baby girl.”

“No,” I interject. “Chesney is one of my best *friends* and Wayne is his brother.”

“So, how do you like the party?” he asks.

“It's been good so far,” (except for you being my father). “Your family seems nice.”

“Ja, I'm married to Marion over there and we have two laaities, Nico and Sergio. You got any kids?”

Is this man on drugs or what? Who the fuck asks questions like these? “No kids. I'm still at school.”

“You never know these days. Laaities are having laaities. Did you see all the children running around in this place?”

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say to this, except: Lord, thank you that Mum never married this guy.

He directs a few questions at Chesney and Wayne. I stare around, hoping that someone will save me from this hell. “Do you want a beer?” he asks the three of us.

“Yes please,” Wayne beams back. So easily influenced. Chesney and I shake our heads.

“Greg, don't you introduce us?” say the kerk anties. Greg turns to them and says, “This is my laaitie who never comes to visit.” Fuck this asshole. I swallow hard and feel the prickle of tears in my eyes, but choke them back. I won't give this loser animal that satisfaction. I get up and go for a walk. Chesney looks at me questioningly. I wanna go home.

I walk into the house through the back door and walk through the kitchen where old ladies with white aprons, heavy makeup and hot-roller hairdos are talking about church bazaars and

the food they'll make for the Christmas fête. They are preparing large trays of cold meats and crackers with toothpicks stacked in the centre. No one notices me. I haven't seen Lorraine at all this evening.

I walk through to the bathroom and turn the handle. "Wait, someone's in here," the voice of an older woman shouts out just as I'm about to enter. I wait in the hallway, and children come running past to the bedroom where I can hear music playing. Lorraine comes out of the bathroom and gives me a hug. I hope she has washed her hands. "And you, looking so lovely this evening. Are you having fun? Did you meet Greg?"

I nod, "It's been lovely, thank you."

"Well, I'll let you get to it," she says and walks past into the kitchen to join the other women. I walk into the bathroom. White tiles line the walls. The grouting is immaculate and there's a row of blue mosaic tiles skirting the top of the tiles at face level. I sit down on the toilet, lid closed. What am I doing here? This isn't my family. Greg is a fucking dick. What could Mum possibly have seen in him?

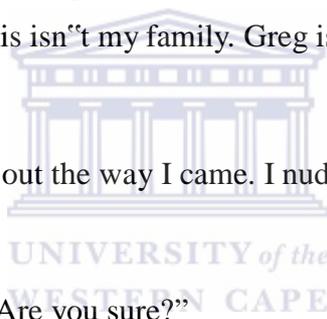
I get up after a while and go back out the way I came. I nudge Chesney and gesture for him to follow me. "Let's go," I say.

"We haven't been here very long. Are you sure?"

"Yes. I wanna go home. Don't say goodbyes. Let's just leave." Chesney whistles softly, and Wayne asks Greg to excuse him for a second.

"Cool guy," Wayne says, as we walk away. We walk to the car and drive home.

Imagine if Mum had married that guy. I'm never going back there. But suddenly I feel raw, and empty – the hole of his not being there has changed shape, but it is there. Still there.



## 2.6. Sophia

“Stoot my kind! Moenie nou opgie nie. Jy’s amper daar. Haal diep asem en stoot! Ek tel tot tien, dan maak jy so, nêh!” says Sies Ragmat, the midwife, white sleeves rolled up, pulling her niqāb off her sweaty face. I can’t feel anything. My whole body is draining, draining of all its blood.

“Push Mariam, push! We’re almost there!”

I can hardly breathe, but I open my mouth wide, swallow air and push. Straining every part of my body to get the baby out.

“Weh!” I hear through the haze. I fall back limply on the bed.

“*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar*” I hear the Imam sing the call to prayer.

That is Allah making sure you hear what is right my baby. “*Ash-hadu-an-la ilah illa llah*” I try to put my finger on my lip to show the midwife she must be quiet, but my hand falls lifelessly back on the sheet.

“*Ash-hadu anna, Muhammadan-Rasulullah, Hayya ‘ala-salāh. Hayya ‘alal-falāh. Allāhu Akbar. Lā ilāha illa llāh.*”

Since I can’t do the Muslim rites with my family, it is good that you hear it from the Imam, my baby.

“Is it a boy or girl?” I ask.

“It is a girl. „n Pragtige klein dogtertjie. Tramakassie Allah, vir die baby.” The midwife puts her on my wet chest in a little white cloth. Bloody stains everywhere, but I’m pleased to hold her. Your name will be Safiyya – may Allah be pleased with you. George won’t mind. He was hoping for a little girl. The wind blows in and the window slam closed.

I heard that clapping sound when Oemie threw us out of the house. “Jy bring skande na my familie. En dan is jy nog lailai genoeg om te kom sê julle gaan trou, maar hy gaan nie vir jou draai nie! Os is saaliegse mense, en jy gaan maak zina met iemand wattie eers gesoenat issie. Jy, Mariam, is „n Jalang! Jy bring dhoenya trobbel op die familie. Daai kind van julle sil nie my familie wees nie. Jy! Jy sal wandel tot die dag van jou dood. Hoor wat ek jou sê!”

“Maar Oemie, hy is mos „n man van die boek. Op die einde vannie dag is ons tog almal die

selle.” But she had already made up her mind. “Selle sê jy? Ek ken nie vir die man nie, ook nie sy kantige boek nie; ek ken nie sy familie nie. Gaan hier uit jou ieblië! Al twee van julle.”

Another slamming door. “Ek wil vir Oemie hê,” This is what I say now as I look down on the blood under me. I feel so weak as if somebody can blow me away.

Sies Ragmat takes Safiyya. “Moenie worry nie Mariam, hulle het die dokter gaan roep. Bly net stil. George gaan nou die babytjie kry. Jy het klom” bloed veloor. Ek sit lappies onner jou.”

Sies Ragmat is lifting my body and dragging red clothes like rolls of carpet out from under me, rolling me over and putting new sheets down. I feel I’m slipping. I smell iron in the air. It’s everywhere, like a metal robe. All I see is red and all I smell is iron.

“Safiyya! Waar is Safiyya? Ek maggie haar lossie!”

“Moenie worry nie Mariam. George het vir haar. Ons het besigheid hier. Moenie worry nie. Sy’s veilig.”

George comes into the room with Safiyya in his arms. Turning to the midwife, he says, “Hulle kannie vir hom kry nie.” I know what that means. I battle to speak: “Sê vir Leila sy moet die qadha gebed vir my doen, en pwasa en as sy eendag op hajj kan gaan, onhou vir my. En sê vir Oemie ek vergiewe vir haar en ek vra haar vergifnis. *La ilahah il-lal lahu Halimul Karim; La ilaha il-lal lahu ‘Aliyyul ‘Azim.*” This is all a whisper. My throat is so dry.

“What is she saying?” George asks the midwife.

“Sy maak soeloeg. Peace. Sy sê, daar is geen God behalwe Allah, the almagtige; daar is geen God behalwe Allah, die sagmoedige.” She translates for George as I continue.

“*Subhana ‘l-laha Rabbus samawatis sab’T*” “Alle prys na Allah, die Here van die sewe hemels en die sewe aardes”

I cannot go on but hear her finish for me: “En wat ookal daar in is en wat tussen hulle is;”

All I can manage is to squeeze her hand. I see George standing.

“Help my met die kooi. Dit moet na die rigting van die kiebla wys.”

George puts Safiyya between my arm and body. I can hear her but I can't see anything. She is making gurgling sounds and her body drops its anchor in me. I can't hear her anymore, but I can feel her. Safiyya.... I don't hear, but know. They are preparing a corpse.

\*

“Os moet die Toeka Manie roep om vir haar te kom was. George, jy moet die Malboet om stuur om die mense te sê daar's „n mayet hier,” Sies Ragmat says, taking charge.

“Wat is „n mayet?” George asks.

“„n Lyk. Gaan sê vir die Malboet hy moet vir die gemeenskap gaan sê en vir haar Oemie. Hulle issie de Koningh's.”

George walks out of the room, leaving Sies Ragmat in the room with Mariam and the baby. He walks out of the house and down Hanover Street to his sister, Anna's house. From higher up the troepe are coming down the street, painted faces and trumpets in hand, singing, “Daar kommie Alibama.” The street erupts as a bright shawl of colour and laughters, but George walks straight ahead. He reaches the terraced houses, broekie lace hanging from the balconies. The neighbour's son, klein Gabriel, sits bare bum on the stoep.

“Anna, Anna!” George shouts. Someone peeps out through the curtains. The door opens.

“En nou, wat gaa aan? Het Mariam die baby gehad?” Anna asks excitedly.

“Mariam is dood. Sies Ragmat praat van Malboet en ons moet die gemeenskap laat wiet.”

“Wat bedoel jy Mariam is dood? Wat het gebeur? Kom binne.” Anna gestures for George to come inside. He tells. But he talks as if it happened to somebody else. As if all these muslim names and phrases are dealing with somebody in another realm.

Anna immediately gets to the point: “Okay, gaan stuurie Pang bad news na haar familie, maar hulle ganie vir haar „n kiefait gie nie, want sy het Kris getrou. Os moet vir Father John laat wiet en reëlings tref vir die begrafnis.”

George sits silently on the couch. At a loss. Blinking his eyes as if he hopes to finally see what has just left his life in cinders. Anna sends one of her sons out to fetch the Malboet and she scribbles down the De Koningh's address on a piece of paper for him to deliver the news.

“Moenie worry nie George. Ek sal alles uitsort.”

For a long time they sit in silence, Anna rubbing George's hand.

“Waar is die kind?” she asks. George lifts his head and it is as if a little spark lits up in his face: “Fok, ek het haar vergiet by Sies Ragmat.”

He gets up and sways like he is lightheaded, then suddenly darts out of the house before there is any more conversation. He runs past the houses with children playing hokke in the street and old people hanging over their front gates smoking cigarettes. He turns into Ekhardt Street and straight in the front gate. When he gets inside, Sies Ragmat is sitting with the baby on her lap, rocking her to sleep.

“Os moet vir haar „n wet nurse kry, want sy“s honger. Ek het klaar die klonkies in die straat gestuur om vir Sanna te roep. Mariam het gesê haar naam moet Safiyya wees – Mag Allah tevrede met jou wees.”

“Maar ons issie Muslimmie, Sies Ragmat. Ek sal haar dan Sophia noem. Daai is mos die selle ding. Ek het saam met Anna gepraat, en ons gaan vir haar uit die Catholic kerk begrawe. Daai“s waar os getrou het, en haar ma het klaar gesê sy wil niks met os te doen hê nie.”

Sies Ragmat raises one eyebrow, “Sy was Muslim. Sy moet „n kiefait het net soes almal haar voorvaders.”

\*

“Oemie, Pang bad news is hie byrrie deur. Hy sê hy moet vir Oemie sien,” Leila says to her mother.

“*Salaam aleikom* Gajah. Ek het slegte nuus vir die de Koningh familie. U oudste dogter, Mariam het maningal. Sy het gekraam en net te veel bloed veloor. Allah yerhama, may Allah, most merciful have mercy on her soul. Sies Ragmat said that she made her final du“aa before she left and the statement of faraj, affirming her belief in the Almighty, maar haar man gat vir haar uit die Catholic kerk begrawe,” and with that he runs off.

“*Rabbanāgh-fir Lanā Dhunūbanā Wa ‘Isrāfanā Fī Amrinā Wa Thabbit ‘Aqdāmanā Wanşurnā `Alā l-Qawmi l-Kāfirīn*, shouts Oemie. Our Lord! forgive us for our sins and wasted efforts, make our foothold sure, and give us victory over the disbelievers.” It tolls through the house. It tolls through the street. It tolls up to the clouds.

\*

“What name shall be given to the child?” the old robed man asks.

“Sophia,” I answer. I nod to Louis, my brother who has agreed to be her godfather.

















“Help me! Something's wrong with me.” They both take my arms and lift me from the ground. We stumble to the nurse's office.

“She can't breathe,” they say, handing me over before vanishing. I stagger into the room and lie down on the bed, world spinning. I close my eyes. Feels like my body's rocking from side to side.

The nurse sits down on the bed next to me. “What's the matter?”

“I'm okay. I think I just have low blood sugar,”

“Okay, I'm gonna get a glass of orange juice. Stay here.”

I lie back onto the bed and close my eyes. I hear indistinct chatter outside. After I don't know how long, she comes back and hands me a glass. “Sit up.” I drink the juice and lie down again.

“I just need to lie down for a while,” I say and turn onto my side.

The final bell wakes me and I jump up, pack my bags and walk out of the office. The nurse is gone. Tocare and Kelly are standing at the gate talking. They fall silent when I get there.

“What you talking about?”

“Nothing. What the hell happened earlier?” Tocare asks.

“Nothing, I'm okay.” We walk to the bus stop. “We didn't want to tell you this before,” Tocare says, “because I didn't want to hurt you, but we heard that Mark is screwing Melanie.” Why is she telling me this now? My head reels. She's probably lying. Why would he do something like that? I'm gonna fucking kill him if it's true.

The bus approaches our stop, but it's not my bus. The sign on the front reads „Khayelitsha“. It keeps driving at a fast pace toward the next stop. I look at the driver as it approaches. I close my eyes and see myself stepping out just before it reaches us, people screaming, “NO!” Something screeches to a halt, Tu Pac playing at full volume, the whole taxi pulsating. “Etlone, Gatesville, Biaville. Ko“ jy girl?”