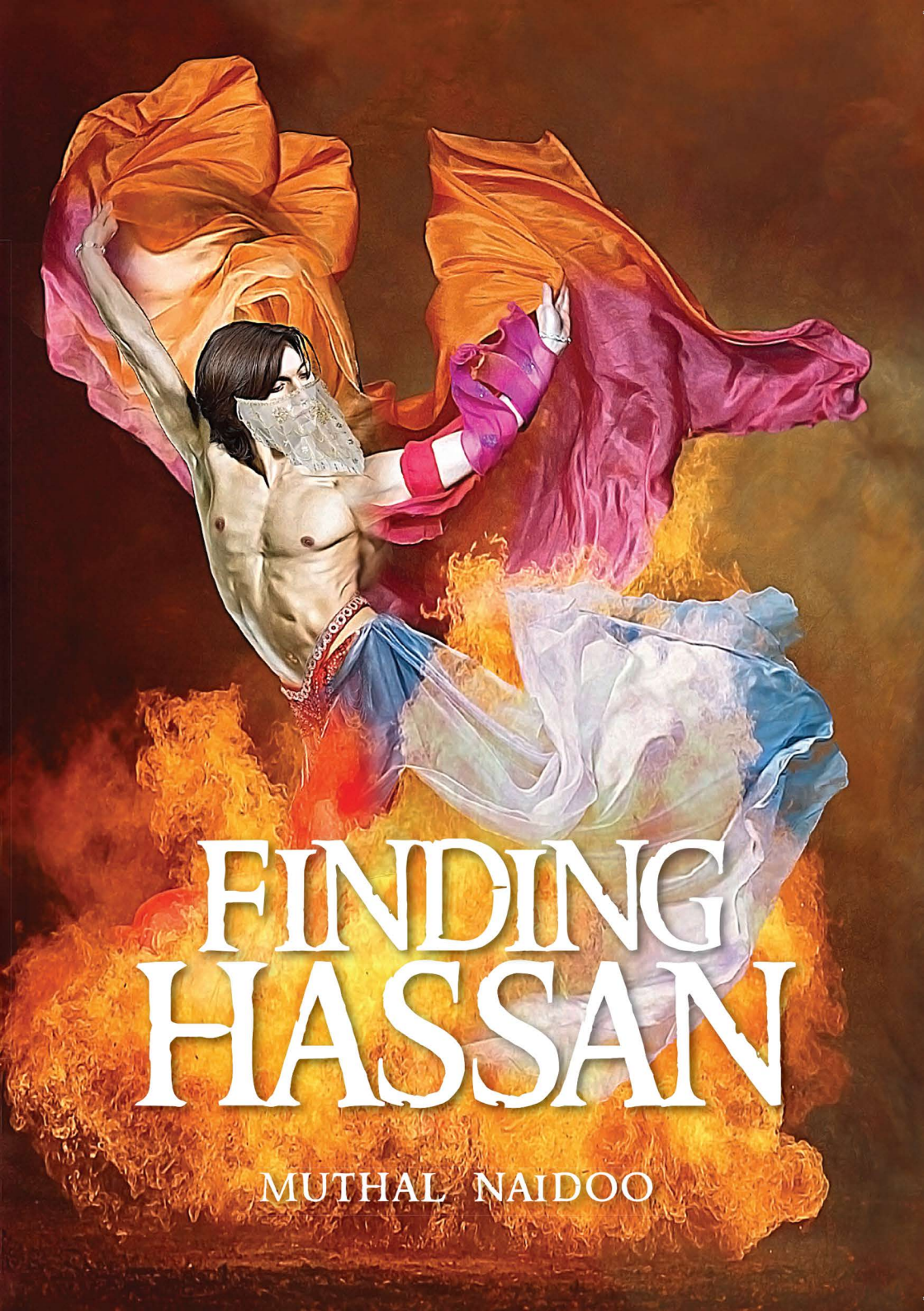


A dramatic painting of a man with long dark hair, wearing a silver lace mask and a multi-colored, flowing robe. He is emerging from a large, intense fire. His arms are raised, holding up large sections of orange and pink fabric that billow in the air. The background is a dark, smoky brown. The title 'FINDING HASSAN' is written in large, white, serif capital letters across the lower half of the image, partially overlapping the flames.

FINDING HASSAN

MUTHAL NAIDOO

FINDING HASSAN

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Other books by Muthal Naidoo:

A Little Book of Tamil Religious Rituals (2004)
Jail Birds and Others (2004, Short Stories)
Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar (2007, Biography)
WIP Theatre Plays (2008)
Gansie in Kammaland (2011)
The Keshwars from Dundee (2011, Biography)
Emerging Heroes (2012, Children's Stories)
Rhulani's Dilemma (2013, A Novella for Teenagers)
Metaphoric Being (2014, Essays)
Kaliyuga (2014, Prose-poems)
Mirroring Nature (2015, Essays)
The Paradox of Being (2015, Essays)
A Life in Fact and Fiction (2016, Autobiography)
Ramy Pillay: Yuga Purushar (2016, Biography)
Pocket Poems (2016)

FINDING HASSAN

MUTHAL NAIDOO

homo

phobia

fear

not of other

but of self

the propensity

forbidden by society

to love

unconditionally

Chapter 1

I have become aware of a movement; a floating in and out of my line of sight, back and forth, back and forth, not regular – little spurts, gusts – a breeze made visible. As I keep my eyes on it, it turns pink, then blue, then white, a spectral rainbow wafting up, billowing, subsiding. Slowly, the colours float into form: rising and falling against a window, a curtain, strewing sweet scents of a garden over me. ... Paradise?

My slow exploring gaze raises walls, built-in cupboards, a dresser, and finally settles like a butterfly on a large photograph against the nearest wall. From it, two little boys smile at me.

Two happy boys. I have seen them before. Very familiar ... sitting on a wall in a yard, holding a bat and a ball. The fingers of my memory trace the features of their faces. Two smiling faces. As the drapes float upward, I see – Khalil, my childhood friend, next to him a little boy ... a happy little boy still in the Garden of Eden.

Eden ... childhood fantasy ... followed by banishment.

Oh Hassan!

My father, risen up in me, against me, had sent me packing. As I began to implode, I had reached out in blind panic trying in vain to contain the collapse, resist the colossal force sucking me in, compacting me, propelling me into nightmare images that lurk in the subconscious.

I have been under the bridge a hundred years. A black hole, my light bent in, a nothing at the centre of my universe.

Khalil Vawda had reached in and dragged me out ... Khalil, childhood friend. We had lived next door to each other here in Trekkersdal, had played together, attended school together. I could never make much sense of school, not like Khalil. He could take what it offered and not let it regiment him because his favourite uncle, the one in the Natal Indian Congress, was always challenging him, making him see things differently.

My father detested Uncle Suliman; said he was a communist, didn't believe in God, was involved in workers' strikes and making trouble with the government. During the Treason Trial, he got the businessmen in Trekkersdal to commit to a monthly contribution to defray the expenses of the proceedings. One hundred and fifty-six activists were facing charges of treason. When Uncle Suliman came to the factory, Dad threatened to inform the police and kicked him out.

Khalil learned from Uncle Suliman all about what was going on in the country. He had pictures on his walls of Yusuf Dadoo, Monty Naicker, Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela and Uncle Suliman. He was learning all kinds of freedom songs. One end of term, as we were walking home from school, I could see he was fuming. Why? It was the beginning of the holidays. He didn't want to talk about it, but I got it out of him.

At their class party that morning when the teacher had asked if anyone would like to sing a song, he had volunteered and had sung a song that Uncle Suliman had taught him. Everybody, including the teacher, had laughed at him for singing a Zulu song – *Somlandela Luthuli* – We will follow Luthuli. Chief Luthuli, a great man, had won the Nobel Peace Prize a few years before. He was the President of the African National Congress which had been banned because it was fighting for the freedom of African people.

Well, they didn't teach us about that in our history lessons in school so the other kids didn't know about the Chief. They had laughed because an Indian boy was singing a Zulu song. Khalil had frowned, 'Next time I'll sing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica*.' That was a banned song then. The teacher probably wouldn't have known that.

As adults, Khalil and I went our separate ways; he to jihad at the macro level, I, as ever, at the personal level – a working man striving to maintain a normal, conventional life; but we didn't lose touch – even after my family moved to Neemville. When I lost myself after the divorce, I had subconsciously gravitated back to Trekkersdal.

Khalil had found me – a hobo wandering the streets.

Chapter 2

After a month's convalescence in the midst of his caring family in Trekkersdal, Khalil drives me back to Neemville, to an existence in some kind of reality with children, a mother, a sister. Nobody asks who I am, where I've been for three months. They know from my sister, Farida, and brother, Karim, of the hobo in Trekkersdal. They accept because they believe they understand my madness ...

Thank god, they do not!

Back home, I hoped I had escaped into another galaxy, but there are no such things as wormholes and I am still a black hole. Disconnected. My light bent inward. The living dead. I have lived all my life vicariously – through my father, then my wife – have I ever been alive? Only Akbar resisted my attempt to build my life through him.

Who am I?

Oh Hassan.

Being aware of my difference from age seven had shaken me out of my complacency but left my eyes wide shut because I was still a child. Now, in my mid-thirties, my eyes are wide open. The divorce, having exposed me, had zoomed my vision from twenty-twenty to X-ray, and super sight makes it impossible to project myself back into the synthetic reality that had kept me hurtling blindly through life. Everyone else around me is bustling about as usual. They have always had faith while I have never been able to fathom why I am here.

Who ... what ... am I?

Out of the pit into which the divorce had hurled me, I am back to routines that give an illusion of life. Repairing cars and electrical equipment, I am a maintenance man, maintaining the meaningless routine of existence.

Who am I?

Oh Hassan.

When I disappeared under the bridge, sister Hasina, a bookkeeper at Neemville Wholesaler's, came to the rescue of my children. She and mother moved into my place to take care of Rashida and Ridwan. Hasina, sold the council house that I had bought for the family years before and invested the money for my children's education. She also saved my auto-electrical-TV business – employing someone to run the shop in my absence. She is now the head of the household; she and mother, Ridwan and Rashida's parents.

I am an alien.

The changes in our lives are as momentous as the changes happening in the country. The ANC unbanned, Nelson Mandela released, CODESA, the Convention for a Democratic South Africa, set up, and I divorced, all in the same few years. While Khalil is part of the ANC delegation to CODESA that is drawing up a new constitution for the country, I am here trying to find my way back into ordinary life. Democratic elections will be held this year, next year, soon. For the first time in thirty-odd years, I will have the opportunity to vote; my mother for the first time in sixty five years.

This is an alien land.

Suddenly, we are part of Africa, the continent of Africa. Trading opportunities have opened up. People are flooding into the country from the north. The Nigerians are here; drugs are flowing into all poor communities.

Alien nation.

Akbar, my firstborn, having fallen into his own private hell, had left home when he was fourteen – sometime before the divorce. Ridwan and Rashida abandoned by their mother, having witnessed the collapse of their father, teeter on the edge of despair. Always close, Ridwan and Rashida have become even closer. They had shared that nightmare night when I had rampaged through the house looking for their mother. She had run off with ... with ... *Siva ... Oh Siva, Siva!*

That night had alienated the children from me. They could see

me for what I am ... vulnerable ... a vulnerable human being ... no longer hidden behind the mystique of fatherhood.

Ridwan has unconsciously gravitated to a father surrogate – his teacher – Solly Patel, a young, energetic man who is becoming a leader in the community. Solly belongs to the ANC. His whole family does. They are people of faith. The first democratic elections will be held next year; his mother, sisters and brothers are all involved in voter education. Elections for the South African Indian Council and the House of Delegates, both apartheid structures, had meant voting for separate development so the majority, who had boycotted them, have no experience of voting. Now they need voter education.

Solly starts with mock elections at Neemville High. He puts the names of the nineteen parties standing for election on cards and each matric student has to close his or her eyes and pick a card.

If Akbar had been at school, he would have been with them choosing his party. Oh Akbar! My beautiful boy ... my first born ... my hope for the future ... lost to me. If he hadn't dropped out, he would be in the school elections – a leader of a political party, making a speech at the school assembly. His name, the most prominent in the election campaign, the whole school would have voted for him and he would have become President. My brilliant boy would have been President ...

But I have lost him ...

I have lost Ridwan too ... he is Solly's boy now. He comes home today after having accompanied Solly for voter education at Madras Stat where mostly poor Tamils live. He explains how they had set up a mock polling station in the temple hall with two voting booths and various tables for checking IDs, marking fingers, receiving ballot papers and so on. Then they took volunteers from the audience through the procedures so everyone would get an idea of what to expect.

Suddenly he stops, turns troubled eyes on me, "It was fun until I saw ... Siva ..."

Siva ... Oh Siva, Siva!

“... Siva ... standing there with Ma right next to him, looking straight at me. I didn’t know what to do. I changed places with one of my friends and went to the polling booth on the other side of the hall.”

He is trembling. I reach out to the boy, but he turns away – goes off to his room. Rashida runs after him.

Ma watching him says to me, “Poor boy, you better take good care of him. Otherwise you will lose him too.”

Hasina is surprised. “Why you say that, Ma? Ridwan is a good boy ... not like Akbar; he doesn’t smoke or do drugs.”

Ma just shakes her head, “Akbar is a good boy too; he is suffering. This boy is suffering too.”

I know he is. He lost his mother. My children lost their mother. And with my collapse having nothing to hold on to – Ridwan and Rashida had clung to each other.

Now with Solly, Ridwan’s life has new meaning. He is doing well at school; he knows how to get information off the ’Net and spends most of his time at home in front of the computer. Unlike his dropout brother, Ridwan is an idealistic kid; he has faith and a purpose in life. Solly is a dedicated anti-drug campaigner, and my son has become as fiercely committed to the war on drugs. He will never do drugs.

Ridwan is in one of the teams of the junior soccer league that Solly has initiated to keep youngsters off the streets and away from drugs. When he’s not home, Ridwan is on the soccer field. As a striker, he is quite a hero. Rashida, always boasting about his prowess on the field, keeps us informed of his every goal. When the boys are not playing or training, they’re at Solly’s house working on strategies for matches or attending special sessions on the dangers of drug abuse and its corrosive effects on the community.

Ridwan has become somewhat fanatical about drug abuse – to dissociate himself from his brother, I suppose. He knows that pushers target children and proclaims, “Children are the future of

the community. If you destroy the future, you destroy the community. Drug dealing is anti-Islam!”

Solly has given him his faith; he is still connected. I don't have to worry about him.

My two sons: quite the opposite of each other; one connected, the other hanging loose. I understand Akbar's disconnection; I know what has made him so unhappy that he had to take to drugs. It is what we have in common; what I have hidden all my life; something he hides too. We cannot speak of it.

Oh Hassan!

Soon after Akbar left home, I learned that he had taken up bodybuilding and was developing a strong, muscular physique ... camouflage? ... like my bullying of good-looking boys when I was at school? Whenever I went to the gym to look for him among all those guys working out, they would look at me curiously and tell me he was not in. But one evening, he came out of the change rooms to confront me. I stared in astonishment at this handsome, well-built teenager in gym gear. He said he was no longer a child and was taking care of himself. “Go home, I am not your responsibility. Stop coming around here.”

After some time, when I heard that Akbar had become a bouncer at the Bombay, I went to the nightclub but Perry Morgan's thugs prevented my entry. They told me Akbar didn't want to see me. Morgan, Murugan actually, is Akbar's boss.

My son has been away more than two years. I suppose, I should be glad he no longer lives with us. A drug pusher and an anti-drug campaigner under one roof – fireworks, civil war – we don't need that.

But the war does happen. Not at home ... outside Neemville Primary which is next to Neemville High.

One day, as Ridwan comes out of the high school, he sees Rashida

near the primary school gate hitting out at Akbar and struggling to push away a couple of boys, her classmates, who are with him. Ridwan instantly grasps what is going on and in a mad rage, charges at Akbar and lashes out blindly. But a few mild taps from his brother send him reeling. As he lies on the pavement completely winded, Akbar walks off laughing. Yelling reproaches at Akbar, Rashida runs to help Ridwan.

The next day, when Rashida sees Akbar with her friends again, she runs off to find Ridwan. He doesn't try to tackle his brother this time – just goes straight to the township police station to report him. Left on her own to chase off Akbar, Rashida runs up to him screaming that the police are on their way.

At the police station, Ridwan at the reception desk, looks up at the police official in front of him. He is confused, the nametag reads Nazir Islam. *Nazir Islam?* But this is a white man!

Ridwan waits while the sergeant's eyes stray over him as he pulls out pen and paper to take a statement. The sergeant listens, writes, hands the statement to Ridwan who reads and signs. He has told the officer about Akbar and expects him to dash off and arrest him. But Islam simply stands back to survey him.

Ridwan knows it is too late to catch Akbar now but he insists, "I can show you where to find the kids who bought the drugs ... and you can find Akbar at Perry Morgan's place or The Bombay."

Islam smiles. His quizzical gaze bent on Ridwan, he thanks the boy for the information, tells him not to worry, and assures him that he will deal with the matter. But Ridwan is insistent. "Will the police come to the school tomorrow? Akbar comes to sell his drugs every day." Islam comes round the desk, squeezes Ridwan's shoulder; tells him not to worry – the matter is now in his hands.

After school the next day, Ridwan waits; no one comes. He waits again the day after and the day after that, for a whole week. The police do not come and Akbar continues to operate with impunity.

When I get home one afternoon, I find Ridwan sitting in the lounge

listening to his ten-year-old sister who is telling him that she had asked her teacher to let her give a talk in class about drugs. During her speech, she had pointed to the boys who buy from Akbar and told the whole class that they had signed their death warrants. She looks at Ridwan for his approval and praise but the boy is quite depressed.

When I ask what's wrong, he jumps up in anger. "My brother is killing little children and the police won't do a thing."

Ma, who has come in with tea and snacks, gives me a look and sighs.

Poor Ridwan! He thinks he is just fighting his brother; he has no idea what he is taking on. Drug lords in Neemville township are powerful; they control cops, prosecutors, judges.

Ridwan and Rashida are at the kitchen table with their homework. It's almost two weeks since Ridwan reported his brother to the police and he is telling us how disappointed he is.

Today he thought there was going to be some action, but he was mistaken.

Coming out of the school gate in the afternoon, he was looking around for Akbar when he heard someone calling out to him from a car parked on the pavement. He went up, saw Sergeant Nazir Islam and was surprised; he had given up on the cops. But there was Islam, not in an official car, but there he was nevertheless, wearing a big friendly smile, asking Ridwan to go with him; he needed more information.

When Islam drove off towards Myburgh, the neighbouring white suburb, Ridwan was puzzled, "Aren't we going to the police station?"

Blue eyes twinkling, Islam smiled. "I thought we'd go to my place. It's more comfortable. We can relax, have a cool drink and talk." But Ridwan didn't have time. He had to be at the football grounds. Islam shrugged, told him he could miss a day's practice.

Rashida interrupts. "But you have the big match on Saturday."

“That’s what I told him. When I said Mr Patel would be waiting, he just turned around and drove me straight to the football grounds.” Ridwan grins. “The police don’t fool with Solly Patel.”

Friday evening before the big match, I am with the newspaper at the kitchen table. Ridwan and Rashida at the other end are getting Ridwan’s soccer gear ready. Rashida asks her brother about the strategies the team had planned that afternoon at Solly Patel’s house.

Ridwan frowns, “That policeman, Sergeant Islam, walked in just as our session was ending. Brian, our goalkeeper, went rigid and stared wide-eyed at Islam. Mr Patel saw that and turned to Islam, “Ma has tea ready in the kitchen.” Islam smiled and went through to the kitchen.”

Walking home with Brian after the session, Ridwan was taken aback when his friend suddenly burst out, “Why did that cop come here? I hope he wasn’t following me?” Then Ridwan learned that Islam had tried to pick Brian up once or twice. “Brian says he’s a moffie.”

I go cold and shudder.

Rashida is puzzled. “What’s a moffie?”

Ridwan ignores her. “Brian is imagining things. It’s against the religion. He wouldn’t have converted if he’s a moffie. And Mr Patel wouldn’t be his friend.”

“But he tried to pick you up the other day. Keep away from him, Ridwan.” My son frowns at me.

Rashida insists, “What’s a moffie?”

Ridwan is silent so I explain. “A sinner.”

Oh Hassan!

Rashida is not satisfied. “But he’s a policeman, how can he be a sinner?”

“Some things are hard to explain. You will understand when you are older.”

“But...”

“That’s enough now. You’re upsetting your brother.” She keeps quiet but her lower lip is pushed out.

Oh god, I will have to keep an eye on this Islam.

I park on the pavement outside the high school. I am here to see Solly Patel to find out what I can about Sergeant Islam. As I am about to get out, I see a car pull up opposite. In it a white man.

Then I see Brian and Ridwan at the gate. Brian suddenly pulls Ridwan back inside; he is looking at the white man getting out of his car. What's going on? Just then, tall, handsome Akbar comes sauntering along. I cannot take my eyes off him.

Ridwan runs out and shouts to the white man, "There he is. He's the one selling drugs!" The man turns, gives Akbar a long look ... then approaches him. They speak for a few moments, move to the man's car, get in and drive off.

Ridwan is jubilant. As he and Brian walk past, I hear him protesting, "... but the cop arrested Akbar."

Brian is frowning and shaking his head. "Didn't look like an arrest to me." He hesitates ... "Is your brother a moffie?"

So that's Islam!

I find Solly Patel marking books in a classroom. He looks up and smiles. We greet, he finds me a chair and we sit down.

"What can I do for you Ismail-bhai? If you are worried about Ridwan ... there's no need. He's an excellent student, doing very well. If only they were all like that ... you must be very proud of him ... a wonderful boy."

I smile ... but I am not here about Ridwan exactly ... and I don't know how to broach the matter of Islam. "I ... er ... I ... believe ... you know ... Sergeant Islam ... the white cop ..."

Patel studies my face, stands up and goes to the window. He turns and asks, "Has he been bothering Ridwan?"

I am embarrassed, relieved at the same time. I don't have to explain ...

Patel tells me a sad story. “Nazir Islam – Nico Botha before he converted – is from a very conservative Afrikaner family and community. All his young life he was vilified and punished because ... well ... because of ... unnatural tendencies ... you understand what I mean?”

I nod. I cannot look him in the eye. I understand more than he can know ... better than he can ...

“Nico was put through the most awful rituals to try to cure him. But ... he is who he is ... and he became an alien in his community. After matric, he joined the police force and lived in police barracks to get away from his family and community. He is an intelligent man and did well. As an officer, Nico’s private life remained private, and in the service, he experienced acceptance as a man for the first time in his life and he progressed.

“Then one day, a parent brought a complaint against him ... and ... he would have been disgraced but someone, a superior, who valued his competence as a police official intervened. Commissioner Nazir Khan became his mentor and convinced him that if he converted, the religion would cure him of his aberration. Khan helped him, found him a moulana who inducted him into the religion. When he eventually converted, Khan proudly bestowed his own name, Nazir, on Nico.”

I am squirming in my seat ... *saved by conversion? But I am a Muslim.*

“I know, I know ... it didn’t cure him ... I am doing my best to help him. I have brought him into my family and I am hoping that all the love we give him will help him to find himself ... and he will change ... become normal.”

I stare at Solly. He is a Muslim; how can he tolerate such a man?

“I am sorry if he tried anything with Ridwan ...”

“Oh no, Ridwan is very strong ... he is not in danger” ... *no ... not Ridwan ...*

While we are having supper in the kitchen, Akbar comes barging in. This is the first time he has come home since he walked out two years ago. Ma is ready to throw her arms around him and kiss him, but he doesn't see her. He comes straight for me and grabs me by the throat. Hasina tries to intervene and Ma is shouting at Akbar. But Akbar is focused on me. "So you reported me to the police, eh? Well that won't work you know. Just keep your crooked nose out of my business."

Before I can say anything, Ridwan jumps up, "Dad didn't report you. I did. If you keep coming to the school, I will go on reporting you."

Rashida shouts, "And I have warned my class mates about you!"

Akbar whips round to attack but bursts out laughing as he takes in his younger brother in an obviously improvised karate stance with Rashida beside him. Though there is only a two-year difference between the boys, with all the bodybuilding, Akbar is much bigger and stronger.

He pushes his nose into Ridwan's face and snarls, "Listen punk, you can't do anything to me. So keep out of my way. Think you did a great thing reporting me to the police? Well, let me tell you, my brother, you did me a favour. I actually owe you one."

I cringe.

"Go on playing football with that crazy Solly Patel but keep your nose out of my affairs." He turns to me, "And *you*, stop checking up on me. You are my biological father but that's where it begins and ends. I disown you. You are nothing to me. Keep out of my way or you'll be sorry."

As he makes for the front door, Ma hurries out behind him. We hear her pleading as she tries to keep up with him, "Please come back. This is your home Hassan. You must come back." When I hear that name, I feel a chasm opening up beneath me. Hasina, aghast, goes to bring Ma in, and takes her to her room.

After this unpleasant intrusion into the house, Akbar no longer goes to the school to peddle his wares. Overjoyed, thinking he has

been effective, Ridwan boasts, "See Dad, I told you. Sergeant Islam put a stop to the drug peddling at our school." Ridwan, the believer, is happy and that makes Rashida happy too.

I am watching from behind the garden fence -- the smokeless flame, the beautiful djinni, dancing in the moonlight. The skirt flares out; arms and fingers curl and twist calling me, inviting me, enticing me into the dance. "Hassan, Hassan, I am coming." Then I see it is Akbar laughing at me. My father shakes his head, "You too!"

Chapter 3

Inspired by PAGAD – People Against Drugs And Gangsterism – an organisation that has been operating in Cape Town for a couple of years, Solly Patel forms a branch, The Sixth Pillar, in Neemville and adopts the strategy of the Cape group – protest marches against drug dealers.

The Junior Soccer League becomes the mobilising force of The Sixth Pillar. The youngsters hand out leaflets, put up posters for meetings, rallies and tournaments, and bring their parents to sporting events and drug awareness functions. Ridwan and one or two other lads often accompany Solly on his visits to people's homes to provide counselling and support for addicts and their families. Proud to be working so closely with his hero, Ridwan looks forward to each day with eagerness and excitement.

Solly organises marches against the drug dealers, mostly Tamils, who live in Madras Stat, the poor section of Neemville. I have to laugh. How will that solve the problem? Nobody asks why poor people always get involved in drug trafficking. Solly isn't asking. If he asked, he wouldn't be going on these futile marches; he would see the real problem. All he is doing now is getting Neemville embroiled in the kind of violence that is happening in Cape Town. Of course,

Ridwan, being a kid, thinks the marches are great; thinks they make a difference; thinks *he* is making a difference. Marching alongside his hero, he is in a state of euphoria. They are 'cleaning up' the community – Batman and Ridwan!

Fearless at fifteen, Ridwan has all the answers. He comes home from rallies at the stadium flushed with excitement, exclaiming, "This is jihad. These drug traffickers are dealers in death. Not part of the community, they must be driven out."

Hasina challenges him. "And where must they go?"

"They can go to hell. That is where they belong."

"And what about Hassan?" Ma asks. "He's your brother. Your blood!"

"He is a murderer of little kids."

Hasina comes to Ma's aid. "So let the police deal with him. Who made you a policeman?"

"The police do nothing. Don't tell me about the police."

Hasina loses her patience. "You are becoming a terrorist like those people in Cape Town." Then she turns on me. "Why are you so quiet? This is your son. Talk to him; he must stop all this nonsense."

I shrug. How do you reason with a fanatic? For him everything is black and white; I can't influence him.

Akbar is my concern; he's the one at risk.

One Saturday morning, as I drive down Lotus Avenue, I see a huge crowd, hundreds of Muslims – men, women and children with banners and pickets, marching. At the Peacock Avenue intersection, I park the car and slip in at the back of the crowd. When I spot Rashida ahead of me with some of her friends, I am annoyed. *She* doesn't listen to me either. I look for Solly Patel to find Ridwan; I don't see the boy. Though Solly is at the head of the procession, I flinch when I see that he is flanked by men in red and white checked kaffiyehs. According to Ridwan, these men from the Cape, members of the G-Force, Qibla's militant wing, are here to monitor the situation.

But their belligerence is dividing the group. Now there are those among the locals who want to take the law into their own hands. They wear kaffiyehs in solidarity with the G-Force men and regard Solly's determination to cooperate with the police as spineless.

The march stops at a known drug dealer's home. As usual Solly opens the gate, enters the yard, strides up to the front door, knocks and waits. Nobody answers. No answer is expected. And with G-Force men in the march, dealers, aware of what happens in Cape Town, expect trouble. But as long as Solly is in charge, there is no violence. Concerned only with making the drug dealers aware that they are known, Solly calls out a warning through a loudhailer to people hiding inside, ordering them to stop dealing or face the consequences. Then pickets aloft, the whole chanting, sloganeering protest moves on to the next dealer's home.

When they stop in front of Perry Morgan's house, I pray that Akbar is not there. Almost before Solly opens the gate to enter the front yard, a youngster wearing the checked kaffiyeh breaks ranks, dashes in front of him, bangs on the door and yells, "Come out destroyers of children. Come out, you trash. You deserve to die." I freeze where I am standing. Solly pulls the maverick away from the door and sends him back into the procession. I move out to get a better view of the front line. I find the youngster. Looking closely at him, I imagine a gun in his hand. I'm shaking as I double back to my car and drive home.

Slumping into a chair in the lounge, I pull out a cigarette and wait. Why? Why? First Akbar turns to drugs, leaves home to join gangsters and make his career as a criminal. Now Ridwan! He seems to have fallen under the influence of the Qibla faction in The Sixth Pillar. Why? Why would he side with the G-Force guys – forsake Solly, his hero? What's happened to his respect for Solly? I didn't like Ridwan's behaviour today; I will not let him become a vigilante. I am going to put a stop to it. No more marching. Perhaps, I should send him away to Trekkersdal to live with sister Farida or brother Karim. But Solly has given him a sense of purpose; he's not drifting

like his brother. He will be lost too if I send him away. The front door opens and I brace myself for confrontation.

But it isn't Ridwan ... Akbar!

He throws a cursory glance in my direction, goes to the room that was his and is now Ridwan's to leave a bag, then comes to the kitchen and makes a cup of coffee – as though he never left, hasn't been away nearly three years! What's more he acts as though I'm not here. I know he has disowned me – *my beautiful boy*.

"Have you come back?"

"None of your business."

"Hey, you can't just walk in and out of my house whenever you feel like it."

"Your house! Hasina-foi pays the bills and feeds you. *She* wants me back so here I am." He takes his coffee to his room.

Suddenly I am restless. I pace, then grab my coat and get out.

At Riaad's café a heated discussion is going on about Qibla. Shabir, my neighbour Sheik Abdul's son, a law student, states emphatically, "No man, these guys can't take the law into their own hands. Once you do that, you're asking for a society where thugs rule and we're all reduced to our instincts for survival. We need the rule of law to ensure civilized interaction between people."

Moosa is equally adamant. "Yeah, laws like the Group Areas Act. Man, if people didn't take the law into their own hands, we would still be living under apartheid."

"When we defied apartheid laws, we lost respect for the rule of law. So now we live with corruption and crime. Is this better? "

Riaad's brother, Yunus, jumps in. "No it's not. Look at Neemville; drug abuse is rife here. I'm scared when I see my little brothers and sisters going to school in the morning. Imagine that! What kind of community is this, if we have to be scared to send our kids to school? At least the Qibla guys are doing something."

A woman at the counter paying for milk and a pack of rotis, chips in. "Yes, the police are useless. You call them; they do nothing – just sit around waiting for bribes."

"That's right." Moosa agrees. "This is a lawless society. We are living under authorised vigilantism. The people will rise again."

"And afterwards we'll go on propagating rape, murder, violence, because we don't make the effort to regain our respect for authority."

"Hey Shabir, man, you can't respect authority that is corrupt."

"But we do. All the time! It's only when corruption becomes unbearably oppressive that we rebel against it."

"Shabir, you don't make sense. You want the rule of law but you think corruption is normal." Moosa shakes his head. "You don't bring any hope to the situation. If the Qibla guys clean up the community, I'll be happy with that."

I pay for my cigarettes and walk out. A lot of hot air. All I know – we are worse off now than we were.

As I open the front door, a delicious aroma wraps around me. Suddenly I'm hungry. I see Rashida and Ridwan at their books; Ridwan has moved his computer back into the lounge. I look around for Akbar as I make my way to the kitchen. Ma and Hasina are doing the dishes.

Before I can ask where he is, Hasina smiles exuberantly, "Isn't it wonderful? Akbar has come back. Poor boy ... hasn't had a decent meal since he left. Ma cooked his favourite, dhal ghosht; you should have seen how he enjoyed his food."

"So where is he?"

"He went out."

"To that nightclub?"

Ridwan, who has come into the kitchen for a glass of water, gives me a sardonic look and replies blithely, "Oh no Dad, *Sergeant Islam* came for him."

"What? Why?"

As he goes back to his computer, he sneers, "Who knows?"

What the hell is he implying? With my mug of tea, I follow him into the lounge and stand watching him. I can't ask what's really on my mind. Instead, I speak about the anti-drug marches. I want him to quit but don't know how to approach him so I attack Rashida,

hoping he'll get the message.

"Rashida, what were you doing in the march on Saturday? You have no business getting involved in such things. It's dangerous. Don't let me see you marching again, you hear me?"

Rashida fixes me with earnest eyes. "We have to stand together, Daddy, otherwise these people will destroy our community."

Ridwan is grinning as he works.

Kids today ... know it all.

While I am having breakfast this morning, Akbar comes into the kitchen. Bustling about getting him a cup of coffee, Ma takes his order for breakfast as though he is a guest in a hotel. He picks up the paper that is lying on the table and begins to browse through it. It's amazing how much he resembles ... oh God no ... the same eyes, same handsome features. *Oh Hassan!* As she sets a plate down in front of him, Akbar turns to Ma and smiles – exactly the same smile!

My cell phone chimes. Riaad, calling from his café, wants me to have a look at his video machine; the tapes are sticking and snagging. I walk over to the café, pick up the VCR and when I return, Akbar is back in his room. The kitchen is clear; I can start on the video recorder. After I open it up and clean the heads, I find that the motor has to be replaced. I call suppliers, get an idea of the cost of a new motor, and walk back to Riaad's café to explain the problem.

When I return, I see Akbar examining the VCR and checking the parts. He knows a lot about VCRs, TVs, even car engines. He used to help me with repairs from the time he was a little kid. Seeing me come in, he drops everything and goes back to his book in his room.

Late in the afternoon, he goes out and waits at the gate. I wonder where he's going. Standing behind the curtains of the lounge windows so he can't see me, I watch him leaning against the gatepost. *Hassan is standing with me, watching. He turns, smiles at me, then*

floats through the glass, over the lawn and disappears into Akbar who straightens up and bounds to the edge of the pavement as a car pulls up.

The driver turns and smiles as he gets in. Nazir Islam.

Chapter 4

After the news on TV, Hasina slips a video cassette into the machine; she and Ma watch an Indian movie. In the middle of a Bollywood cabaret number, Ridwan runs in breathless and excited. He has just come back from an exploit involving a drug pusher. Rashida leaves her homework on the kitchen table and goes into the lounge. I put my paper down and join them.

‘We gave him a helluva joyride.’

We? ... Solly? ... The Qibla group? ... The number of marchers has begun to dwindle as a result of the G-Force’s aggressive conduct and violent tendencies. I can’t believe that Solly is going along with the masked men.

Ridwan’s eyes are gleaming. “We drove into the parking lot of Marigold Manor flats. People came out and stood along the verandas waiting to see what we were going to do. A few of us went up with Mustapha to this guy Zane’s flat while the rest waited in the parking lot.”

“Mustapha? Who’s this Mustapha?”

“You don’t know him. He’s from the Cape. Anyway ...”

“The G-Force leader?”

He doesn’t answer, but Rashida pipes up: “Yes, Dad, he’s the G-Force leader; there was an article about him in the community newspaper. Didn’t you see it?”

Ridwan frowns at her, then goes on. “Anyway – Mustapha knocked. When Zane opened, Mustapha pushed his way in and we followed. Mustapha said, ‘We have warned you many times to stop

selling drugs to kids but you do not listen. Now you have killed a fourteen-year old boy who was trying to get clean. We're not giving you any more chances. It's time to show you we mean business. Strip!' Mustapha made him take off all his clothes." Rashida giggles. "We marched him in the raw along the balcony, down the stairs and into the parking lot where we paraded him around a couple of times for the mothers who cheered and applauded." Rashida gasps in amusement. "Then we pushed him into one of the cars, drove him down the highway and dumped him on the other side of Bokkieskraal. To make him run, one of the guys fired shots at his feet and sent him on his way."

Ma is shocked. So is Hasina. Even Rashida. "I didn't know you had guns. You got a gun?"

"Since when does Solly carry a gun?"

Ridwan ignores me. "We don't injure or shoot people, only their pride. They must understand that they can't get away with killing children."

"But you got guns!" Ma insists.

"You feel sorry for the *drug pusher*? Do you know what this Zane guy did? Do you know? He sold to this boy who had been clean for months. God knows what kind of poison he gave him. After the boy went home and took the stuff, he began to bleed through the nose. By the time his mother found him, it was too late. After the funeral, she came running to Mustapha and begged him to do something. So we did."

Hasina shakes her head, "You should have gone to the police. You don't know for sure what caused the boy's death."

"Tell that to a mother with a dead son in her arms. *She* didn't go to the police. She knows that's of no use. She came to us. She came to us! Here you are feeling sorry for a murderer – a murderer killing little kids. You feel sorry for him because we humiliated him. Stop and think Hasinafoi, how many children hasn't he killed already? You don't know about his victims so you don't feel sorry for them. What if it was Rashida or me?"

I cut in. "It's not that we don't care about the victims. We just

don't want you to become a murderer too. You told me Solly doesn't carry a gun? When did that change?"

Ridwan turns on me in fury. "Don't ask me about Solly Patel. I don't know where he was," he sneers, "holding hands with the police I suppose. He wasn't with us."

As Ridwan stomps off to the bathroom, I run after him. "What's going on? ... Have the Qibla guys ousted Solly? ... Why are you with them, not with Solly?" He slams the door in my face.

When I go back to the lounge, Hasina turns on me, "You must put a stop to this. Ridwan is a sweet boy but look how he's changing."

Ma adds: "And he hates his brother."

When I don't respond, Hasina snaps, "One of these days those Qibla people will come in here and chase Akbar naked out of here?"

"Akbar is a bouncer at that nightclub; he's not selling drugs."

"Oh, since when?"

I can't do anything about Akbar. As for Ridwan ... I don't like what he's getting into ... with Solly he was safe ... but he doesn't seem to respect Solly anymore ... I don't want Ridwan joining Qibla and taking the law into his own hands.

My boys make me very nervous.

The next afternoon, I'm in the kitchen working on a TV. Rashida, home from school, comes in.

"Hi Dad." She makes herself a sandwich and switches on the kettle for tea. When she puts a mug in front of me, I ask, "Why is Ridwan against Solly these days; what's happened?"

"He disapproves of his friendship with Nazir Islam. I don't know why."

I look down into my tea. *Nazir and ... Solly? Is that what Ridwan thinks? Nazir likes them younger – like Ridwan ... or Akbar.*

A G-Force guy leads the procession this Saturday morning. I have

joined the march to keep an eye on Ridwan. Where's Solly? The G-Force guy isn't masked but men close to him, in bodyguard formation, are all wearing kaffiyehs. Looking for Ridwan, I examine them all. I can't find him but I locate Solly a little *behind* the G-Force leader – a new development! I don't like it. Still searching for Ridwan, I see Rashida walking along with a few women. Damn! Not one of my children listens to me.

The march goes to Mansoor Mansions on 18th Street, enters the parking lot, and moves straight to a flat on the ground floor. Heads pop through windows above and people begin gathering along balconies. Before Solly can get to it, the Qibla guy is at the door, banging loudly, barking at the tenants to come out. When there is no answer, he signals; two masked men jump forward to kick the door down. Solly shouts to stop them, dashes in front and shoves them out of the way. A few men rush forward to help Solly and a fight breaks out.

Residents, leaning out of windows, yell and gesticulate trying to stop the melee below, but their hollering only aggravates the situation. Some spectators are horrified at what is going on; others laugh as they watch these people, supposedly making war on drugs, making war on one another.

Suddenly! A gunshot!

Dead quiet for a second; then an explosion into pandemonium; a stampede toward the main entrance gate! Pushing against the flow, I move forward looking for Ridwan. I must get him out before more bullets go flying. I make it through to where Solly and a group of men planted in front of the drug dealer's flat are keeping the masked men at bay. One of Solly's brothers is holding a smoking revolver pointed high in the air.

The G-Force leader, realising that the whole effort has gone wrong, simply shouts insults. "Kafir! Munafiq! You're a fucking hypocrite, Solly. You think you can change these people with a stupid warning. You have to deal harshly with the enemy; they have to be punished for their crimes." He and his men march out of the complex chanting, "Sell-out! 'Impimpi!" "Collaborator!" "Enemy of

the Islamic Revolution!”

Not finding Ridwan in the group around Solly, I run out after the masked men. Several youngsters are wearing kaffiyehs; he could be one of them. Unable to find him, I eventually give up and go home.

The lights turn red. I drive into the middle of the march, knocking women and children down, left and right. His picket held high, Solly stands directly in the path of my oncoming car. Ridwan riddles him with bullets; G-Force guys surround my car, and capsize it. As I crawl out from under the car, I see blood flowing from the body of a woman. I think I am going to drown in it but Hassan grabs my head and makes me look. It's Akbar. Ridwan pulls off all my clothes and forces me to march naked.

Chapter 5

On Monday after having bought parts for the TV I am repairing, I open the front door and hear someone sobbing. I find Rashida and Ma on the sofa with their arms around Ridwan. “What’s wrong? What’s going on?” I leave my purchases in the passage and go to Ridwan. “Something happen at school?”

Ma, doing her best to comfort her grandson, shakes her head sadly and leaves it to Rashida to explain. “Somebody shot Mr Patel this afternoon.”

“Solly Patel!” My heart is thumping. My God, the dream! “Who shot him?”

“They don’t know. It was a drive-by shooting.”

“Is he dead?”

“No, it was a flesh wound; the bullet glanced off his arm.”

I am shaking my head. “The Qibla guys.”

Fiercely dashing tears from his eyes, Ridwan jumps up. “No, no! You don’t know what you’re talking about. It was that Nazir Islam.”

I am astonished. "That's crazy! Islam -- Solly is his brother." After his family threw Nazir out for converting, Solly helped him, found him a place to live, counselled him, supported him through his crisis. Ridwan is confused. If what he suspects is true that makes it even more ridiculous to accuse him. But that's the reason Ridwan has thrown in his lot with the Qibla guys.

"Look, Ridwan, you saw how the Qibla guys behaved at Mansoor Mansions on Saturday. It has to be them ..."

"Shut up! Shut up! You don't know what you're talking about. It's that Islam, I tell you." Ridwan is screaming hysterically. "Solly should kick him out. The Qur'an condemns such people!"

Oh Hassan!

Ridwan has to get out of this. With the attempt on Solly's life, I can't let it go on any longer. I motion to Rashida, who moves, and I sit down next to my boy. Ma shakes her head and frowns; she doesn't want me to try to reason with him while he's in this confused state.

"Listen, Ridwan, you'll be in matric next year, I want you stop all this and concentrate on your studies." Ma shrugs, but I continue. "With all the shooting, it's getting too dangerous. I don't want to lose you; please, I'm begging you – give it up." I feel him stiffening. "Life is tough without an education. Please think of your future. You don't want to end up like Akbar."

That is a red flag. Ridwan jumps up, and, giving me a dark look, dashes out of the lounge. Rashida runs after him.

Hey, you think you know your kids, but here is Ridwan standing up for a bunch of thugs against a teacher whom he clearly loves.

In the morning, when I hear Hasina, Rashida and Ridwan trooping down the passage on their way to work and school, I wait to hear the door open and shut before I get up to shower and dress. Plenty to do today: aerials to be installed in Neemville and Myburgh.

In the kitchen, I find my breakfast on the table with the community tabloid next to it; Ma is in the backyard hanging up washing.

I pick up the *Neemville News*; on the front page, pictures of Solly Patel, the Qibla faction, the skirmish at Mansoor Mansions; inside an account of the attempt on Solly's life

I read and am astounded. The report implies that Solly is to blame. *How can they print such rubbish!* The journalist, no name given, hints that Solly is in cahoots with drug dealers, blames him for the fracas at Mansoor Mansions, condemns the activities of the Sixth Pillar as a cover up and vindicates the Qibla men who have apparently exposed Solly as a police spy. What kind of journalism is this completely ridiculous, libellous and contradictory account? This confused attempt to demonise Solly – the *victim* of a shooting?

Later in the day, I stop at Riaad's café where I know there will be a lively discussion on the latest happenings. I am not disappointed. The usual gang is here. They suspect the Qibla men, who have suddenly disappeared, of the attempt on Solly's life. I know they are right. Shabir says that the violence at Mansoor Mansions was a clear indication of dissension between Solly and Qibla. Apparently ties with PAGAD have now been broken.

The attempt on Solly's life brings to an end the Saturday marches. I am glad. Ridwan can now concentrate on his studies. He is working hard at school but is morose and no longer speaks of his teacher. Before the Qibla guys appeared on the scene, you couldn't shut him up about Solly Patel.

In the following months, The Sixth Pillar – reduced to a small band of dedicated anti-drug campaigners, made up mostly of the members of Solly's family – becomes a kind of research facility that compiles information on drug operations for crime prevention organisations.

But they too don't make the connection between poverty and the drug trade! Everyone simply tackles the symptoms.

Chapter 6

For the next few years, there is relative calm at home. Rashida, by all accounts a brilliant student, is in Grade 12. Ridwan, now at university, has joined a Muslim youth group and has new friends. He still avoids Akbar who has joined Nazir Islam in some kind of business run from Nazir's flat in Myburgh. My auto-electrical-TV repair business is stable, supports me but I'm still unable to make much of a contribution to the home. Today I have to get to a hardware outlet for spares for a couple of jobs.

After breakfast, I stub out my cigarette and make my way to the lounge to watch the early morning news. Seeing the door open as I pass Akbar's room, I look in and jump back in shock. *My God! What is he doing here?* I gape at the form lying prone on Akbar's bed, cannot prise my eyes off it flung out in careless abandon. Beads of sweat roll off my forehead as I take in the smooth creamy skin, the firm buttocks, the strong, solid thighs, the arch of the back, the long black lashes. Short, thick, dark waves undulating over his head, make him look so much younger. So enticing! Never more beautiful, more desirable. *Oh my god. He has come back -- to me!* Before I know it, I am at the bedside about to climb on, when he turns in his sleep. I jump back in horror! Akbar! ... I thought ... I thought ... it ... it was ...

I run back to my room. Oh, the shame of it, the shame of it! Oh *Hassan!* ... My God, I have to get out of here! I dash out of the house, jump into my car, am off! A madman consumed with shame, I crash through red lights, ignore stop signs and barge through the traffic. A pedestrian, whom I narrowly miss, yells and gives me the finger; I don't care. I want to kill somebody ... *I almost committed the worst sin of my life.*

I'm on Temple Street. How the hell did I get here? *This is where he lives.* But he was there ... on the bed! *Oh Hassan!* I *Oh my god!*

There he is! With Ayesha! In a brand new Ssanyong Mousso! ... But he ... No, no, no! ... *that was Akbar*

In a daze, I look around – Hoof Straat? In town! ... I am in town! How the hell did I get here? I look at my watch. It's one o' clock! One o' clock! ... What happened to the morning?

Oh god, it's happening again.

I move off to the Indian shops in the old location and in a quiet spot try to calm down and gather my thoughts. What am I doing here? Did I come to look for parts for the aerial I have to install? In an electronics outlet, I muddle around unable to focus on anything

I overtake a fuel tanker and move into the fast lane. I look at my watch; four o' clock. Four o' clock! Who stole the last three hours? I see the Brookfield overpass up ahead. What the hell! I'm on the highway to Jo'burg? How did I get here? *Oh God, I'm disappearing under the bridge again!* Ahead, I see Hardware Haven. I take the off-ramp and slip into the parking lot. Staggering out of the car like a drunk, I take a few steps, return to the car, slump into my seat and wait for the thumping in my chest to stop.

Someone knocks at my window, "Are you okay?"

I manage a feeble smile and nod. Eventually, the dizziness passes. I make my way into the mart, wander around aimlessly, pick up odds and ends, pay for them and leave. Heading home in rush hour traffic, the highway, as usual, is bumper to bumper, I won't make it back till after six.

When I enter the driveway, neighbours who seem to have been

watching for my arrival, rush out and surround the car yelling at me. "God forgive you Ismail." "What have you done?" "How could you?" Everyone shouting at the same time makes it impossible to hear what's being said.

I am being accused of something. The vision of a sleeping form suffuses my brain; I want to die. *They know. Everyone knows. How could they? Akbar was asleep; he didn't see me. He was asleep. How do they know!*

Someone shouts, "The police came here twice already looking for you."

I gasp. *He's laid a charge against me! Was he pretending to be asleep? Hell, I thought it was ... I didn't do anything. I'll fight the lot of them; it's not their bloody business anyway!* I yell at the neighbours, "Leave me alone. Get away from me. What the hell are you all talking about? Get away from me!"

I escape into the house and shut the door. Hasina and Ma rush to me, yelling something about a shooting but I am focused on Akbar, with Ridwan and Rashida, in the arched entrance to the dining room. He's crying. My heart sinks; he's told them. *My God, the shame, the disgrace! I can never hold my head up again.* Pulling himself free of Rashida and Ridwan, he rushes at me. I look down in shame, waiting for the accusation.

"Today is her birthday! Is this her birthday present?" With a murderous look in his eyes, he lunges at me but Rashida and Ridwan hold him back. He struggles to get out of their grip but grief overcomes him; he can't free himself.

I don't look at him; won't hear what he is saying. *So they know. He's told them. What the hell! I didn't do anything! Everybody knows he's a drug addict, a criminal. How can anyone believe him?*

I turn to confront him, cannot look at him and focus on Ridwan and Rashida. "He was sleeping ... he was fast asleep ..."

Rashida and Ridwan frown, puzzled. Akbar tries to attack me again. Rashida and Ridwan take him outside but I can hear him yelling. "It's her birthday! It's her birthday! You do this on her birthday?"

Birthday! What has that to do with anything? Whose birthday? When I got up this morning, I didn't even know what day it was. It's his fault. I thought he was ... Dammit he's going to destroy me ...

Ridwan shouts out over Akbar's pain, "We're going to the hospital to see Ma."

What? ... Birthdays? ... hospital? ... what the hell's going on? I can't make sense of anything. "Is your mother ill?"

Ma is shaking her head at me. "Poor Ayesha! What a terrible thing! Nearly ten years you didn't let her see the children. You have been such a cruel father."

This is getting beyond confusing. "What? ... What are you talking about, Ma?" She frowns.

Hasina takes me by the shoulders and looks into my eyes. I squirm to get out of her grip. "You don't know what happened?" She is staring in surprise. "You don't know? ... Listen, Chotabhai, somebody shot Ayesha." She shakes me. "Do you understand? Somebody shot Ayesha."

I am staring at her trying to make sense of her words when Shabir from next door, dashes in to tell us that a couple of police cars have pulled up outside. I look out and see men in plain clothes getting out of their cars.

Shabir says, "They're looking for you. I came to warn you," and he's gone.

This is not real. This is not happening. This is some kind of insane dream.

Hasina shakes me. "Listen Chotabhai, somebody went into Ayesha's shop, shot her and shot Siva. Siva is dead. Do you understand what I am saying?" I stare at her. "Do you understand what I am saying? Ayesha and Siva have been shot? The police are here because they think you did it."

Then it hits me. I am being accused of murder! Murder, not! They don't know! Thank God! I pull myself together. "Murder? Murder? You think I killed someone? Who did I kill?"

"I just told you, Ayesha and Siva have been shot. Siva is dead."

Siva ... Siva ... dead! My legs give way.

When I regain consciousness, Ma is sitting beside me on the sofa. I remember and cannot control the sobs that rend my body. Ma takes me in her arms. "My poor boy! Ayesha is alive. She will recover. Don't cry. She will be all right."

Dead ... dead ... dead ... Siva dead.

"Hassan phoned from the hospital. He said she was not seriously wounded. Ayesha will be all right."

Hasina comes in with the detectives who were inspecting my car in the driveway. They want to search my room. Hasina, follows them in silent apprehension. She too suspects me.

When they come out, they question me. I explain that I have not been here – the whole day – just got back from Jo'burg. I show them the sales slips from Hardware Haven; they're not interested. They know about the divorce. They know that Ayesha went off with Siva. They decide to take me in to have my hands analysed for gunshot residue. I do not ... cannot ... resist ... *I am in mourning.*

Just as I am getting into the police car, Akbar drives up and drops Ridwan and Rashida at the gate. Ridwan comes up to me but Rashida won't look at me; she dashes right past to her grandmother and falls sobbing into her arms.

My boy speaks to me in Gujarati, "Ma says you did it."

A detective pushes me into the car.

At the forensic lab, though they find nothing, they arrest me and lock me up. I am the only suspect; I cannot account for my whereabouts at the time of the shooting and I have motive; the victims – my ex-wife and her husband.

After three days in jail, I am arraigned, charged with murder, attempted murder, and possession of a firearm. I don't care.

He is dead. I have no will to live.

For the next few days, Neemville is buzzing; I cannot escape the sensationalism; the prurient curiosity.

After a decade of mindless roller-skating on the periphery, I am suddenly the eye of the hurricane, the centre of sound and fury in the community. Having already found me guilty, everybody wants to catch a glimpse of the 'murderer'. Filled with morbid curiosity, they want all the gory details. Some, the told-you-so's, reveal what has long been suspected ... poor Ayesha ... he and his son ... Akbar ... *you know, wink, wink* ... Some seek to beat the devil out of me ...

No one can see a broken heart.

Oh, Hassan.

But as justice takes its own laborious course, the sensationalism dies down. Unlike a television drama where murder is immediately followed by a suspense-filled investigation and a dramatic trial with startling revelations, all that people see is a man going about his business as usual. The trial far off, no retribution, they live with a boring murderer in their midst.

To compensate, stories and rumours begin circulating. Sympathies flow naturally to Ayesha. It doesn't surprise them that she left me; that she turned to the handsome Siva. They believe I wanted revenge.

The gossip distresses my children. They are the focus of malicious attention. Ridwan takes up residence in a varsity dormitory and stays away as much as possible. Rashida has to put up with all kinds of spiteful remarks about her parents. Some pick on her because her mother has become a Hindu; others don't associate with her because her father is a murderer ... and a ...

She is angry, distressed; to escape the scorn, the insults, she immerses herself in her schoolwork. She is a strong girl.

Akbar has connected with his mother again and visits her regularly. His disdain for me has grown to such proportions that he avoids me altogether.

Ma and Hasina are treated with formal respect; friends and neighbours don't pop in to chat as they used to.

And I begin to lose business. Longstanding customers now look elsewhere for car, electrical, TV maintenance and repairs.

Even my lawyer, Boetie Docrat, believes I did it. Nevertheless, he will defend me – to a lawyer guilt and innocence are immaterial until proven.

A year drags on.

The trial begins in December, on the eve of the new millenium. Ma put Boetie in touch with Khalil my old school friend, now an advocate, who lives and practises in Durban. Unable to come himself, he has acquired the services of Advocate Barry Pillay, his old comrade in the underground, to represent me. Boetie tells me that with Barry in my corner, the case is already won.

I have no doubt. I did not kill anyone.

I go on trial and am acquitted. In gratitude, my mother buys a ticket to send me for hajj; she thinks I am guilty and the pilgrimage will absolve me. I go. It is the beginning of a new year, a new century, a new millennium. I am in mourning ... not for murder ... I have been in mourning ... ten years ... the divorce ten years ago had devastated me ... not for the loss of ... a wife ...

Chapter 7

I am a muhrim – pilgrim – wearing ihram – a white sheet that covers my body from waist to ankles, another over my shoulders and chest. Hajj commemorates the story of Ibrahim, his wife, Hajar, and their baby, Ismail, after whom I am named. When Ibrahim left his wife and baby at Mount Marwa in the desert, Hajar wandered about looking for water. She ran seven times between Mount Marwa and

Mount Safa searching for sustenance for her baby and was saved when the Angel Jibreel came down and revealed the Zam Zam spring of water. Though I am named Ismail, I see no parallels with my life. And Zam Zam in my heart flows with my tears.

In my life, I have run seven times seven times seven, searching, but there has been no miracle for me, no spring in the desert to quench my thirst for acceptance. My existence, a continuous jihad, I have run ... run ... run – run from rami – the stoning. Everywhere I go, people pelt me with their looks, their words; I am their Oola, Wustah and Aqaba – all three devils in one!

The firing of the cannon wakes us all just before dawn. It is still dark. I shoot up with fright. A little dazed, I look around, see all the people wearing *ihram*, realise I am at Muzdalifah and it is time for the dawn prayer. Last night, after evening prayers, we picked up stones for *rami* – the pelting of the devils – and then spent the night here in the open. Now all of us dressed in white – I am one of millions – advance like a tsunami on Mina, five kilometres to the south, where we will stone Aqaba, the most powerful of the devils.

Around noon, in the midst of the tremendous drift of pilgrims, I make my way up the ramp leading to the *jamarat* – walled enclosures with pillars representing the devils. There is Aqaba, towering above me. As I stare, the pillar begins to transform and out of it grows a laughing face ... *Oh Hassan*. I am filled with sorrow. I look around but all the faces I see are smiling; pilgrims joyfully flinging their stones, rejoicing in their power over evil.

Only I ... am in mourning.

Someone calls out. "What are you waiting for – pelt the devil." But I can only stare as he joyfully hurls his stones. I cannot fling stones at the pillar; I drop them into the enclosure and take a bus to Makkah, for the required *tawaaf* – circumambulation of the Ka'bah – and *sae* – running seven times between Mt Marwa and Mt Safa.

Then it's back to Mina, tent city.

When I reach my tent, which is practically empty, I drop down on my mat to sleep.

Suddenly I am awakened by a foot nudging me insistently in the back. Annoyed, I sit up and look around.

“Hey, you’re in my place. Move from here.”

A man in white sheets is standing over me ... My god! Another ghost from the past! Why do I keep dredging them up? I know this gangster standing over me. Why is he wearing *ihram*? I know him. I know his gang. When I was out on bail, they beat me up for... Siva’s ... murder. I close my eyes a moment, open them –still here, hasn’t dematerialised ... he is real. He’s here – in Mina.

“Hey, didn’t you hear me? You are in my place.”

He’s here to make trouble. I pretend I don’t know him.

“Look, this is not your place. Go find another mat and let me sleep.” I lie down again with my back to him. When I hear him walk away, I am relieved. I hope I’ve seen the last of him.

A few moments later, I feel a sharp, stinging thump on my back. When I turn over, I see a pebble like the ones I collected at Musdalifah.

I can’t sleep now. I slip on my sandals, and go searching along the narrow alleys between the rows of tents, looking for the one who pelted me. He must be in one of these tents; this section is assigned to South Africans. As I move between the tents, I think I hear voices speaking in Afrikaans. I stop, listen ... make my way towards the voices, find the tent, look in and see him there ... not alone ... the whole gang is here. All from Neemville. Small world! They’re bad news. I back away quickly before they see me and return to my tent.

I sleep fitfully and am glad to get up when dawn breaks and stops the barrage of bad memories.

Today, the second day of stoning, we go to pelt all three pillars. Soon I am caught in the maelstrom of pilgrims surging along the ramp leading to the *jamarat*; my *ihram* clings to my skin like a poultice. Suffocating, choked by the phlegm that fills my nose and throat, I no longer feel my arms and legs. In the magma flow of bodies heaving towards Oola, the smallest pillar, I am a drowning head among drowning heads bobbing on a solid river of compacted flesh. My

frame constricts, bones crack and buckle, and a disembodied voice, like a stuck siren, emits a continuous flow of involuntary screaming as every cell in my brain bursts from an overload of pain. The molten stream, sweeping me along, drives me inexorably towards the point of detonation and in the moment of eruption, I burst into the air and tumble in a pyroclastic flow down a mountain slope of compressed human tissue.

I know I am dead.

Propped up against a tree, I make out a bottle of water floating in front of my eyes. I grab it. As I gulp down the coolness, I feel all the riches of the world, all the gold, diamonds, every precious thing on earth, flowing down my throat.

Someone is kneeling next to me. "Are you feeling better?"

I look up into kind eyes full of concern; point to the thousands and thousands of muhrim streaming up the ramp.

The kind eyes smile, "You collapsed on the ramp."

"You brought me here?" Another smile. "I must go back. I must finish rami. It must be done before sunset."

"You can come back this evening. Pelting after sunset is allowed if you are not well." He helps me up, takes me back to the tent where I throw myself on my mat and fall fast asleep.

I awake late in the afternoon to find people crowding into the tent in tears, distraught, gasping with shock, horror and pain. There's been a terrible disaster! Five hundred pilgrims have died in a stampede *just where I had collapsed*. The dreadful congestion, heat and jostling had caused chaos. People on the ramp, completely disoriented, had pushed, shoved, rushed blindly. Many were crushed underfoot. It happened soon after I left! *I too could have died there*.

People in the tent begin to pray for all the lost souls and to thank

God for his infinite mercy – in sparing us.
Are all prayers simply egocentric concerns?

The sun has set. It is much cooler. There are still many pilgrims, mainly women, who, with the sick and the handicapped, are allowed to pelt after sunset. I move along with these pilgrims, I cannot pelt; I simply throw my stones into the enclosures. When I come to Aqaba .. I am afraid to look ...

My mobile chimes. Boetie Docrat, my lawyer, in a jovial mood says, "I knew you were going to do it – trying to salvage your dignity, eh? So you can live with yourself?" Pellets of laughter come flying at me. He almost chokes with mirth, "It makes no difference to me. But just between us, tell the truth, you did it, didn't you? To prove ... you are a man?"

I reach into my bag and throw my pebbles around the foot of the Aqaba pillar; that's what I am supposed to do anyway because the pillars don't represent the devil; they only mark the spots where he appeared.

The third day of rami, my last day, I make my way to the jamarat before noon. I want to be at the head of the procession as I wish to be out of Mina before sunset. I only hope people stay calm; we don't need a repetition of yesterday's terrible calamity. I plan to make the farewell tawaaf in Makkah tomorrow. Then I'm off to Medina for eight days of prayer and visits to the Prophet's grave, the tombs of his wives and daughters, the tombs of the caliphs. That's what Ma paid for.

But now it's time to pelt the devil. Moving along in the flow of pilgrims, I make my way in the blazing sun. Why has this ritual to

be performed during the hottest part of the day, between noon and sunset? Penance, I suppose ... no, this is probably when Ibrahim pelted the devil. Today we move up the ramp in a fairly orderly manner; all of us have yesterday's calamity in mind.

Again I simply throw my stones into the enclosures around the Oola and Wustah pillars then move apprehensively to confront al-Aqaba.

Keeping my eyes trained on the foot of the pillar, I am about to throw out my stones when I see that the pillar is turning blue from the bottom up. Inexorably, my eyes rise with the colour. When they reach the top, there is no pillar, only ... only ... *Siva*. As I stare at the handsome face, tears begin to roll down my cheeks. *Oh Siva, Siva, Siva ...*

Siva, the beautiful one, stands before me! I fling my pebbles aimlessly; one hits the pillar and the colour drains out of it. And I see – just a stack of bricks. Siva is dead; has been for two years. Some murderous thug destroyed him – tears stream from the spring in my heart.

I find a taxi, make my way to my hotel in Makkah but I cannot staunch the tears. I can never forget.

After hajj, I come back to the same old Neemville. Though I am now a hajji, people still see a murderer.

How can they know? – *I could never have killed him.*

Chapter 8

After living in a university dorm for a whole year, Ridwan is back home. He has changed. With his beard and topi, my younger son looks more like a hajji than I do. At varsity, he joined DYOW --, Da'wah Youth Organisation – and has dedicated himself to the Global Islamic Movement.

I often find him sitting in the yard with his friends from DYO, all are bearded, but only Ridwan wears kurtah-pajamas. Sometimes I sit down amongst them as they discuss and debate issues. These are very smart guys. They know everything that's going on in the Middle East; are always debating the merits and demerits of men like Saddam, Gaddafi, Mubarak and the Saudis and roundly condemning US interference in oil rich countries.

The DYO belongs to Din-al-Fitrah – Reversion to Islam – and their mission is Da'wah, the call to Islam. They work at grassroots level, among the poor and downtrodden; establish schools in the townships using large shipping containers converted into classrooms. They also provide stationery and meals for the children. They are expanding the ummah, the Islamic community.

Ridwan has always been a person of faith – not like his brother – and he takes my faith for granted. After my hajj, he feeds me with books and articles from Din-al-Fitrah – about Iraq, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, the Arab-Israeli conflict.

I am growing close to Ridwan, but I am not happy about my relationship with Akbar. Still filled with shame about that morning ... on the verge of sin ... I am uncomfortable in his presence. But he knows nothing of it – all he sees is a 'murderer'. Not that he cares about ... Siva; it's the attempt on his mother's life that agonises him. He had left home before she ran off with ... Siva, so he never experienced feelings of abandonment like Ridwan and Rashida. His love for her is intact.

He is still a bouncer at the Bombay night club, and is employed in Nazir Islam's SMME, which is run from Nazir's flat. He seems settled, happy ... ever since he went to work for Islam.

Oh Hassan.

I really don't know what kind of business Nazir is running; nobody comes in or goes out. I went up there once, saw a sign on the door, 'Catering and Office Supplies,' with phone and fax numbers for placing orders. *Catering and Office Supplies?* An odd combination – enough to tell you it's bogus. That makes me nervous. No

matter what, he is still my son; I want to protect him. *Oh Hassan.* That is why I followed him tonight.

Parked in the dark outside Nazir's flat, I wait. After an hour, just as I fold my paper, throw it on the passenger seat, and prepare to drive off, Islam comes through the gate, followed by another policeman. He's still up there. Then I get the shock of my life. The second cop! That's him! Akbar, in a police uniform! Looking like two officers on duty, Nazir and Akbar get into a cop van, and drive off. My God, what is he involved in?

I go home, get into bed, but cannot sleep: I am listening for his return. He doesn't come in most nights; he doesn't – tonight.

The next evening, after having installed a satellite dish and cable connection at a home in 15th Avenue, I come home to find Ridwan at the kitchen table reading. I fill up a plate and am about to sit down to supper when I hear Akbar making for the front door. I rush to my room, get my coat and as I pull my arm through my sleeve, I see Ridwan standing in the doorway.

"Don't follow Akbar. It's dangerous." I am taken aback. How does he know what I am going to do? "You don't know what you're getting involved in. Keep out of it."

Standing there staring at Ridwan, I expect him to explain, but he goes back to his book in the kitchen. I follow. "What do you mean?" He shrugs. No answer. I pull on my coat and begin to move out but Ridwan stops me.

"Figure it out, Dad. Islam's a cop but he runs his business solely on police contracts. As a cop, he shouldn't be bidding for police contracts. But high officials, who need his services as courier, and strong arm man, tell him to submit tenders and there are transfers out of official accounts into bogus business accounts set up for him. There is no exchange of goods or services for money. Islam just gets small contracts from the tender board, not real businesses or projects –pay-offs for dirty work. The contracts worth millions go

to big companies that have top cops in their pockets. Big businessmen, drug dealers and top cops have formed a syndicate; Islam and Akbar work for the syndicate. If you keep on their tail, you'll eventually stumble onto their operations and they won't think twice about eliminating you."

"How do you know all this? Are you still involved with Solly Patel?"

A look of disgust and he sneers. "No. He's given up teaching and joined the police force, the crime intelligence unit."

Is Solly also a crooked cop? I can't believe that. What's Ridwan's interest in all this? What's it to do with Da'wah. Why is he spying on these people? If he knows about Islam, why doesn't he report him? Isn't he trying to clean up the world? His interest in criminal activities is a complete mystery to me.

But I am more concerned about Akbar. Ridwan has written him off as a criminal and deviant. But I want to help him back to a normal life.

I am his father!

Oh Hassan ...

Chapter 9

Then 9/11 happens and the date of my birth takes on global significance. After the bombing of the Twin Towers in New York, I read about the upsurge of fear and suspicion of Muslims everywhere in the world. Muslims are being subjected to humiliating treatment. Women in traditional dress are insulted and followed around in shops.

At Riaad's café, vigorous discussions condemn the openly anti-Islamic sentiments and attitudes that have followed in the wake of 9/11. Long submerged prejudices are surfacing in the UK, Europe

and America: 9/11 has given them spurious justification.

Shabir, who has just returned from a visit to a cousin in Leicester in the UK, tells of his own experience. "I was in a supermarket. I put down the bag I was carrying to pull my cell phone out of my pocket. Before I knew what was happening, security guards were on either side of me. They picked up the bag, dragged me into an office, did a body search, went through my bag and checked my cell phone. When they found nothing suspicious, they apologised – said such precautions had now become necessary. I swore, called them racists, grabbed my bag and left. Outside, as I walked down the pavement, people turned to stare at me, at anybody vaguely resembling an Arab."

We are about to respond, but Shabir holds up his hand. "Wait, that's not all. As I was walking past a bus stop, I came upon a bunch of people confronting a young Muslim guy. They didn't want him on the bus. They demanded that he take off his jacket; they wanted to see what he had underneath. The guy angrily fought off people who tried to touch him, shouting that they were racists. He tried to push people aside to get to the steps of the bus but a phalanx formed in front of the door. Scared out of his wits, the bus driver, a Pakistani," he laughs, "can you beat that – the bus driver pulled away from the kerb and drove off."

"Then the mob began to move forward as one to deal with the Muslim guy. I ran up to join him but he waved me away. As the wall advanced, he suddenly yelled out, 'Come on, muthafuckas. You think I'm afraid to die. No man, I am on a mission to take out as many of you as I can. I am the Islamic Revolution. I am Jihad. Come! Come! Die with me, shaytaan. I am going to paradise; you are going to hell!' He put his hands under his jacket and shouted, 'Allahu Akbar,' and everyone in the vicinity fled. Then he turned to me. 'You see, brother, they are just a bunch of cowards;' he opened his jacket – there was nothing underneath."

Laughter explodes in the café. But Shabir's final words have a sobering effect. "As we walked together towards the Muslim quarter, he said to me, 'I was born and brought up in Leicester. I walk these

bloody streets every day. I am a British citizen.' He paused. 'They make me admire Bin Laden.' "

As I walk back to the house, my brain is seething with thoughts of 9/11 and jihad. I watch Aljazeera and see the great suffering of Arabs in the Middle East. They live under dictatorships imposed on them by the West. With the creation of Israel to protect Western investments in the Middle East, millions are refugees, living in the most appalling conditions. The Palestinian people have become virtual prisoners in Gaza. These are Muslims, my people; their suffering calls for jihad. They are powerless; their only recourse – suicide bombings. The mujahidin of Al Qaeda are fighting for the right of Arabs to govern themselves. If I were in the Middle East, I would become a mujahid and fight alongside them. That would show everyone – the man I am! If only I lived in Afghanistan!

A few days later, Ridwan and his friends, Farouk, Mohamed and Essop troop into the kitchen and plonk themselves at the table where I sit with my newspaper. They are in a heated discussion about 9/11. I make tea for them while Ridwan scratches in tins for home-made biscuits, and puts them out on the table.

Farouk is going on about Al Qaeda. "Man, it's like David and Goliath. Such a small group striking a blow against such a mighty power."

Essop is shaking his head, "But what good did it do? Now everyone hates Muslims. They think we're all terrorists and are ready to confine and restrict the lot of us."

"Violence is not our way, Farouk. We follow the Prophet, *sallallahu alayhi wassalam*; our way is to teach people about our religion. We don't want to kill people; we want them to join the Ummah," Mohamed insists. "Bombing the Twin Towers – that is not jihad."

"Oh yes it is," Farouk is adamant. "Jihad is holy war."

"No, it's not."

"Well actually, Mohamed, it is. Jihad means every kind of striving to accomplish God's will."

“Ridwan is right. Jihad operates at all levels from the personal to the global. Because of the bombing of the Twin Towers, people think jihad means only one thing, holy war. But the greater jihad is the personal one, the striving to cleanse our souls of evil. That’s what we are involved in, the greater jihad.”

But Farouk wants war. “Okay Essop, but for how long do Arabs have to put up with the West’s interference in their affairs and exploitation of their resources? Bin Laden has made them sit up and take note.”

“And God knows what kind of punitive action they will take. No, Farouk, that kind of jihad does not cleanse the spirit; it only leads to more violence, hatred, prejudice and provides the excuse for exploitation.”

“But how do you stop powerful nations from exploiting smaller nations? In Africa, they came with their guns and the Bible. In the Middle East they came with their guns, set up puppet governments and oil rigs. How do Arabs break free of imperial power?”

“Only one way – Jihad!”

Every head suddenly turns in my direction. My involuntary response, quite unexpected, elicits one approving smile – Farouk’s.

I make a quiet exit and leave them arguing.

As far as I am concerned, Da’wah with its reversion to Islam is dealing with an evolutionary process that will take forever. I am for revolution. In South Africa, Gandhi used passive resistance to try to remind the oppressors of their common humanity; it didn’t work. Power is more compelling than brotherhood. It was Mandela’s call to jihad that made the difference. Now Osama bin Laden has made the first strike for Arab freedom; he has awakened the conscience of the Muslim world.

And in me the will to jihad! Why else was I born on 9/11? If only I lived in the Middle East!

In the following months, events surrounding the 9/11 bombings dominate the media. A week after the attacks, letters containing anthrax spores, sent to two American senators and a few media

offices, kill five people and infect seventeen others. Osama bin Laden is public enemy number one and the hunt for terrorists begins. Apparently, American intelligence had been aware of the threats, had not taken them seriously and had not acted. We learn that the pilots who crashed their planes into the Twin Towers were undercover Al Qaeda men who were trained in the United States. Now all Muslims in the West are under suspicion. Stringent measures are being taken to protect the U.S. against further terrorist infiltration and strikes. Air travel has become fraught with body searches and other security measures.

In Neemville, however, life goes on as usual. My circumstances do not improve. I earn enough to take care of my personal needs but that's about it. My sister Hasina is really the head of the household; she pays the bills and puts food on the table. The investment she made on behalf of the children when I disappeared, takes care of university fees for Ridwan and Rashida and their personal needs. Akbar, working with Nazir Islam, though covered by the investment as well, doesn't make use of it.

I sit at home like a woman. I don't feel I am alive. Perhaps I ought to give up my private business and get a job. While I am in the kitchen, looking at the want ads in the newspaper, the doorbell rings. I go to answer it and get the shock of my life. Khalil! I haven't seen him since he brought me back ten years ago. He gives me a great big bear hug and acts as though we have never been separated by time, place or events.

Ma comes in, sees Khalil, cries out with joy, rushes up to kiss him, then pulls him with her as she rushes off to make tea. I follow them into the kitchen. Khalil sits down, makes himself at home and waves me into a chair. I have not seen him for more than ten years, not since he brought me back from my life as a hobo in Trekkersdal. I feel embarrassed; he has always been there for me; I have never been there for him. Now here he is, friendly, at ease – I have never truly appreciated the man he is.

As she goes about preparing tea, Ma wants to know everything

about Khalil. He asks if we know Barry Pillay, an advocate in Neemville. How can I forget: he defended me at my trial; Khalil had asked him to represent me. Barry and Khalil were underground MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) operatives in Durban in the 1980s. Barry has offered Khalil and his wife, Dawn, partnerships in his law firm and the family has moved up from Durban. Dawn Abrahams, Khalil's wife, also belonged to the same underground MK cell. Ma asks Khalil about Dawn and finds out that they have two children, Karl and Winnie.

Khalil and his family have moved into a home in neighbouring Myburgh. "Barry organised it all. He wanted us down right away. His firm is doing very well and he is desperate for help. He gave us just a couple of months to pack up and leave. I didn't have time to prepare you for my arrival."

Ma laughs. "We are so glad to see you. No preparation needed. We have missed you so much. And all you did for us, we can never thank you enough. Now you must come for dinner tonight. I want to meet your wife and the children. And you must see Hassan, Ridwan and Rashida. They are big now and so beautiful."

When Khalil, Dawn and the children, Winnie and Karl, arrive that evening, there is great excitement in the house. Akbar isn't there, of course, but Ridwan and Rashida are eager to meet Khalil. Rashida doesn't hold back, "We have heard so much about you and we know how much you have done for Dad." Khalil gives her a hug and then introduces her to Dawn. Rashida is equally excited to meet Dawn – a lawyer. She bursts out, "I am going to study law."

Winnie and Karl, in their early teens, keep away from Ridwan, formidable in his beard and juba. They take readily to lively Rashida who ushers them to her room where they go through her music CDs and exchange email addresses. Dawn goes to help Ma and Hasina in the kitchen.

I hear the women laughing and talking and here in the lounge, Khalil and Ridwan are arguing about the Islamic Revolution and the merits and demerits of theocratic rule. Ridwan becomes impatient

with Khalil's refusal to acknowledge that it is the only way to ensure a democratic society based on sound moral values. Khalil laughs and challenges notions of democracy that attempt to regulate human behaviour in every aspect. "We had that under apartheid, you know." Ridwan indignantly declares that there is not the slightest similarity between Da'wah and apartheid; he accuses Khalil of being a slave to liberal Western values. And they continue to argue. Though they have opposing views, they are totally engaged and enjoying their interaction. This looks like the beginning of a real friendship.

I am glad Khalil is back in my life. He always appears to save me in my moments of blackest despair.

Chapter 10

As I follow happenings in the Middle East, I am shocked to learn that Baghdad has been bombed. A pre-emptive strike ... the West claims that Saddam has weapons of mass destruction; that he was planning to attack the US. Paranoia? Opportunism? American tanks, helicopters and fighter jets have overrun Iraq; Baghdad is under constant fire. It is insane. Listening to Radio 786, I hear the call for Human Shield volunteers. I scoff at the notion. Stupid! How can the presence of a few hundred people in front of key installations in Baghdad stop a warmonger who is killing thousands of people every day?

Ridwan agrees. "Those who volunteer to be Human Shields are Muslim Gandhis. They are committed to suicide, Dad. This liberal passive resistance nonsense doesn't achieve anything. Didn't Mandela reject it when he found it ineffective? The human shield thing is something for British and American pacifists. Not us. We have other, more effective ways."

"Jihad!"

“No Dad, we believe in building the new society based on a moral foundation. We are training the young to live by the principles of the Qur’an and Hadith.”

“Are you talking about Moral Rearmament?”

“No Dad, Moral Rearmament comes too late, after corruption has set in. We are establishing a society free of corruption.”

I don’t say anything. I live in the real world.

Jihad makes sense to me. If only I could get to Iraq. If only they were recruiting fighters, not human shields. I would volunteer and become a mujahid. I smile at the thought. I smile as I see myself firing on the enemy, chasing the invaders out of Iraq. I am a hero. A man! In every sense of the word! As I sit in the kitchen with my coffee mug in my hand, the picture of me as a mujahid stays before my eyes. I see it everywhere, on the table, on the fridge, on the wall, in the window.

Then it strikes me! If I go as a human shield, when I get there I can become a mujahid and join in the fight against American imperialism. I jump up – *this is my call, my da’wah!* I will become a Human Shield. I telephone Ozzie Ravat, the organiser, and enlist. There isn’t much time.

The family is shocked. But this is the way to prove myself.

When people in Neemville hear, my life makes a complete turnaround. It is breaking news in the community; it clogs the grapevine and once again my face stares at me from the front page of the local tabloid. People stop me at the shopping centre, the mosque, on the street, to express their gratitude and admiration. I tell them that I am proud to be going to the lands of Saleh al-Din ibn Ayub (Saladin) and Haroun al Rashid.

Of course, there are those who say I am mad or suicidal: Saddam Hussein is a monster, a dictator oppressing his people. He deserves what he is getting. Though some laugh at me, and some are contemptuous or indifferent, most are proud and congratulate me. Many envy me. No longer reviled, treated as a criminal – I am a hero! A man! In every sense of the word! Many looking for vicarious martyrdom

press donations on me and I collect enough to get to Baghdad.

It wasn't coincidence that my hajj was followed by the 9/11 bombing. Soon I will be winging my way to Cairo, then to Amman in Jordan where I will board the bus for Baghdad. And Jihad!

Only one person is appalled – Ridwan! He walks with me as I make my way to the bank to collect traveller's cheques.

“Dad, you're crazy. What do you think you're doing?”

“Look, Ridwan, your mission is da'wah; mine is jihad.”

“Since *when*?”

“Aren't you horrified by what is happening? Bush has invaded Iraq; taken over a whole country! Thousands are dying every day. That's worse than the bombing of the twin towers. I have spent my life ignoring jihad here in my country. I was wrong. I left the fight to people like Khalil. It is time for me take up my responsibilities. You believe your mission is here in South Africa. I am finding mine.”

“And you think it's Iraq?”

“Well isn't that what Ummah means – community and unity of faith? That can take me anywhere in the Islamic world. After 9/11, Muslims are being subjected to humiliating treatment everywhere. Now Bush is destroying Iraq. Muslims are not terrorists but we will fight to preserve our religion and our way of life.”

“You don't have to become a human shield and throw your life away to prove you are a good Muslim. There are better ways.”

“I knew you wouldn't understand. I'm not throwing my life away. I am standing up against people like Bush and Blair who are interested only in establishing economic empires in the Middle East and elsewhere. My friend Khalil stood up against injustice all his life to protect people like me. It's taken me a long time to learn, but I am standing up now.”

“Dad, that's utter rubbish! Romantic nonsense! I won't allow you to do this. I forbid it!”

I look at him in amazement but I must admit I am more flattered by his concern than all the praise and blessings I receive from the people of Neemville. There is, however, no point in continuing this discussion.

This is something I have to do. A man has to do what a man has to do.

Then Khalil comes to see me. He has heard that I am going to Baghdad as a Human Shield. Like Ridwan, he disapproves. I wasn't expecting that – not from a mujahid in the South African struggle. He tells me it's an ill-considered mission. "There's no need for more individuals to sacrifice their lives in Baghdad; thousands of Iraqi men, women and children are dying everyday – that has not stopped the bombing. Being a human shield is a symbolic gesture; it is much better to become involved in real action – not gestures."

Like Ridwan, he has no idea that is exactly what I plan to do. He has no idea of my plan to join the mujahidin.

Chapter 11

Our first day in Baghdad, we, the human shields from South Africa, are stationed with volunteers from other countries at the Al Rashidiya Water Works. Ozzie Ravat, our leader, has split us into three units and we stand at different points around the plant. I am surprised to find that most of the human shields are anti-war activists from the UK and USA. I find that strange. Aren't they the enemy? There are about thirty Americans amongst us. I take comfort from that; the US won't bomb its own people.

But that night we find ourselves in the midst of terrifying explosions. I am horrified. How can they bomb us with their own countrymen and women standing here? After a few nights with bomber aircraft playing hit and run over us, we are caught in wave after wave of terror.

I didn't come here for this. I must find out how to join the mujahidin. With a gun in my hand I have a fighting chance but turning myself into a target like this is plain stupid! A line of people is not a

protective shield in a situation where human life has no value. The bombers aren't worried about anyone standing here or who they are; they have a mission; they carry it out.

After three days of standing together at the Water Works, waiting for bombs to drop down on us, we have become comrades. I have found a real friend in Neville, an American. He is the only one in whom I confide my true motive for coming to Iraq. I tell him I am going to join the resistance. I am going to fight to free Iraq of Israeli-American control. Neville raises his eyebrows and shrugs.

On our first Friday in Baghdad, Ozzie points out Mohammed Ali, the Lebanese mujahid having breakfast at an adjoining table in the hotel dining-room – this man is my way into the Iraqi resistance. I indicate to Neville that I am going to speak to Mohammed Ali, who is seated with Mehmood, our Iraqi minder – our liaison and guide. I secure an appointment to see him later in the day. When I return to my table, I tell Neville that I am going to meet with Mohammed Ali after Joomma Namaaz – Friday Prayers.

In the afternoon, Mohammed Ali and I sit down in a lounge off the lobby. He smiles pleasantly, "Yes, my brother, what can I do for you?"

I burst out, "I didn't come here to be a human shield. I came here to fight. I want to go into battle against the enemy. I used this opportunity to get to Iraq. Now I need to find out how I can join my brothers in jihad?"

He looks dubious, then speaks to me in Arabic. I am confused; I tell him I don't speak Arabic. He asks how I will manage in the training camp where all communication is in Arabic, on the battlefield where all orders are in Arabic. I suddenly realise I have been naïve – simply assuming that my willingness to fight was all I needed. I am embarrassed. He looks at me with kind eyes. "We are glad to have your support for our cause; your willingness to show solidarity. But, as you know, communication is extremely important in such situations. How will you cope?"

I tell him I understand; I realise it was a foolish dream.

“Foolish – no. We need your moral support; it gives us hope and the strength to go on. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

I go back to find Neville. He sympathises but shrugs. “You know I am an anti-war activist; that’s why I became a human shield.”

A few mornings later, after a terrifying night at the waterworks, I am on my way to breakfast, when I see Ozzie in front of the reception desk surrounded by eight from our group of South Africans – all highly agitated, all yelling at the same time. Wondering what’s going on, I approach the group. They are hysterically demanding to be put on the first transport out.

I understand their terror: our shift at the waterworks last night!

After several bad days – bomb attacks close enough to scare the wits out of us, last night was relatively quiet so when we came across a café that was open, we decided to stop for coffee before returning to the hotel. Neville and I were looking at an array of pastries in a display counter, when a thunderclap threw us off balance. Suddenly, teetering on the edge of an earthquake threatening to swallow us, we were exploding, splintering, bursting ... dying ...

Then a shout from outside, ‘The Telecommunications Centre! They got the Telecommunications Centre!’ And we were out of our coma. We had not been hit, only shaken; we were intact.

Crowding onto the pavement, we saw the night ablaze over the city centre – flames climbing over walls and rooftops into a black sky. Mehmood and Ozzie took charge, urging us to get to the hotel shelters immediately; it was no longer safe out here. They warned us to be very cautious; to keep in the shadows as we headed back.

Huddling together, tense with foreboding, we crept off down the main road of Baghdad that stretched before us for mile after mile after mile. We would never get back. Dark shapes in the clouds – stalking us ... I could not hear them ... they were silent ... we were silent ... they were shadows ... we were shadows ... a procession of ghosts marching forever through hell. The hotel suddenly reared up before us, a mirage, taunting us with the promise of refuge. Then I

heard a whisper, "Thank God, we made it."

I understand the hysteria of the night surrounding Ozzie this morning. He arranges for them to leave.

After breakfast a few of us walking about in Baghdad, inspecting the carnage, eventually come to Yarmouk Hospital. The victims of war – little children maimed, disabled for life. I sit down next to Shireen, a pretty five-year-old, who will never walk again. Her spine was crushed when a 'stray' missile smashed into a residential area. In the next bed, eight-year-old Ameer – in time the severe injuries to his face and abdomen will heal but the removal of his spleen will mean a lifelong dependency on medication. While I am standing next to his bed, I feel a little hand slip into mine. I look down to see four year old, Ahmed,; he has lost his whole family, mother, father, a sister and two brothers.

Collateral damage – that's what they are to warmongers.

Later that day on Aljazeera – images of three captured American soldiers, threatened with decapitation by Iraqi fighters, momentarily displace mental images of wounded children in the hospital. The soldiers, shown on TV, at the mercy of their captors are terrified, not as in movies where American soldiers are always heroes. Without their weapons and military equipment, they are as helpless as the children in Yarmouk Hospital. They are victims too; victims of statesmen who believe soldiers are simply instruments of their power. All politicians, not only Saddam Hussein – all politicians are monsters.

At the end of the second week in Baghdad, I come back to the hotel after my shift at Al Rashidiya to a meeting with Ozzie in the foyer. He informs us that we will be leaving the next day. Looking relieved, the other volunteers stand up to go and pack.

I remain sitting crossed-legged on the carpet.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and look up into Mehmood's face. "It's time for you to go home."

But I didn't fight.

I returned to Neemville two days ago and am sitting here with a reporter from the local tabloid who has come to interview me. A celebrity now, I will be on the front page again. The reporter looks quite excited to be interviewing – a hero.

I will tell my story and be honoured.

But I didn't fight.

Chapter 12

A knock at the door. Khalil Vawda. I call him into the kitchen to have breakfast with me but all he wants is a cup of tea. Since he settled in Myburgh, he has become a regular client. "The tape deck in your car still giving trouble?"

He shakes his head. He looks quite serious; I wonder what's going on. Then he amazes me. Aware of my reputation in TV maintenance and computer services, Khalil has come with a proposition. Would I be interested in setting up and running an Internet Café? He has the money, I have the skills, together we can provide a service that Neemville really needs. I am overwhelmed. I have been struggling to make ends meet since I lost my business. I had set it up in Ayesha's name and she got it in the divorce. So this is a godsend. Khalil coming to my aid! Again!

When Ridwan comes home, I tell him and he becomes quite excited. "Let me work with you, Dad." I know the boy is an IT whiz and can do a lot more with the computer than I can. He knows about chips and motherboards, programming, web pages and I don't know what all. He will only be able to work part-time until he has completed his degree, but after that! 'Ismael Amin and Son: IT & Communication Specialists!'

Very happy to include Ridwan in the venture, Khalil draws up contracts and obtains premises on the first floor of the shopping centre, next to his firm's law offices. I get the place ship-shape, put in

cubicles, tables, chairs, and set up connections. When the computer equipment arrives, Ridwan and I spend all our spare time connecting up. Khalil tells us we have a free hand to run the business as we think fit. As we will be catering mostly to students, we decide to open after lunch and close at nine p.m. That gives me the mornings to continue with my TV/Electrical/Motor services which are picking up again after my stint as a human shield.

After three months we are ready to open our Internet café. In the first few weeks, people come in to check us out. Soon the word spreads amongst students and the shop becomes busy. Even university students come to use our facilities.

And Ridwan is there after lectures to help and advise. I feel very proud when he says, “Dad, you’re amazing. With no formal training, you pick up so quickly.”

And we talk. It surprises me how much Ridwan knows about underworld activities in Neemville. He tells me about the syndicate’s crooked operations: drug trafficking, tender fraud, money laundering. He points to headlines in newspapers – *Container Hijacking: Hardware Shipment Disappears, Mandrax Worth Millions Seized, Black Dollar Scam, Money Laundering, Hajj Scam* – “You can bet the syndicate is involved in all of this

“Hajj Scam! What is that? Who would desecrate the holy pilgrimage?”

“Don’t be naïve Dad. Nothing is sacred to anyone wanting to make a fast buck. Travel agents are drumming up business for themselves with free Hajj tickets that the Saudi government allocates to each country for poor pilgrims. A crooked diplomat is getting a kickback from making these tickets available to travel agents who in turn offer a free ticket as an incentive to families to book through their agencies.”

“These people have no shame.”

“One of the biggest travel agents involved in the scam lives in Neemville and is in the syndicate. Solly knows and is collecting

evidence against him.”

Solly ... I show him the local tabloid. A picture of Solly on the front page with the banner headline, ‘Crooked Cop in our Midst.’

Ridwan laughs. “That’s ridiculous! He’s the only honest cop in Neemville.”

“So what’s all this about fraud, spying, intimidation, bribery, nepotism.”

“Who’s accusing him?” I look; accusations from a couple of ‘unnamed victims’ identified only as a businessman and a doctor. “No names, right? So how do we know it’s true? Who wrote the article, Dad?” I look again; no by-line. “Even the reporter doesn’t have the guts to give his name. It’s just a bunch of lies, Dad.”

“What’s going on, Ridwan?”

“The syndicate owns the *Neemville News*; they’re running scared because Solly knows what’s going on; and he can’t be bought.”

“If Solly is a good man, why have you turned against him?”

“As if you don’t know.”

But Ridwan is quite wrong.

After picking up a take-away lunch from Jubie’s Café, I come straight to the shop where I have set up a separate corner for small electrical repair jobs. Waiting for me at the door is Essop, one of Ridwan’s buddies.

As school kids need a good deal of help and Ridwan and I can barely cope, Ridwan has brought his friends, Mohammed, Farouk and Essop to help out. These guys just love the students and enjoy tutoring them. I am quite amazed to see how kind, patient and attentive they are, not at all like the majority of selfish, self-indulgent young people today. Ridwan and his friends are dedicated, conscientious and know where they are going.

When they’re not on the computers, they’re outside on the balcony deep in discussion. They are in different fields Ridwan in information

technology and communications, Essop in pharmacy, Mohamed in law and Farouk in electronics and mechanical engineering, but they all belong to the Da'wah movement. When Farouk is around, I don't have to worry about any electrical or electronic failure; he just hops to it and fixes the problem. And always tinkering with cars, he is his friends' personal mach. He reminds me of myself at his age, learning about cars and electricity. Sometimes he even comes with me to give me a hand when I am installing aerials or working on cars.

Essop smiles as I approach. When I see the box in his hands as usual, I know it is full of stuff he has collected – learning aids for the students. He often comes up during his lunch break to leave his precious box in the shop. I open up and invite Essop to a cup of tea but he has to get back to work.

As I am about to have lunch, I look up to see Solly Patel walking in. Superhero Batman! Here in the shop! Calm, dignified, conventional-looking; a nondescript façade that hides the heart of a daredevil. Nothing frightens this man. He takes his battles right into the heart of enemy territory; stands in the midst of hell ready to handcuff the devil. He gave up teaching to join the SAPS a year or two ago. Wonder why he's here? Which of my boys is he investigating? The criminal or the crusader?

He smiles. "as -Salaamu alaikum, Ismail-bhai."

I return the greeting and wait. But he takes his time, looks around, takes in everything and nods. "This is a very nice little shop. A real asset to the community; just what students need. If I were still teaching, I would send students here for their research."

He walks around and after inspecting the equipment, turns to me. "I believe Ridwan works here with you."

Ah, he's after the crusader not the criminal. I nod. "Yes, after varsity, most evenings during the week and over weekends."

"I was hoping to find him here."

"He's still at lectures. Can I help?"

He contemplates me a moment, shakes his head, starts to leave but stops short of the door. "Ismail-bhai, you should keep a careful

watch on Ridwan. He was the best of the lads in the junior soccer league. He was like a son to me, still is. I don't want to see any harm come to him. Tell him I'll be back to see him."

Just as I sit down to lunch again, Akbar barges into the shop. His appearance here is a surprise. He always avoids me, never remains in the same room with me. This is his first time in the shop.

He slumps into a chair. "I am going to kill that Solly Patel."

I almost choke on my roti roll.

"Ever since he became a cop, he's been interfering in my business. This morning, I went to the airport to pick up a package from a Customs Official I know. When I asked for him, I was taken into the SAPS Office and questioned. They brought my package and pushed it under my nose. When I saw that it was open, I knew it had gone through the red channel; my friend always makes sure my things go through the green. Inside the package, they found cell phones, not the stuff indicated on the manifest. Man, I was scared. I thought they were going to arrest me. I told them I was just a messenger, collecting a package for the boss. When they asked about my friend among the Customs Officials, I pretended I didn't know him; said I had been told to ask for him. Luckily they didn't search me; I had his pay envelope in my pocket. When I was leaving the office, I caught a glimpse of a familiar face in the customs shed – Solly Patel, super spy. Then I knew. He's been investigating the boss for some time now. Hell, he must have had wind of the shipment. It's been confiscated; my boss has lost thousands. I don't know how Solly found out about my contact at customs, even the boss didn't know. Dammit, it must have been Nazir. I followed him from the airport and when he entered Neemville, he came straight here. What did he want? Did he say anything about me?"

I tell him that Solly was looking for Ridwan, and ask, "Who is the boss?" He walks out as abruptly as he came in.

Why was Solly looking for Ridwan not Akbar?

When Ridwan and company come in, I tell them about Solly's visit.

Ridwan shrugs it off. I quiz him about Solly's warning but all he says is, "He shouldn't be worrying about me. He should worry about himself and his 'friend' Nazir Islam. They are both going to hell."

The boys settle down to their tasks. Din al-Fitrah is organising the commemoration of the seventeenth anniversary of the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini and they are responsible for advertising the event in Neemville and surrounding townships. While they are busy at work, Mohammed's cellphone rings. As he listens, his face begins to glow with excitement; the others lean forward eagerly. When he switches off, he shouts out, "Farees Mohammed has accepted our invitation."

They all jump up, cheer and embrace one another.

When I ask, Farouk tells me, "Farees Mohammed is going to be the guest speaker at our commemoration. He is a mujahid from the Afghanistan war. He studied in Qom and was an ardent follower of the Ayatollah."

Essop laughs, "We can get the pamphlets printed now."

Soon after, they are off on their mission and won't be back tonight. A mujahid! ... Brings back wistful longings.

Chapter 13

A shadow falls over my keyboard. I look up into the eyes of Mrs Farhana Shaikh, a woman who often appears in the social columns of the community newspaper. She is the sister of Ebrahim Joosab, owner of a huge wholesale concern in town.

What's a socialite doing in my internet café this morning?

As she stands here in her expensive shalwar kameez, I don't know where to put her. There is no leisure space in the shop; she would be quite uncomfortable in our plastic chairs. But she settles herself in one and smiles condescendingly as her languorous eyes take in the appointment of the shop.

"You must be wondering what brings me here, Mr Amin." She adjusts the silk dupatta covering the elegantly coiffed brown hair that flows into a soft bun at the nape of her neck. "Don't look so worried, it's good news; at least *I* think so." I frown. I don't move in her social circle so what is she doing here? "Mr Amin, I have come to make some enquiries."

Oh God, what now? Akbar selling drugs to her grandsons? Ridwan recruiting them for holy war?

But she surprises me. "I believe your daughter is studying law at Wits. They tell me she is a brilliant student. You must be very proud of her."

"Rashida?"

"You don't have to be modest. Most parents boast about such a child. And she's a beautiful girl too." Mrs Shaikh laughs. "Mr Amin, do you realise what a catch she is." I am puzzled. "She will make someone a wonderful wife."

Oh! ... This woman is a matchmaker ... she has a client interested in Rashida.

"Do you know my nephew, Saleem? My brother Ebrahim's son? He's also at Wits ... has just completed a master's in business administration."

I shoot bolt upright ... she is bringing a proposal from *Ebrahim Joosab*! My heart begins to race.

"I have come to find out how you would feel about a proposal from my brother on behalf of Saleem?"

I can hardly hide my grin. "I don't know what Rashida will say. Girls nowadays choose their husbands themselves."

"To be quite honest Mr Amin, Saleem and Rashida have been seeing each other for quite a while now. My brother tried to put a stop to it but Saleem is convinced that Rashida is the girl for him. He has completed his course and is going on to Harvard Business School for further studies. He wants to get married before he leaves for Boston."

"Your brother tried to put a stop to it?"

"Your family circumstances you know: your divorce ... your

murder trial ... your financial situation. He is dead against the match but he doesn't want to lose his son."

I frown. It's easy for her to sit in judgment. "I will speak to Rashida ... find out what she wants."

As she stands up to leave, she hands me her card. I walk her to the door where she stops and involuntarily exclaims, "Rashida is an amazing girl – to have overcome such a background."

After supper that night, I get Rashida's number from Hasina and call my daughter. I don't tell her about the proposal. I simply ask her to come home for the weekend as I have something urgent to discuss with her. She agrees.

Hasina and Ma are over the moon. Beaming, Ma says, "I will have to prepare a special tea. Such short notice, my son! We have to call Karim and Farida. They must be here to represent the family."

"Relax Ma. The proposal isn't this weekend. I'm just going to talk to Rashida so we can arrange a time."

Hasina looking around the room says, "Don't arrange it too quick. Give me a chance to get some painting done first. Oh Allah, imagine – a proposal ... from Ebrahim Joosab!"

Hasina doesn't work on Saturdays; she has spent all morning helping Ma make samoosas and other treats. Now she waits at the front door; as soon as she sees Rashida's little blue car pulling into the driveway, she rushes out, hugs and kisses her niece and helps her bring her things into the room they shared for many years.

So Rashida has learned to drive, bought a car – when, how?

Hasina and Rashida come out of the bedroom and head to the kitchen for tea and snacks. After they sit down, I hear them laughing and talking, so I go through to the kitchen and lean against the door.

"That's a nice little car you have there."

"Yes, thanks to Hasina-foi. She loaned me the money for the

down payment. Are you joining us for tea, Dad?"

I sit down and Ma puts a mug in front of me. I watch Rashida in animated conversation with her aunt and grandmother. Rashida is not a little girl anymore. I take in the large black eyes, the shining black hair – face like a Bollywood star – her mother all over again. Ayesha ... back to taunt me! I take my tea to go back into the lounge when the front door opens and Ridwan rushes through to the kitchen yelling, "Hey Rashida, you home at long last!" He picks her up, whirls her around, hugs and kisses her. "I gotta show you my new books."

"Hey, hey, hey! Spare me your fundamentalist travesty of democracy."

"Wait till you read them, man. A revelation! A genuine way to establish a humane principled society."

"For men only, I know."

Ma laughs. "Aw, what y'all talking nonsense. Sit down Ridwan, have tea. See I made your favourite, naan khataay."

All we need now is for Akbar to come in, throw his arms around his sister, do a little dance and sit down to samoosas and tea.

I escape to the lounge.

The revelry in the kitchen continues for quite a while. Eventually, the group makes its way into the lounge. Ma settles in her chair and Hasina, Ridwan and Rashida sit on the sofa opposite me.

Rashida turns bright eyes on me. "Well Dad, here I am. What's this all about? I couldn't get a word out of anybody so this must be something really important."

As I look at her, see Ayesha's smile, her black hair falling in waves onto her shoulders, I don't know whether I am looking at my daughter or my ex-wife. In her jeans and T-shirt, she is a modern makeover of her mother.

"I'll let Hasina explain it to you."

Hasina is delighted. "Do you know Ebrahim Joosab's son, Saleem?" Rashida turns red.

Ridwan laughs, "Your secret is out little sister."

"Oh, shut up, Ridwan. Yes, Hasina-foi, what about him?"

"His aunty came to see your father. They want to make a proposal. What do you think, eh?"

Rashida looks shocked.

"Yes, he wants to get married. His father wants to make a formal proposal. So we want to find out when it will suit you. Don't make it too quick. I have to get some painting done first."

Rashida sits there like a stone so I chip in, "Well, what do you say? Mrs Shaikh told me that you have been seeing this boy."

"I don't want to get married, Dad."

Ma, Hasina and I are taken aback; for us it was a foregone conclusion: Rashida marries Saleem and we are connected to the affluent Ebrahim Joosab.

"What's going on? Why don't you want to get married? This boy is rich; he's going to take you to America. You can have whatever you want."

"That's just it; I won't have whatever I want. I don't want to go to America. I want to practise here."

"What does it matter where you practise? You can practise there; there's more money and..."

"You don't understand. I believe that this is where I can make a difference. This is a struggling young democracy; I am excited at the prospect of helping to build it." She sounds a lot like Ridwan, only he is building an Islamic society.

But for Ma this does not make sense, "If you marry Ebrahim Moosa's son, you can live a comfortable life. You *don't* have to work. You can get married, have children and be happy."

'Dadima, my aunt Hasina and aunt Farida are happy. They didn't marry. Like them, I want to build my own life. There are so many problems in our country, so many poor people; as a lawyer I will have the opportunity to work for change.'

"Rashida, don't close your eyes. Things are not improving here; they are getting worse. There's too much corruption in government; no understanding of democracy. You will be sorry if you turn down this proposal."

"No Dad. I believe it's up to all of us to bring about change. We

have never experienced democracy so we are making mistakes, but we will learn ...”

“No we won’t,” Ridwan bursts out, “not without a moral foundation. And we don’t have that. We are ruled by greed and selfishness. Corruption bedevils us because we don’t have faith. We need to build on a foundation of morality and only faith can give us that. Only religious faith teaches us commitment to the principles of brotherhood.”

Rashida laughs, “Does that include or exclude women?”

“That’s enough now.” Ma suddenly interjects. “There’s only one thing. If Rashida doesn’t want to get married, we can’t force her. That is against the religion.”

Rashida jumps up and kisses Ma. “You see Dad, Ridwan, the sisterhood understands democracy.”

Hasina is puzzled. “I thought you liked this boy. I thought you had come to an agreement.”

“We did, Hasina-foi, an agreement *not* to get married. We have different ambitions. I do care for him and I am willing to wait till he comes back, *if* he comes back. But I am not putting my career on hold. I’m sorry he is trying to force me by involving you. I’m sorry he has embarrassed his family in this way. You had better let them know as soon as possible that I refuse this proposal.”

In the morning, Ridwan and I walk to the Internet café which is closed on Sundays to give us a chance to check and clean equipment. As we stroll past the spice shops, Roopanand’s Bookshop, the supermarkets, the sweetmeat dens, the roti parlour, I ask, “Do you think she’ll change her mind.”

He shakes his head. “She told me about Saleem some time ago. She really loves him, would like to marry him, but not if it interferes with her plans.”

In the office, I switch on the kettle, “You know her better than I do. What’s going on with her?”

"You really want to know?" I nod. "Well ... It goes back to your trial."

"My trial? What's that got to do with it?"

"Everything. Are you sure you want to know? It may hurt."

"I can take it, whatever it is."

"I don't have to tell you that the murder of Siva ...

I feel an arm around my shoulders ...

and the attempt on Ma's life were the talk of Neemville. When the trial started, the kids at school kept taunting her about our father being a murderer and our mother, a heathen. There were stories of you dressed as a woman going into the shop and shooting them."

"You didn't believe that stuff, did you?"

Ridwan laughs. "No, but it wasn't funny at the time. The kids used to make fun of Rashida. Now that our mother was a Hindu would she be going to the temple to worship idols? The girls kept at her, calling Ma loose, saying she had been having lots of affairs because you ... she couldn't stand you ...

I can't look at him. I pour out the tea.

He goes on. "This continued for more than a year after your arrest, and intensified when the trial began. Rashida became depressed. When she heard that Ma was going to take the stand, she begged me to go with her to court. She wanted to hear for herself what Ma had to say. I didn't want to go. I was too ashamed; I didn't want to hear anything about what had happened. But she kept on at me. When I realised that this was something she had to do, I gave in.

"On the day of Ma's testimony, we sat at the back of the courtroom where neither you nor Ma could see us.

"When Ma entered the witness stand, Rashida took my hand ... held it tight ... she was trembling. While Ma was giving evidence, Rashida couldn't control the tears streaming down her cheeks. She was crying as hard as Ma. I don't think she heard a word Ma was saying; just felt her suffering. Your advocate made Ma look and sound like a desperate, vindictive liar. The more he belittled and discredited her, the more dishonest and crazy she seemed. We were both distraught; we rose and unobtrusively made our way out.

Rashida said not one word as I drove her home.

“The next day, she said to me, ‘I will never allow myself to be abused like that. I am going to equip myself in every way so that I am in charge of myself. And I have made up my mind ... after what I saw in court ... I’ve made up my mind to be a lawyer.’

“Ever since then she has dedicated herself to achieving that goal. You know about her wonderful matric pass, and her acceptance at Wits. When she graduates, firms that are not chauvinistic or racist will be fighting to get her. But she is aiming very high; she will go into politics. She wants the power to implement change. She does research on draft legislation for the Women’s Forum.”

“Does she think *I* did it, the shooting and the murder?”

“No, Dad. She just felt very sorry for Ma.”

I asked Hasina to telephone Mrs Shaikh ...to inform her of Rashida’s decision. We waited a few days; didn’t want to insult Mrs Shaikh with a too speedy reply, but when Hasina told me she had laughed with relief, *I* felt insulted.

Chapter 14

It’s nine o’ clock. Time to close the shop. All the students have gone. Ridwan and I are checking terminals and putting away equipment –when in walks Solly Patel! Well, he did say he would be back.

“as-Salaamu alaikom, Ismail-bhai, Ridwan.” We return the greeting. “I hope you don’t mind my popping in like this but I need to have a word with Ridwan.”

Judging by Ridwan’s look of cool detachment, one would think this was a stranger. Ridwan condemns the local newspaper’s attempts to defame Solly, yet here he is quite hostile to the man in person. “Is this a convenient time?”

Ridwan shrugs, remains leaning against a computer table. I push

a chair forward for Solly and settle in another next to him. I am eager to hear what this is all about.

Solly smiles at me, "Ismail-bhai, do you mind? I would like to speak to Ridwan in private." As Solly is looking at me, he misses the look of revulsion that fleetingly distorts Ridwan's features.

Before I can say a word, Ridwan exclaims, "Don't go, Dad. I have nothing to hide." Ridwan always kicks me out when he is talking with his friends so I am surprised, quite pleased actually, not to be thrown out now.

Solly shrugs. "You know that I now work for the Crime Intelligence Unit of the Police Department, don't you?" Ridwan nods. Solly pulls a photograph out of his file. "I was given this and asked to investigate." He hands over the photograph. "I think you know who this is." Ridwan nods. I look over Ridwan's arm and see a bearded man in military fatigues and cap, a kalashnikov slung over his shoulder. "This man, Farees Mohammed, is on a list of suspected terrorists."

Farees Mohammed! The guest speaker – the mujahid – that got the boys so excited. I pull the photograph out of Ridwan's hand to examine it closely. I wonder where this was taken ... Afghanistan?

Solly scrutinises Ridwan. "We don't want to become a country that harbours terrorists."

Colour rises from Ridwan's neck into his hairline, but he keeps control of his voice. "How easily you label people. Farees Mohammed is not a 'terrorist.' He defended his country against Russians and now, Americans." Ridwan's tone is icy. "He is a soldier."

"Someone in my department discovered that he is coming to South Africa. To Neemville, in fact! At your invitation! Why have you invited him to Neemville?"

"You know perfectly well why." He shoves a flyer in Solly's face. "It's all there. We are honouring the Ayatollah Khomeini, the inspiration behind the Islamic Renaissance. Does this look like a terrorist plot to you? We are now supposed to have freedom of expression in this country."

"Calm down, Ridwan; I am not accusing you of anything. I am simply doing my job."

“Is it your job to spy on a legitimate organisation simply because we are Muslims? Have you forgotten that you are a Muslim?”

“You’re a Muslim. Why do you spy on Muslims in the community?”

Silenced and furious, Ridwan looks away.

According to Solly, Ridwan, Mohamed, Essop and Farouk have been tailing people from the syndicate. What’s wrong with the boys? They’re mad if they think they can challenge the local mafia with its combination of top police officials, powerful businessmen and hit men.

Solly appeals for Ridwan’s understanding. “I am a Muslim but I am also a policeman with the duty to protect the society in which I live.”

“So you need protection from us, fellow Muslims? Why don’t you go after real criminals, all those who rape and murder. Women and children are raped every hour of every day. Go after the rapists and ... the moffies. They are the ones destroying this country. Not us. We are trying to build a good decent society based on sound moral values. We follow in the footsteps of our Nabi, peace be upon him. That was once your aim too. What happened? Do you find the temptations of jahiliyyah too strong? You and your ‘friend,’ Nazir Islam.”

Solly sees that Ridwan is becoming irrational.

“I’m sorry you don’t trust me anymore. But you are still like a son to me and I am concerned about you. I am here because members of my department have you and your friends under surveillance. I thought you should know.” He takes the photograph and waves it at Ridwan, “This has been given to passport control at the airport. Farees Mohammed will be taken into custody when he arrives and sent back to Afghanistan.” He contemplates Ridwan for a moment. “Be careful Ridwan.” Solly turns to me, “Thank you for your patience, Ismailbhai.” He greets and is gone.

Ridwan pulls out his cell phone.

“Ridwan are you spying on the syndicate?”

Ridwan waves me out, impatiently. “Go home, Dad. I have things

to do. Go. I'll lock up."

"But what's going on? Why are they watching you and your friends? Do they think you are terrorists?"

"Don't talk like them, Dad. Don't use divisive labels."

"Solly has always been your friend. Why do you hate him now? Why?"

He looks at me a moment, "Read Surah 26: 165, about Lut," and pushes me out.

Ridwan is so wrong about Solly; quite mistaken about Solly's relationship with Nazir Islam. He won't believe that Solly is trying to help Nazir – trying to cure him. So he can't see that he and Solly want the same thing.

Solly is doing his best to bring down drug lords and end the drug trade. He is involved in drug busts at airports and mine dumps; in closures of illegal drug laboratories and factories. But in *The Neemville News*, intrepid warrior Solly gets bad reviews. Who is writing them? Even Ridwan condemns these attacks on Solly that accuse him of being a spy, liar, corrupt policeman.

But he detests Solly; not because the flow of drugs has turned into a flood despite Solly's efforts to detour it into police storage – away from the syndicate's drug labs and depots; not because of Solly's attempts to put an end to these subterranean operations that are destroying the community. And he can see that denunciations of Solly in the local paper are indications – tremors and running cracks, surface manifestations of seismic reverberations in the underworld. They spell disaster for Solly.

Ridwan is not blind to all of that, but he is fixated on Solly's relationship with Nazir Islam – *that* looms largest in his mind.

Solly has awakened the wrath of the gods in Neemville – and both my sons.

Chapter 15

Taking care of logistics for their big meeting, Ridwan and his gang are in top gear – distributing handbills, putting up posters and banners, making announcements on radio stations, at all mosques in Neemville and surrounding areas. When they give out handbills to the students in the shop, I get one and discover that Abu Moosa, an important proponent of the Global Islamic Movement, will be speaking at the meeting. With National Intelligence on his trail, they were forced to replace Farees Mohammed, their original choice for guest of honour.

I see a kaffiyeh slowly enclosing Ridwan's head leaving a pair of cold eyes visible. His hand lengthens into the AK-47 that is shoving me in the shoulder.

“Hey Dad, daydreaming again?” I look up. Ridwan who has been shaking my shoulder, points to the handbill. “Will you be coming to the meeting?”

“I don't know.”

“Come. You will get a better idea of the Global Islamic Movement. Your heart is in the right place but liberal democratic values taint your ideas.”

“What's wrong with liberal democratic values?”

“Man-made, not pure, not God-given. Come to the meeting, Dad; see what we are doing.”

I want to know. I will attend. I ask whether Ridwan is going to invite Akbar; he just glares. “Why not? He needs to be saved as much as anyone.”

“It's too late for him. He can never be redeemed.”

“How can you say such a thing? Hadith says, ‘One who forsakes a brother is like one who sheds his blood.’ How can you give up on him?”

“He's a germ. No, worse! A virus! He will pollute the ummah.”

I ask about Solly and Nazir; Ridwan becomes livid. “Don't be ridiculous. You expect them to give up their wicked ways and follow the Qur'an?”

Ridwan pulls out his cell and phones Rashida; I find that ironic. "You called Rashida. Isn't that a waste of time."

'She's confused. She needs guidance. Though she believes in a society rooted in sound, humane principles, she thinks that's the African Renaissance. When she finds out that won't work, she will join our movement – the only hope for a humane society."

It's a lovely world that Ridwan has created for himself only it's black and white. He may be an IT genius and in cyberspace one and one may make two, but that's not how it is in the world of people. He will never convert his sister, but he wants to, so very much. Will she come to his meeting? To humour him? To challenge the meeting? Will she be able to sit in silence in the women's section? I have to laugh.

At home, I find Akbar at the kitchen table morosely sipping his coffee. I see that he's miserable and want to help him. Impulsively, I invite him to the meeting. He guffaws, declaring flatly that he can't be involved in any fanatical bull.

It's nearly four o' clock. I am waiting here on the steps of the community hall, waiting to see whether the little blue car will appear at the entrance gate. I bet it won't. Why would Rashida come all the way from Johannesburg for something she doesn't believe in? Just to please her brother? No, this meeting is a waste of time for her. Then I see the car rolling in through the gate. Well, well, well, she came. She and Ridwan are close; they keep their connection intact; they are people of faith, hers different, not religious, but still faith.

I wait for her. She comes up the steps; her thick black hair, just like her mother's, cascading over her shoulders. She comes to kiss me. We go in together and find seats. An usher comes up to Rashida and points to the women's section on the right. She looks at me and shrugs. I expect a fight but she moves without a fuss and settles at the end of the back row. I move too and lean against the back wall.

In the middle section are rows and rows of little African girls all

properly attired in abayas with hijabs to hide their hair. They have set the proper example and are an unconscious criticism of Indian mothers who have not covered their daughters' heads. On the left, opposite the little girls, are little boys, also appropriately dressed in kurtah-pajamas and topis. Little African children constitute almost half the audience. The basij? Foundation for Ridwan's Ummah?

Where she is in the back row, Rashida has to endure the constant jostling of people bashing into her as they pass behind. She is forced to sit forward and duck her head from time to time.

It is now nearly five. The meeting, advertised to begin at four, is awaiting the guest of honour, Abu Moosa, visiting religious scholar from the Global Islamic Movement in London. We are here to commemorate the seventeenth anniversary of the passing of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, father of the Islamic Revolution.

From where I lean against the back wall, I can see both my son and daughter. Ridwan is stretched out in his seat in the front row of the men's section. Rashida at the back, buffeted by the perpetual motion behind her, is taking notes. Taking notes? Why? The meeting hasn't even begun. People just milling about waiting – what is there to note?

A small flurry as Essop and Mohamed come in, move swiftly down the aisle to the stage, speak briefly with the chairman, and take their places next to Ridwan and Farouk. Immediately afterwards, the Iranian ambassador and the guest of honour, Abu Moosa, with their South African entourage, enter and make their way down the aisle. The Ambassador and Abu Moosa ascend the steps and take their places at the table at the centre of the stage while the members of their train sit in the front row.

The person about to take his place next to Ridwan looks down at him and smiles. Ridwan, who has been frowning at the group, lips parted in deep disbelief and anger, stands up. The man puts out a kindly hand to restrain him but Ridwan flings his hand off and walks out. Essop, Farouk and Mohammed try to restrain him but he brushes them off. Essop rushes after him down the end aisle, to the

back of the hall, past me, past Rashida, who sends a puzzled look in their direction. They exit into the lobby.

What the hell's going on?

I look closely at the front row and start when I make out the man who has taken the seat next to Ridwan's. I hadn't recognised him because of the long flowing robes and topi; I have never ever seen him in anything but his uniform – Nazir Islam!

In a flash, I am in the lobby, positioned behind a pillar near Ridwan and Essop, who are in a quiet but intense dispute. If I show myself, Ridwan will send me back.

Essop is pleading, "But that's what we are about; making people aware of their true faith. Getting them to revert. Da'wah is our mission."

"Yes, but he's a germ. He can't revert. Everything he stands for is anti-Islamic. And *he* walks in with the guest of honour from Qom. Sacrilege!"

"No, Ridwan, the man has reverted; is doing his best to submit to the Will of Allah. How can you be so intolerant? I have seen him at spiritual gatherings. I know he is truly repentant; has repudiated his old lifestyle."

"Don't be a fool, Essop. Just because your uncle recruited him, you defend him. The man is a sinner. I know."

A cynical sneer on his face, Ridwan storms off into the parking lot, gets into his car and sits there. Essop jumps into the passenger seat and they go on arguing.

I go back into the hall. I don't want to miss Abu Moosa's speech. I want to know exactly what the Global Islamic Movement expects of us. At the end of his oration, I still don't have a clue. He has told me that I should read my Qur'an and follow in the footsteps of the Prophet, peace be upon him. My mother has always told me that.

The meeting over, Rashida stands up to leave the hall and begins filing out with the women. As she emerges through the doors, Ridwan who is waiting in the lobby dashes over and pulls her aside.

I get close so I can listen.

“What happened, Ridwan? Why did you walk out? Have you had a change of heart?”

An angry sigh escapes him. “They let in a germ.” Rashida raises inquiring eyebrows. “Nazir Islam.”

“Oh, is Akbar here too?”

“Damn it Rashida, don’t be stupid. They don’t belong here.”

“Where then? ... That’s why I can never join you, Ridwan. I can’t belong to an exclusivist movement. I believe in our constitution which recognises people as people first, before *innocuous* differences like sexual orientation.”

“That’s why I can never be part of your liberal democracy, your man-made rules for living. I follow God’s laws.”

“Isn’t prejudice against God?”

Ridwan grabs his sister by the hand and takes her outside to the parking lot where all those kids who had sat so patiently throughout the meeting, listening and not hearing, are now laughing, running and frolicking. Ridwan waves a hand over them, “Do you see that?”

“What? Hungry kids wanting *real* food not food for thought?”

Ridwan sneers, “Totally caught up in the material world, you can’t see what’s going on here. We are building the new order on a true foundation, the children on whom God’s Word is being imprinted – children, untainted by the corruption of the neo-jahiliyyah. Look at them – the basij – the building blocks of the ummah. We cannot expose them to germs!”

“Look, Ridwan, I understand that your movement is trying to restore respect for the rule of law, something that we sorely need. You and I want the same thing. But I won’t go back to the seventh century for values. You can’t simply wipe out a millennium and more of human experience and development. Today’s world requires today’s solutions. Simplistic belief in right and wrong doesn’t work. Will never work.”

“You want to restore respect for authority but there is no moral authority here, not in a culture of rape; not with people like Nazir Islam around. That’s why I believe in the Book. When the world

becomes a cesspool of evil and corruption, there is only one way to deal with it. Remember Nuh, remember Lut. These children that you see here ... are on the Ark. They will build the new world."

"You can try your best to brainwash them Ridwan but they live in the twenty-first century; they *will* claim their places in it." She hugs her brother and goes down the steps to the parking lot.

Rashida is right. These children live here in South Africa, a land of diversity, exposed to all kinds of influences. Ridwan thinks it is possible to keep them 'pure'; rid the world of evil; create paradise on earth. But there was war even in heaven. Why can't he see that? He worked with Solly Patel and saw how hard it was to clean up just a small place like Neemville. But Solly believed, so Ridwan did. Faith was the lifeline that enabled him to overcome the devastating circumstances of his life, the loss of his mother, his father's trial for murder, a gangster for a brother. He has built his faith into a fortress against corruption; he believes that you can rid the world of evil if you build the Global Ummah.

Poor Ridwan ... trying to build the Ummah, but unable to reconcile the presence of Nazir in the Da'wah movement.

Chapter 16

It's pretty quiet in the shop today, kids probably writing exams or something.

Khalil comes in looking for Mohamed, who has approached him about articles after he completes his law degree at the end of the year. Mohamed will be in later so Khalil sits down to chat. He wants to know whether Rashida will be coming back to Neemville. Would she be interested in being articulated to him?

"Why? What do you want her for?"

Khalil laughs. "Just wishful thinking. In this little place, she would

be hiding her light under a bushel. I wish I could get Karl interested in law; but he's been taking part in school plays and is hooked on show business. I hope he grows out of it. How will my son support himself as an actor? I've seen him in one or two productions and he's pretty good. But I would hate to see him in one of these ridiculous TV soap operas, but that's probably where he's heading."

"Not Hollywood or Bollywood?"

Khalil sighs. "Maybe that too. You are so lucky to have Rashida. She'll probably be a judge someday."

"No, no, she's going to be President." I laugh but my joke falls flat; Khalil is nodding in agreement as he goes back to his office.

I go out on the balcony for a smoke and see Akbar pulling up in the parking lot below. Akbar has been dropping in a lot lately. He's definitely not his usual cheeky, cynical self. I wonder what's going on. As I watch him, his whole body in a hangdog attitude, he seems a little boy again, lost. No wonder he can't push Ridwan around anymore. These days the crusader is much stronger than the criminal. Akbar enters and slumps into a chair.

"What's up? Why aren't you at your office supplies job? Not working today?"

"I don't work there anymore. I was fired."

"Thought you and Islam were partners. Isn't the business in your name?"

"No, it's not. It never was." His eyes wander over my desk. "He has a new boy now. Got any smokes?" I pull my pack out of my pocket.

He sits back observing me with troubled eyes. "When you killed Siva – was it in cold blood or was it anger and hate?"

I turn to my monitor. *Siva's beautiful face fills the screen.*

Akbar takes a deep pull, blows a few rings. "With me, it will be both – premeditated and a crime of passion. Anger, resentment, passions, drive me as I lie on my bed every night planning exactly how I am going to do it. I will find him at one of his stakeouts, walk right up to him in his car where he thinks no one sees him, pull out a revolver, aim right between the eyes and squeeze until every bullet

is lodged in his brain.” He reaches for a cigarette. “There’s no such thing as cold-blooded murder unless you’re a hit man hired to kill someone you don’t know.”

I try to forget ... but I cannot. They still haven’t found his murderer ... Oh Siva.

“I have a mission.” Akbar is rambling on. “Nazir is so confused. Man, I think they have him praying five times a day. He’s trying so hard to be a good Muslim. Is it real? He is who he is.”

Siva never looked at me.

“Did you love Ma? ... Really love her? ... Hey, Dad!” Akbar nudges me. “Did you love Ma? ... Did you feel she was part of you?”

Where the hell is this going?

“Did you try to kill her because you were nothing without her?”

Oh Siva.

I feel my son’s laser look. “No, she was your screen ... you needed her.” I lean back nonchalant as though he’s talking nonsense. “You can’t hide from *me*, Dad ... Why did you never tell us about your brother, Hassan?”

I jump up and switch on the kettle. He is aware that he has unnerved me. The conversation is veering in a dangerous direction; with the mention of Hassan, he is moving to an admission that will destroy me.

“Dadima has called me Hassan so often, I had to ask her. When she told me about Hassan, it freed me from my personal hell. I could finally be myself ... thanks to Dadima.”

“Coffee?” I am trying to distract him.

“Like Nazir, you are looking for answers in the wrong place. You won’t find them in the heart of prejudice. Look at Nazir, trying to fit in exactly where he is a ‘germ’. Man, how perverse is that! I guess if you hate yourself enough, you join the enemy; it’s a matter of camouflage, especially if you plan to blow them up.”

“Is that what’s he’s planning?”

“That’s what I’m planning.”

“You hate yourself then?” I bite my tongue. It’s almost an admission.

“No. I just want to put a sick animal out of its misery.”

“A sick animal ... who...?”

He stands up suddenly. “Don’t worry, Dad. I’m going home. This is not the day.”

So he knows about Hassan! Hassan, my eldest brother, my constant companion in the days before I started school.

Hassan and I had shared the same room. He wasn’t sent to school and didn’t work, so he and I spent a lot of time together. Hassan didn’t work in my Dad’s factory like Karim, the second eldest, now the boss. Hassan, the firstborn, should have been the boss. But Dad was always angry with him, hitting him, chasing him away.

Ma did her best to keep Hassan away from Dad. She loved Hassan; he was her favourite ... because of Dad. She tried to keep Hassan with her as much as possible. From the time he was very little, she would take him into her sewing room where he played with scraps, dressing dolls and creating fashions for them.

Even though he was more than ten years older, he was my best friend. We sat together and looked at pictures in books. He made me give the people in the pictures names and make up stories about them. I couldn’t read so Hassan was teaching me. I don’t know how he had learnt to read and write. Ma couldn’t read English and Hassan had tried to teach her too, but she had just laughed, “No, I’m too old.”

Whenever I got a new toy, especially a car or an engine, I would stay in our room taking it apart. Hassan knew exactly how it fitted together, how it worked, and he helped me when I got stuck. He also helped Ma with her sewing. Ma had taught him how to use the machine. She had hovered over him to make sure he didn’t hurt himself, but he seemed to have a knack and was soon helping Ma with some of her work.

I don’t speak of Hassan to anyone; we were not allowed to mention his name after he was sent away. And I missed him more than I can say. I used to go everywhere with him. We would walk around in town even after Daddy tried to stop that; after Uncle Dawood

told him he had seen us talking to those dancers who perform at Hindustani weddings. But Hassan always did what he wanted.

Daddy hated him. When I was six, Daddy sent him away to a special farm somewhere far away. Hassan was beautiful – better looking than all of us, including my sisters. It broke Ma's heart when Dad sent him away. She had held on to him and cried and cried and cried; had pleaded with my father, "This is my child. How you can do this?" But Dad had simply turned his back on her.

I know it is haram to think about Hassan, but I can't help it. He used to make me laugh. I can see him putting on my sisters' shoes and walking around in them. Sometimes he would get their dresses and try them on. One day, he brought Hasina's dupatta, bangles and lipstick to our room. He rouged his cheeks and painted his lips, put the dupatta over his head and shoulders and the bangles on his arms. He looked so pretty. I laughed and laughed. Then he put a scarf over my head and rubbed lipstick on my lips. When I looked in the mirror, I giggled ... I looked pretty too. Then he danced like in the films. He pulled me into the dance with him and I laughed and laughed.

We were singing, dancing and having fun when Hasina came to see what was going on. She took one look at us and got a fright. She pulled the stole off Hassan's head and shoulders, the bangles off his arm, took a handkerchief and rubbed the lipstick off his mouth and cheeks. Hassan was laughing all the while.

She scolded Hassan as though he were a child, not her older brother. "You must stop doing this! Our father will kill you if he sees you."

But he wasn't listening to her; he was playing with the locket that was hanging from her neck. Jerking it out of his hands, she turned to me, "And what's wrong with you? Why *you* starting this nonsense?"

Eyes, mouth, wide open, I stared at her. What was wrong with my sister? We were having fun. But she pulled off the hijab and rubbed off the lipstick,

"Hey, don't do that; don't I look pretty?" Hassan began laughing.

Hasina was startled. "Not you too."

When Dad sent Hassan away, it was so bad – the way he beat him. I thought he was going to kill him. He kept shouting, "You are not my son. You are not my son. You bring shame on this house."

The night before, he had gone to fetch Hassan from a neighbour's house and when they got home, Dad had started beating him. Ma had grabbed his arm. "Stop, stop. Leave him. Leave him. Leave my child alone."

While Dad was struggling with Ma, Hassan ran into our room and locked the door. Dad turned on Ma. "It's all your fault. He comes from your side, not mine." He caught sight of me, shuddered, stormed out and didn't come back till the early hours of the morning.

The next day, Hassan was packed off to the farm. When it was time for him to leave, Ma clung to him and wouldn't let go. I ran and held him too. Dad pulled me away and gave me a hard slap. I started crying and he chased me back into the house. I ran up the stairs. My brother, Karim was on the landing; hard-eyed, taut lipped, watching Ma holding Hassan close, close, not letting go. Dad slapped her, grabbed her by the shoulders, pulled her away and held on to her so she couldn't get to Hassan. Then the people from the farm grabbed hold of him and pushed him into their car. Ma screamed, went on screaming as the driver pulled the door to and drove off. When Dad let her go, she ran up the stairs, pushed past Karim, went in and locked herself in the bathroom.

We never saw Hassan again.

Dad was so angry no one in the family could talk about it. But we all knew why he had sent Hassan away.

There was to be this wedding at a Hindu home in the next street. In the yard a marquee, with a flag flying from the top. Streamers decorated the house, the bushes, the trees, and festooned the entrance to the marquee. Music played all day and night; neighbours were in and out setting up, putting out chairs, getting everything ready. Hassan

and I went in to look around. In the centre of the tent, we saw men tying banana trees to pillars at the corners of a little platform.

I went up to one of them. "Is this for a band?"

"No, no. This is the pandal. The wedding ceremony will take place here. It will look beautiful after we have decorated it."

We went outside and in one corner of the yard found the cooking area where huge pots stood ready. Irons bars had been set over bricks for an open air fireplace where enormous amounts of rice and curries would be cooked. Nearby were trestle tables with benches where meals would be served on banana leaves.

While we were walking about, we saw some men going into a small tent near the fence. Hassan became excited and ran to talk to them. I ran after him and saw that he was talking to his friends, the dancers that Daddy didn't like. They had been hired to entertain the crowd that would gather there that night before the wedding the next day. Pointing to the small tent, one of the dancers said, "This is our dressing room. Come and see our costumes." Hassan went in; when he came out, he was laughing, excited. The dancers were saying he should come back that night and dance with them.

As we were making our way home, I asked Hassan, "Why doesn't Daddy like those people." Flushed, smiling, Hassan wasn't listening.

That night, I heard footsteps hurrying along the pavement to the little alley with the stairway leading to our home over the factory. Looking out the window, I saw our neighbour, Uncle Dawood, rushing up the stairs. He banged on the door, shouted at Karim who opened, "Where's your father? Tell him to come and see what his son is doing." He came in. After a few minutes, Dad, Karim and the Uncle Dawood were rushing down the stairs. I followed, making sure they didn't see me. They were too agitated to notice me anyway.

They made straight for the wedding house on the corner. When they got there, Uncle Dawood took Dad to the fence on the side street and pointed to where the dancers were entertaining the crowd.

The dancers, men dressed like women in choli blouses, long skirts, bangles and chokers, jewels in their long hair – wigs – and faces

thick with make-up, glowed with a strange aura. Unable to take my eyes off them, I felt a fearful, wonderful fascination. Watching them dancing, moving their sinuous arms, shaking their heads, swaying their hips, I was enthralled. Most alluring among them – Hassan!

Smokeless fire, djinni in ecstasy – Hassan! There was something about him, about these men that held me in their power; me and everyone in the crowd. Laughing, clapping, faces glowing with animal energy, spectators were caught in a spell, a wild excitement that resounded in their cheering and jeering. I had never felt anything like this before – a mad craving for and anticipation of pleasure. Dad and Uncle Karim rushed through the gate to drag Hassan out of this sensual revelry. I stayed just where I was, mesmerised by sensations filling my loins. I did not know what was happening in my body; such unaccountable sensations.

Years later, I came to understand what I had experienced that night. In their challenge to traditional sexual norms, those dancers had released the inhibitions of all spectators. More potent than any aphrodisiac, they had evoked erotic feelings that had driven the crowd into frenzy. The spectators' shouts of raucous, derisive laughter had barely covered their lustful hankering after the wild pleasures of true abandonment, freedom from restraint – euphoric gifts of darkness being offered by the ambiguity of the dancers.

Swirling in a circle, hips swaying, eyes glancing from side to side, arms curling like snakes, dancers impel the most beautiful one in the centre to awaken and thrust them into ecstasy. Slowly, like the purest of flames, smokeless, the beautiful one rises. Flickering arms reach out, alluring eyes and swaying hips invite as his steps bring him closer and closer. I am beginning to melt into him, but when I look into his eyes, I see the incensed face of my father and become a burning whip that lashes out and is consumed. I turn to run but my feet don't move. My father, dancing with Hassan, holds him in a fiery embrace.

Trapped in taboos, my father, had kept his yearning throttled, and frustration, bloating him with unreasoning rage, had turned him

into the sword of nemesis. He feared and hated the dancers –... especially Hassan ... alluring djinni, child of his loins. Underneath his excessive anger lurked the inordinate shame of having felt the pull of the forbidden.

And I began to look at myself through Dad's eyes. I was afraid ... I was ashamed. The craving and pleasure that I had felt were so intense, they had to be wrong, sinful. I didn't know why; I just knew they were. I could not speak to anyone about it. And my love for Hassan turned to fear.

Whenever I hear of heinous murders of men like my brother, I see my father's fist, and mine, raised high, ready to fall. On Hassan. He ran away from the farm and we lost all contact with him. Still, I see him everywhere, ... in my mother's eyes ... in my mirror ... in ...

Though Hassan was sent away, he never left me.

And I had to prove I was not like Hassan. I married when I was nineteen ... I had children.

Oh Akbar!

Chapter 17

Doomsday! The gods speak! The earth opens up – Neemville teeters on the brink of a chasm!

Murder most foul! Heinous execution!

It is the news of the day. Television cameras transport us to the scene of the crime, an isolated country road in Rozendal, just outside Burgerstad ... focus on a burnt out car ... cut to a smoking, black patch some meters away where a body has burned out on the grass.

A reporter describes the ruthless killing that has taken place ... petrol bombs thrown at a police official in his car, soaking him, setting him and the car on fire ...

Oh god no! Oh Akbar!

... his burned, blackened body ... found some meters from the car ... he had extricated himself from the blazing vehicle and crawled away, trying to escape the flames.

The camera takes us from the spot where the body was found, to the burnt out car, riddled with bullet holes.

My son! My son!

The TV reporter interviews Koos Pienaar, the first person on the scene. "When I saw the huge fire raging out of control on the Rozendal Road, I drove over, saw a car in flames on the side of the road and stopped. As I jumped out of my car, I was shocked to see a vehicle pulling away from someone burning on the ground."

No, no, no, no, no!

"I ran over to try to help but it was too late ... nothing there but a charred form, black smoke billowing from the mouth out of scorched lungs. Suddenly, I saw that the eyes were staring straight at me. I flinched in horror. How could there be life in this charred body? But those eyes, fixed on me, were compelling my attention – concentrated on one thing, one thing only – to hold me there! As I stood petrified by the power of the man's will, he spoke his name and the name of his killer, even spelled them out – twice! A few more people arrived on the scene, among them a paramedic – too late."

Suddenly overcome, Pienaar exclaims between gasps, "He was lying there, a corpse, spelling out his name ... his murderer's name." The reporter informs us that the dying man, a police captain ... Solly Patel ...

Oh, Akbar!

Hasina and Ma gasp, cling to each other in horror.

"... he repeated the information to the ambulance personnel and to the staff at the hospital. After this superhuman effort to ensure that his murderer was known, he finally let go. He died before his family could get to the hospital."

Oh, Akbar!

Ma, who has been gasping and exclaiming throughout, bursts

into tears. "He didn't deserve to die like that. Insha Allah, he will find a place in Paradise for trying to protect our children from drugs and criminals."

Hasina too is sobbing violently.

I wish they would stop crying; I can't stand it. I can't stand it! I begin to tremble uncontrollably as I try to suppress the tattoo in my chest.

Hasina looks up suddenly. "Chotabhai? You all right?"

Wracked by tremendous, dry, empty sobs, I am the passer-by seeing the spirit of the man clinging to his charred remains.

Hasina jumps up, "It's a terrible shock. I'll bring some tea; that will make us all feel better."

He named his killer! Whose name did Solly call out? *Akbar? Ridwan?* They are not here ... haven't been home for a couple of days ... Which one of my boys? ... Which one? ... The police know. They know the name of the murderer ... Solly named his killer!

The front door opens, bangs shut and Akbar crashes through to his room. Ma rushes after him. Hasina and I dash after her. She is banging on Akbar's door, screaming, "Hassan! Hassan!" I see my anxiety in Hasina's face.

Terrified, I hammer at the door. "Akbar, Akbar! Solly Patel has been murdered. Akbar! ..."

The door flies open, an acrid smell, Akbar looks out of red, confused eyes. "Solly Patel? ... Murdered? You're joking."

Hasina bursts out. "No, no. It's true; it was on the television."

His look is quite disoriented. "So they got him."

I grab his arm, "What are you talking about? Who did? Who did?"

"I don't know. He had many enemies."

I let go of him ... he can't have done it ... *Where the hell is Ridwan?*

Today, the aftershock – it registers on the Richter scale. Nazir Islam has been arrested for the murder of Solly Patel! Nazir! Solly! His

closest friend! His benefactor! ... Impossible!

But in all reports ... Solly named Nazir Islam as he was dying. That's the name he gave to the witness who came to help him, to the paramedics and hospital staff.

No! No! No! It can't be! Nazir could *not* have killed him! Solly was his brother ... more than a brother! The only people I know who hated Solly – *Akbar and Ridwan*. Akbar even told me he was going to kill him. I bang on Akbar's door.

"Akbar, Akbar! Nazir Islam has been arrested for the murder of Solly Patel. It's on the news."

Ma runs out of the kitchen, into the lounge, followed closely by Akbar and Hasina ... but the broadcast has moved on to the next item.

Hasina stands wide-eyed, aghast, "It can't be. Nazir is Muslim; he wouldn't do that to another Muslim. Burn him! Sacrilege!" She turns to Akbar. "Why are they accusing your friend?"

Akbar stares blankly, eyes wide open, aghast, fixed on me, "No! No – not possible. You didn't hear right. He couldn't have. He would never kill Solly. He loved Solly. He loved him! He loved him!" He drops onto the sofa, sobbing ... tears ... for Solly? ... Nazir? ... himself?

Where the hell is Ridwan? He hasn't been home for three days, not since Solly's murder. Why am I so concerned? I'm being ridiculous. The killer has been named – Nazir Islam! Ridwan had nothing to do with it. He worshipped Solly when he was a kid. Solly put him on the path to a righteous life. The man was his hero. The murder, the brutality of the murder, that's not, could never be ... Ridwan. No! no! no! Does he even know?

This will be a terrible shock ... Will it? ... he deserted Solly to join Qibla, ... lost his regard for Solly ... Qibla called Solly a sell-out ... the drive-by shooting of Solly ... now ... a heinous execution ... making sure he didn't get away ... this time?

What's wrong with me? It's spelled out clearly in all the papers: Solly named his murderer, Nazir Islam! Nazir is in jail! I know, I know, I know ... but it won't sink in. Nazir ... close friend ... intimate ... impossible! I devour every mention of the murder ... but it is the same horror served up over and over in all newspapers.

Still, I go on searching; I am looking for even the slightest connection ... to my sons.

But Akbar is sitting around at home – a man in a coma ... Where is Ridwan? Why has he gone into hiding? ... What's wrong with me? Solly named Nazir Islam as he was dying; the cop has been arrested! He's in prison! I know this; I know he is in prison! Why do I keep coming back to Ridwan and Akbar? I should be thanking God my sons are not involved; instead I keep looking for signs of guilt.

Because the truth sounds like fiction!

When Essop, Mohamed and Farouk come to ask me where Ridwan is, I become agitated. I was counting on them to tell me, but they are also looking for him. They are taking part in a symposium; Ridwan had found a key document but they don't know what or where it is. They are desperate to find him. It's odd – they don't know where he is. They always work as a team.

Farouk sits down at Ridwan's computer and goes through his searches.

Hasina, home after work, rings me at the shop. She has just called Rashida. On the morning of Solly's murder, Ridwan left to visit his sister in Braamfontein but Rashida says he never pitched. Hasina has asked Rashida to call if Ridwan gets in touch. My sister thinks Ridwan, devastated by Solly's murder, is somewhere suffering all by himself. He went off like that after Ayesha left us; went missing a couple of days. We were at our wits end until a police sergeant at the station called Hasina and told her they had picked him up for stealing a cell phone. It took her some time to explain the situation to the cops before they eventually let her take him home.

When I try to explain that he was only six then – a child – he's an adult now, she dismisses me. Hasina believes Ridwan loves Solly

and could be in terrible trouble. The last time it was a cell phone. What will it be this time? In desperation, she even asks Akbar.

He breaks down in anguished anger. "Why are you worried? They've arrested *Nazir*! ... *Nazir*!"

This is the fifth day that Ridwan has been missing. When his comrades troop into the shop again tonight, I look up hopefully. But they are as mystified and worried. They ask if he's with Rashida. Though I tell them he's not, they still want her telephone number and address. I don't have them.

When I get home, Hasina tells me they came to see her; she gave them Rashida's telephone number. "They are determined to find him. I am so glad. At least *they* are doing something."

She thinks I don't care, but if the boys don't know where he is, nobody does. It's for the best – if he ... but no! ... it was *Nazir* ... it was *Nazir*! ... *What the hell was it? A lovers' quarrel? ... Was Ridwan right?*

Chapter 18

After breakfast this morning, I leave for the shop. On Saturdays, we open from ten till two, three, in the afternoon. On my way, I stop at Riaad's café to pick up the local tabloid. Leaning on the counter, Riaad shakes his head as he looks at the front page with its picture of a senior police official and the headline, *Solly Patel Was My Friend*.

"First they kill him; now they say they love him. The big cover up begins." At the shop, the gang see Nazir simply as a hitman for the syndicate.

"Solly was a good guy but he was wasting his time. You can't fight corruption; its endemic," says Shabir. 'Like AIDS; it can't be cured. Solly gave his life for nothing.'

Such a cynic! But with Nazir being interrogated, members of the

syndicate must live in fear of exposure. They are powerful and most dangerous when running scared. I just hope Akbar is safe. Nazir isn't; he knows too much. Still in custody and fearing for his life, Nazir refuses to apply for bail. But how safe is he in prison with high-ranking police officials involved in the syndicate? I check the papers every day to see whether he has been found hanging by his shirt in his cell, whether some inmate has knifed him to death, whether he has been shot trying to escape – nothing so far.

And these are our cops! Whoever is going to change this society has his work cut out for him. Ridwan may be right. The only way to deal with ingrained corruption is a purge, another flood like the one that destroyed all corrupt and evil people and cleansed the world for Nuh.

Sunday; Rashida is here ... not her usual composed, confident self. Lurking at the back of her eyes ... a quiet anxiety ... not fear – distrust – as she looks at me.

“Dadima, Hasinafoi, Dad, you don't have to worry about Ridwan; he's with me.”

“What! With you! Since when?”

“Last Saturday.”

The day Solly was murdered! I shudder in relief; *he's not involved*.

“You mean he was with you all the time!” Ma is staring incredulously. “Why you didn't tell us? I been so worried; couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. Now you say he was there all the time. How you can be so cruel?”

“Dadima, I couldn't let you know ... Ridwan didn't want it ... doesn't want it. If he finds out that I came here today, he will lose his mind. So please ... don't try to get in touch with him.”

“Ya Allah! He's in trouble.”

Hasina puts her arms around our mother and turns on me. “I told you. I told you. Didn't I tell you? He doesn't know what he's doing when he gets so upset. He knows, eh Rashida, he knows about Solly.”

“No ... this has nothing to do with Solly.”

Hasina frowns. “Not Solly? Then why ...?”

Rashida stares at me. “I don’t know whether you can handle this, Dad.”

Hasina grabs hold of Rashida, “Rashida, please.”

“Look, what I have to tell you will upset you all very much.” Her eyes are pleading. “He needs your love and understanding; he needs us very much but he can’t reach out to us.”

Oh my god! What is he involved in!

“Dadima, Hasinafoi, Dad – I have shocking news.” She takes a deep breath; it’s not like her to be so hesitant, so uneasy. I brace myself. “Ridwan was carjacked and robbed just as he was getting out to come to my flat.”

Carjacked! Robbed! Confused, I turn to Rashida.

“Oh Allah,” a dry sob escapes from Ma, “did they hurt him?”

Rashida’s eyes look into mine ... pleading ... “He was ... raped.”

Dead silence.

I dash off to the bathroom to throw up. When I come back, Ma and Hasina are sitting like statues.

“Let me make you all some tea.” Rashida stands up but Hasina pulls her down. She can’t speak ... indicates that Rashida stay where she is. I pull out my cigarettes but there’s been a short circuit somewhere, my fingers have become idiots. Rashida pulls a cigarette out of my pack, puts it between my lips. She looks calm, but her hands are shaking as she lights it.

Hasina croaks, “What happened?”

“Ridwan called me on Friday. He wanted to tell me about a seminar and a document he had found that would give me a better understanding of the Global Islamic Movement. As I had just completed the research I was doing on a Bill that the Women’s Forum is studying, I was treating myself to a small break and invited him to spend the following day with me. He was supposed to have been there at nine, for breakfast, but he didn’t show. I telephoned several times but his phone was off. I couldn’t understand what was going on; this was so unlike Ridwan. He would never just stay away

and not let me know.

“After a couple of hours, thinking he wasn’t coming, I decided to go shopping. I live in a house that has been converted into four flats, Dad. Mine is upstairs. When I came to the top of the stairs, I got a huge fright; there was a body on the lower steps, scrunched up against the wall, the head sunk into the chest, the face hidden under a shock of dishevelled hair. I nearly died when I realised it was Ridwan – without a topi, his kurtah torn and bloody. I rushed down to him, but he pushed me off, wouldn’t let me touch him. His face ... cracked with fear and shame.” Rashida stops to gain control of her voice. Copious tears course silently over Hasina’s cheeks.

“I didn’t know what to do. I put my hands out so he could take them if he wanted. I waited. Eventually he reached out. Together we staggered up the stairs to my door. When we got in, he lurched towards the bathroom and locked himself in. I heard him moaning as he showered. I wanted to call Jonathan who lives next door, he’s an intern at Jo’burg General Hospital, but I was waiting for Ridwan to come out. The shower was still going after an hour so I ran next door, explained to Jonathan and asked for his help. Fortunately he didn’t have plans for the day.

“After another hour, I heard the shower shut off. Then Ridwan called from the bathroom. He didn’t have anything to wear. I took him a dressing gown. When he came out, he avoided looking at me. I told him I had made up the bed in the spare room and asked if I could get him something to eat or drink. He just kept his eyes lowered, disappeared into the spare room and closed the door.

I ran next door to fetch Jonathan. He brought the medical bag his grandma had given him when he graduated. We went in. The moment Ridwan saw Jonathan, he pulled the blanket up to his throat, reared, fell out of bed, knocked his head against the wall and lay on the floor holding us at bay with his screams. Jonathan whispered that he needed something to calm him down. I nodded. When he had his syringe ready, we both went forward and grabbed hold of him. He screamed while I held him down for the shot.

“After he fell asleep, Jonathan examined him and dressed his

wounds. When he had finished, he came into the lounge – eyes full of concern, ‘Rashida, I think you know what’s happened here.’

I sat tense waiting for the awful words. ‘Ridwan has been raped.’ I was expecting those words; still it was a blow to hear them. ‘There’s some rectal and anal tearing. He needs to report this ... take an HIV test.’

I must have looked like a ghost because he suddenly sat down next to me and held me. He wanted me to take a mild sedative and lie down but I shook my head. I had to get Ridwan some clothes.

“Jonathan drove me to the nearest mall where he picked out clothes; he had a good idea of Ridwan’s size and needs. When we got back, I checked on Ridwan. He was still asleep. Jonathan made tea and we sat with our cups in the kitchen.

Jonathan sighed. ‘Men hardly ever report rapes; the law doesn’t encourage it; says there’s no such thing as male rape. And when victims go to police stations, they are ridiculed, scorned. Don’t be surprised if your brother doesn’t report it. But he must be tested for the HI virus. When he is ready, bring him to the Gen; I’ll take care of it.’

“I couldn’t suppress my tears any longer. ‘Oh Jonathan, Ridwan will never overcome it. He’s a homophobe. Nothing worse could have happened to him. For a devout Muslim like him to be sodomised, is to be condemned to hell.’

Jonathan shocked said. ‘But he is the victim here!’

I told him it made no difference. ‘Ridwan will revile himself. Just as he reviles our brother.’ ”

Damn! Damn! Damn! Why did she have to say it!

Hasina puts her arms around Rashida and holds her.

“Hasinafoi, I’m fine. It’s Ridwan we have to worry about.”

I go to the window; *on the glass, Hassan’s sad face is staring back at me.* I start.

Rashida calls out, “Are you all right, Dad.”

I can’t say a word; I just nod and sit down.

“Jonathan stayed with me and helped me cook supper. When I went to see if Ridwan was awake, I found him lying on his bed,

hands over his eyes, trying to squeeze out whatever images were trapped under his lids. He wouldn't look up but somehow sensed Jonathan at the door and became rigid. When Jonathan moved forward to help him, he jumped up, ran out and locked himself in the bathroom again.

'I'd better go. I've seen this before. Men who've been raped often don't want other men near them.' And he left.

I spent a long time at the bathroom door trying to convince Ridwan that he could come out, that Jonathan had gone. When he eventually emerged, he went straight back to his room and closed the door. He had a very bad night. I could hear him moaning in the dark; he screamed once or twice ... got up at least four times to shower.

"It went on like that the next day as well. He was having flash-backs, would suddenly fold into himself as if to ward off an attack, would kick and fight, call out to spectres to take the car, take the cell phone – leave him alone. The little I know, I pieced together from his violent ramblings. He didn't tell me anything; wouldn't talk to me, couldn't talk about the assault – just closed in on himself, reliving the whole thing over and over.

"I thought he would find comfort in the Holy Book, so I took him a Qur'an but he pulled back from it in shame. I felt helpless; I knew I couldn't really help him. I spoke to a couple of professionals who told me I had to get him into a hospital.

"That's what I've done. Jonathan had him admitted into the trauma centre at Jo'burg General Hospital; he gives me a daily report on his condition.

"Hasinafoi, the Ridwan we know has gone for the time being; there's just a tormented phantom in his place. Until he is ready to come back, there's nothing we can do; we have to leave it to professionals and wait."

"So he's not with you? He's in hospital? Oh my poor boy! I want to see him. I want to help him."

"I'm so sorry Hasinafoi, you would be wasting your time. He blames himself; is so ashamed he can't deal with people he knows.

He's better off with strangers. The doctors have even asked me to stay away."

Tears rolling down her cheeks, Ma, who has been listening intently, goes off to her room ... "Oh Hassan, Oh Hassan."

I jump up, go out into the yard and pull out a cigarette ... *Oh Ridwan!*

Chapter 19

In the months that follow, desperate to pluck Ridwan out of my mind, I don't ask about him but Hasina can speak of nothing else. I try to block my ears ... she doesn't notice. Day after day, she bangs at my eardrums forcing the sounds and images of the horror into my brain. I can't get away! In the shop, everything reminds me of him – his work station, his students, his coffee mug. His friends don't come in to help anymore. Have they rejected him too?

Today, Khalil walks into the shop and slumps into a chair. He looks quite crestfallen.

"What's wrong?"

"I've been trying, but I can't get through to him."

Ah – Ridwan!

Khalil sighs, "When he came out of hospital, he kept asking for Solly. He didn't know; hadn't been told; the doctors felt he wasn't ready. But when he kept on asking, Rashida told him and he had a relapse. After that he disappeared from his life and left a wraith sitting in the dark, staring at the emptiness."

Khalil is giving me a questioning look. Why am I squirming?

As is his way, he comes right out with it. "You haven't been to see Ridwan. Why? ... Tell me. I want to know." He sits there waiting. I turn to my computer. "It's been six months. Why have you abandoned him?" I don't answer. He sees that he is wasting his time

and stands up to leave. At the door, he turns, gives me a long, hard look, “What kind of a father are you?”

What kind of a father? No! No! No! That’s not it; the question is, ‘What kind of a son is Ridwan?’ We were becoming so close. Now *he* is under the bridge. He may come back to live in the real world or he may remain forever in a void. I don’t know; I can’t help him. I am – have always been – locked in.

Oh Hassan!

I am busy checking that all computers have been properly shut down before closing up, when Akbar barges in and plonks heavily in one of the chairs.

“The trial begins tomorrow.” He sees my inquiring look. “Nazir’s trial begins tomorrow. He’s been in prison six months. I don’t know how he’s surviving in there? If he’s convicted – my god!”

He still cares for Nazir even after the cop dropped him. I tell him not to worry. “Nothing’s going to come of it. Powerful people are involved.”

His retort is scornful. “Then he’ll swing for them.” He pulls out a cigarette, offers me one and we sit smoking together. “The evidence against him is solid. All those independent witnesses at the crime scene.”

How long will they remain independent?

“They’re all confused. Solly probably called out Nazir’s name as someone they should phone. They must have misunderstood. How could Nazir have killed someone he loved?”

I shudder. “He got the contract.”

Akbar turns on me. “That’s what everyone is saying. But Solly was his brother. He couldn’t have killed him! And in that brutal way! Burn him alive! Oh god, he couldn’t have, wouldn’t have. He didn’t do it; he loved Solly.”

Akbar drops his cigarette, grinds it into the floor, pulls out another and lights it. I quickly bring an ashtray. “He *couldn’t* do that;

not to someone he loved.”

I see what is behind his anguish but I won't put it into words. Words have killed my connection to Ridwan. *Oh Hassan*. I turn away violently; Akbar doesn't notice – just sits there smoking. I'm afraid of what he will say. I want him to go but he just sits there so I jump up to finish checking the equipment.

He shakes his head. “It's not possible.”

Ignoring him, I continue shutting down. I work quickly. I want to put a stop to this. I don't want to hear anymore. The thought of Ridwan is bad enough – that's been put into words. I don't want any more words! Words can't be ignored.

“Okay, I'm done. We can go.”

He doesn't move. I stiffen with fear at what he will say next. He looks into my eyes. “How could you do it? You shot Ma. How could you do it? Didn't you love her?”

I am about to protest. Then I see in his eyes that I'm not here.

“Okay, she betrayed you, robbed you of your self-respect. Love is so weird. Your ability to love somebody else – it's all tied up with your ability to love yourself. ... He can't accept himself.”

He's back to Nazir again.

“That's why he converted in the first place; thought the religion would help him sort himself out. The police directors, commissioners, whoever, who got him to convert, his mentors – he used to pray with them, attend religious discussions at their homes, but that didn't change him, *couldn't* change him ... they knew that ... and they preyed on it.”

I jiggle my keys. I can't let him go on. “You ready to go?”

“He got mad at me because I don't give a damn what anyone thinks ... I'm okay with who I am. He wanted me to be ashamed. Like him. That's what they were teaching him – Those holier-than-thou super-cops.” He lights another cigarette. “They made him throw me out. When he told me to leave, I thought he was joking; I laughed – asked if he was homophobic.”

The words are coming ... I am at the door.

“Why did he convert? Surely he knows that all religions are

homophobic. It's like gays who insist on weddings, what for? If you need external legitimation for who you are, you are never going to find yourself."

I am outside, ready to lock the door.

Shaken out of his spell, Akbar calls out, "Hey, where you rushing to?"

I call back, "You coming?"

At breakfast this morning, Akbar sighs, "The show begins today." I look up, eyebrows raised. "Nazir's trial."

That accounts for his long face. I don't say anything but I agree – it will be a show, a magic show. Nazir's case will be a trial that isn't a trial, it will disappear, poof! Gone! Everyone paid off.

"I think I'll take a drive into town. Look in at the courthouse."

So that's why he's up so early. But he's going to see what can't be seen. Why do I feel pulled to go with him?

Inside the courtroom, only two young white guys. Akbar and I go to the front row. Someone in a lawyer's black gown approaches us, a member of the prosecution team, wants to know whether we want to talk to him; are we witnesses? I shake my head, ask what's happening. Nothing – the case has been postponed.

I knew it would be. The two guys behind us get up and leave. So do we.

Later in the day, Akbar comes to the shop to tell me that the trial has been postponed for six months. Another six months of torture for him.

"I don't know why I care; he ended it between us."

There will be more postponements.

Justice is simply an illusion. At the court today they presented the treatment for a prime time series. But it will be killed – there won't even be a pilot. It won't get on the air.

Dreams that plague me every night show betrayal everywhere, especially between lovers. You can't be human outside the human community; can you be human within it? If you cannot, what's the point? What actually does it mean to be human? I can't figure it out, so I keep inventing new purposes for living. Before I went to Baghdad, it was Holy War. But my notion of jihad was a simplistic dream, an escape from reality, a scenario of simple good versus simple evil. Now I can no longer clearly identify the enemy, not since Solly's murder.

I can't sleep. I go into the lounge to watch the late evening news.

Akbar comes in, throws himself into Ma's chair, pulls out his cigarettes, offers me one, lights up, watches the smoke curl up to the ceiling, "I have just come back from Rashida's. I went to see Ridwan."

I wince. Not Akbar too! That's all they talk about these days. Now even Akbar? He hates his brother – so why?

"He sent for me. Poor guy, sits in the dark with the curtains closed, won't let any light in ... has become so fragile ... shrinking into nothingness!"

I don't say anything. Ridwan, like Akbar, is beyond the pale. I cannot tolerate what they are. Too close to home.

"When I got there, Rashida so glad to see me, threw her arms around me, hugged me, kissed me and sent me into his room. She made me feel warm inside. She looks just like Ma; acts like her too."

He's making me squirm ... *behind Ayesha ... Siva*

"I went into Ridwan's room and greeted, but he didn't say one word, just sat there staring vacantly so I sat down opposite him and waited. I thought he needed a little time. We had no time for each other after he became part of Solly's anti-drug operation. All we did was fight. When Nazir came into the picture, it got much worse; he treated me like evil incarnate."

I shudder.

"Anyway I waited, but I was getting impatient. He sent for me so what the hell? I jumped up went over, leaned on the arms of his chair and looked straight into his eyes.

"What the hell's wrong with you man, sitting here feeling sorry

for yourself? So you were raped, big deal. Get over it. Be a man; face up to your misfortune. People don't give up when they meet with adversity. What happened to your bloody faith? What the hell good is religion if it can't sustain you; abandons you when you most need it?

"At that he jumped up. I don't know where he got the strength – I mean you should see him, just half his weight – threw a punch, like a pat from a powder puff, and hissed – he didn't have the stamina to shout; 'Shut your mouth. Don't pick on my religion. You, you ...' – he was going to say moffie – but it stuck in his throat." Akbar sees me shudder and shakes his head. "Just like you, Dad. Then he yelled 'What do you know about the Word of God?'

"I sneered at him, 'I don't have to know a damn thing. I just look at you, collapsed into a hopeless heap, and I know it's worthless.' He rushed at me in a futile gesture of attack and folded against me. I put him back in his chair – then I yelled at him.

"What the hell are you doing, man? Turning Rashida's place into a crypt; haunting it like a bloody ghost? Is that what you learnt from your precious Seerah, to hide in despair and give up? You make me glad I never filled my head with any kind of religious mumbo-jumbo."

At that point Rashida came rushing in. 'What's going on in here? Are you mad, Akbar? You come here and fight with Ridwan after all he's been through? In his condition? Get out of here. Get out right now!' So I left. After all he is *your* son."

What the hell is he saying?

Akbar yawns, stands up. "Anyway, I've been to see him. I went to help but I see I can't; he hates me for who I am." He goes off to bed.

Ridwan in his room, reading from the Qur'an smiles. "Dad, I am a basiji; I will fight in the war."

In which war? Afghanistan? Mogadishu? Baghdad? Palestine? Darfur? Who is he going to fight – Sunnis, Arabs, Shiis, Baathists, Rebel Forces, US Forces? "But you are not a jihadi!"

"The war against evil." He stands up, folds his prayer rug, gives me

his Qur'an, kisses it, asks me to hold it up high so he can pass under it three times.

Hassan comes rushing in, "Ridwan, what are you doing?"

"I am a basiji. I will fight to bring down the enemies of Islam – I will free the world of moffies."

Chapter 20

While I'm checking a computer, Akbar bursts into the shop with the news that Nazir is out on bail. What's changed? Suddenly he doesn't feel threatened? Feels safe? Can come out of custody? – It's clear – a deal has been struck. The case will be postponed ... again and again and again ... until the murder fades from the mind, evaporates, becomes hallucination and Solly – a lost essence. Only his people will keep finding him in the spaces from which he is absent.

Akbar, restless, prowls around the shop, cell phone in hand. Is he hoping Nazir will call? Eventually, he sits down at Ridwan's station, restless and fidgety. Then his cell phone rings. He jumps up in excitement, pulls it out and answers. His face falls. Not the call he was hoping for.

Then I hear him laughing. I figure out he's talking to Rashida. I didn't think she'd want anything more to do with him after the fiasco of his visit.

After he switches off, he grins at me, "Guess what, Ridwan has summoned me again."

"Well, he's not in his right mind, is he?"

"That was Rashida. Apparently after my visit, he suddenly became hungry and she had to prepare sandwiches. She says he got up the next morning and ate a good breakfast. In fact he has been eating properly for a whole week. Then he asked her to find him the Qur'an – on disc. He won't touch the Book because he is unclean. She eventually found a CD in an Islamic bookstore in Fordsburg

and for the first time, he pulled out the laptop that Uncle Khalil took him and began to read the Qur'an again. Now he wants to see me so he can read certain surahs to me. Rashida thinks he is on a mission to convert me."

"You mean get you to revert."

"Whatever. She says he now recognises that his mission is to redeem *me*. He always took the word 'brother' in the wider sense, didn't realise that God meant me until he was made my brother in sin. Now he has to redeem us both." Akbar's great burst of laughter startles me for a moment. "Well, if it will help him become himself again, I'll play along."

"What do you mean? Are you going to become a Tablighi?"

Akbar's roar of delight startles me again. "No. Rashida says that my challenging Ridwan was good for him. Everyone else has been handling him with kid gloves; encouraging him to wallow in self-pity. After I yelled at him, he is getting up to fight again. So Dad, I will just be my gay self. I don't adopt beliefs to please anyone; with me it has to be understanding, not blind faith."

A few days later, I am working on a TV set in the kitchen; Akbar comes in, sits down, and watches me work.

When I look up, he says, "I went to see Ridwan last night. Man, what a difference. He looks much better, much brighter. The curtains in his room were open and he was at his laptop making notes. But he put all that away when I came in, took me into the kitchen where he made tea and we sat down to talk. Rashida came in, sat down with us and Ridwan poured her a cup. Rashida smiled like it was her wedding day. Ridwan said, 'I am glad you're joining us, Rashida, you have to come back too.'"

Rashida put out her hands and we each took a hand. I held out my hand to Ridwan to close the circle. Then, like a high priestess, Rashida pronounced, "This, Ridwan, is the ummah; people who love each other unconditionally, without regard to gender, sexual

preference or religious conviction. We don't need anything else."

'But where's God?'

I smiled. 'In your heart and in your understanding.'

And Rashida smiled, but Ridwan wanted God the Father so we dropped hands, began arguing and returned the ummah to cloud-cuckoo-land."

Akbar has become a regular visitor at Rashida's. He is cheerful, has stopped the drugs and is becoming a brother.

"Ridwan is lost somewhere in a tangle of ideologies. I'm not going to leave him drowning in that mess – even if it means yanking him out by the hair on his head."

I laugh. "Didn't you tell me he's shaved off his hair and beard?"

When Akbar returns from Johannesburg tonight, he is a little subdued. Ridwan had asked him about Solly. "He wanted to hear every detail and afterwards had cried for a long time. Then he said, 'You see, that is how God punishes the people of Lut. That is how I must be punished.' Akbar shakes his head. "He thinks Solly was gay – because he was close to Nazir."

I cringe.

"Then he spent the whole time reading Surah 26 to me. He read it over and over and over until I switched off his laptop to jerk him out of the cycle. To challenge him, I asked him about Abraham. 'Didn't Abraham try to save Lot's people? He actually bargained with God who promised not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if he could find one good person there.'

"But Ridwan was adamant. 'Lut was Ibrahim's nephew, a good man, that's why he put up a fight for him. Lut was saved but the cities were destroyed.'

"When I asked him if he meant that people like me should be destroyed, he answered, "And me.' "

Before I could retaliate, Rashida put her hand on my arm and

shook her head. Okay I stopped, but I know it's better for him to get back into debates. That's what he was used to."

A bearded young man in a black dishdasha, stands in front of me, in his hand a knife with which to cut himself as he marches. 'Dad, this is Ashura, a holy day, the anniversary of the death of Imam Hoosain. It is that and more; it is the day that Musa led his people out of Egypt. The Prophet, peace be upon him, always fasted on this day and I am committed to following in the footsteps of our Nabi, sallallahu alayhi wasallam. I go to beg for God's mercy, to be allowed to serve Him and not be damned to hell.'

Chapter 21

When I come into the kitchen this morning, Akbar is at the table with his coffee. He's up early.

"The trial begins today."

"Trial?"

'Nazir's – Solly Patel's murder.'

After all this time! I had forgotten about it; put it out of my mind actually – the murder happened more than two years ago. With all the postponements, I was certain everyone had been bought off. Why is it coming to court? Who is it that's not for sale? Whoever it is, is definitely in danger of being eliminated. I should check the murders in Neemville, in Burgerstad, everywhere – see how many can be connected to the case.

But it's Solly's family. They want justice.

They are aware that they live in constant danger but a strike against them would be too obvious – those responsible for the murder need to keep a low profile so the Patels live under a fragile immunity. But they are strong people; their commitment to truth and justice is firm. They will not let the case disappear.

I will go with Akbar so I leave a note on the shop door with a later time of opening.

Akbar and I enter the High Court to find Solly's family sitting on benches outside the courtroom waiting for the session to begin. They have waited two and half years for a trial, a little more waiting is par for the course. One of Solly's brothers sits quietly on the end of a bench, a small hopeless smile on a face drawn with disillusionment as he observes the machinations going on around him. An older brother stands talking to friends, his upright bearing proclaiming his faith in the truth. When we go into the smoking area, we see his sisters and a niece; their eyes reflect dark depths of pain. They take one look at Akbar, stub out their cigarettes and leave.

Solly's family had been activists during the apartheid struggle; had invested most of their energy and time in the fight against drug abuse which they believed was the real threat to democracy. They had seen too many of their friends and acquaintances lose their humanity through addiction. They had seen drug lords taking control of Neemville, reducing people to slaves, criminals or cowards giving silent consent to the debasement of their lives and the life around them.

Not the Patels! With Solly, the spearhead of their attack, they had been vociferous and active against drug trafficking. The widowed mother, brothers, sisters and other family members had formed the power base from which he had operated.

After 1994, the Patels had joined the Community Police Forum and taken their fight against drugs into social work, drug awareness and counselling programs, the Junior Soccer League and marches against drug dealers. After Solly became a police captain in the crime investigation unit, they had stepped up the war against drug trafficking despite intimidation and corruption. Caught up in their jihad, the family had worn the mantle of righteousness and civic duty as protection; they had thought it enough to ward off criminal attacks.

The slaying of their stalwart, courageous and principled leader had knocked them into another consciousness. The heinous murder violently dislocated them, tore them out of idealistic preoccupations, and flung them into individual forms of grief. The tremendous feeling of loss and the need for justice holds them to a sense of purpose. But their tacit reliance on goodness, mercy and justice has gone. Now they sit at the High Court trying to resurrect a lost faith and find it sinking deeper into the quicksand of bribery, corruption, manipulation and intimidation.

Akbar and I may not sit with them, may not even sympathise; we are of the enemy camp; we are here for Accused No 1, Nazir, formerly their friend and intimate; one who came and went freely in their homes like a member of the family; now a murderer – the instrument of their dislocation. The grief in their eyes reflects the pain of disillusionment as well as loss. How could this man, an intimate friend, commit such a horrendous crime against his dear friend and patron?

When we enter the courtroom, I feel Akbar tense up; he has spotted Nazir in the dock with his co-accused, Jannie. Akbar and I take our places at the back; we watch Nazir aimlessly flipping through papers.

The State opens its inquiry with witnesses at the crime scene. The first are those who had gone to investigate the terrific blaze that had suddenly flared up on the Rozendal road, and had found Solly's burning body. Next are paramedics who transported him to the hospital. We listen to horrific details: the body, almost completely burnt out, still alive with the tremendous spirit of the man who names his murderer several times. The members of the family, unable to close their ears, cannot stop tears that roll freely over their cheeks.

More devastated than any of them – Akbar. Suddenly convulsed with sobs, he leaves the courtroom. I go after him, find him in the men's room, unable to control the involuntary shuddering. I hold him until the spasm is over. Then he washes his face.

“I’m sorry Akbar, but those witnesses can’t be lying. They don’t know Solly or Nazir; they are telling us what they actually saw and heard. It’s not that they are against Nazir.”

It takes a moment to realise Akbar isn’t crying for Nazir. He is crying for Solly, who loved Nazir – and for himself. During the testimony, he had identified completely with the murdered man. “How could he do that to someone he said he loved? How could he do it? I was angry at Solly because he was interfering in my business but I would never have done anything like that. I know I said I would kill him; that was talk, just talk. But Nazir loved Solly. How could he kill him? And ... in that way! I thought I knew him.”

“He has pleaded not guilty; they still have to prove ...”

“Oh, shut up!” Akbar drops down over the sink again and sobs violently. “He couldn’t have loved Solly; he couldn’t have loved him. To do what he did – he couldn’t have loved him.”

He walks out of the restroom, out of the High Court building, down the road to the parking lot where we left the car.

Today at breakfast, I am reading the newspaper. I look up as he comes in; he is tearing up a photograph. My inquiring look makes him throw the pieces on the table in front of me. When I put them together, I see a happy couple on a balcony – Nazir and Akbar.

Serves me right for being inquisitive.

The second day of the trial.

We hear from a witness, the fourth independent witness, Simon Mabuza, who saw the crime being committed. Mabuza, a farm worker, illiterate, had had a few beers that day. The defence team sits there laughing, ridiculing him, forgetting that we no longer live in apartheid, that we don’t belittle people or regard them as incapable of stating facts because they are poor and not formally educated.

As Mabuza was hurrying down Rozendal Road to find a taxi after work, he saw a car, Solly’s car, as he later found out, parked

well back from the road. A bakkie pulled up next to it, shots were fired at the car, there was an explosion and the car burst into flames. Terrified, Simon had hidden in the bushes and after the bakkie had driven away, had run off down the road. But when he saw the bakkie behind him, he hid again and watched until it was out of sight. The prosecution presents proof that the bakkie Simon had seen belongs to Jannie, Accused Number 2. It was bought ostensibly to carry supplies for Nazir's SMME. As Mabuza is the only one to place Nazir and Jannie at the scene of the crime, the advocates are trying to discredit him with their mockery, but this is a black judge, unlikely to be party to their prejudice.

With such powerful eyewitness testimony against him, Nazir is trapped. He had underestimated Solly's strength of will; the will that had kept him alive for hours after there was nothing left of his body; the will that had allowed him to name his murderer to people whose objectivity could not be questioned. The instructing attorney for the defence, Haroun Vahed, who represents the masterminds behind the assassination, is fully aware of the damning nature of these eyewitness accounts. There had been an attempt to buy off Koos Pienaar, the first witness on the scene, but it had failed.

Pienaar, just an ordinary man, to have kept his integrity intact, in these corrupt times, makes him extraordinary. I wonder what prompts his strength. Is it the connection that he made with a dying man?

As we are driving home, Akbar shakes his head, "You see how it is, Dad? They just look at the criminal act."

"What else is there?"

"The reasons! What about the reasons? What about Solly's investigation into corruption? Nazir was gathering information for him. Why doesn't that come into it? They look only at the murder and all they want is proof of criminal intent. The trial does not delve into the real causes. It's a waste of time."

"No, it's not, these guys will be punished."

"Perhaps they will. But the real criminals will never be caught."

Nazir and Jannie – the stooges – *may* be punished. Even that isn't certain. Crooked supercops and drug lords – the real murderers – will never be caught and they will go on destroying people's lives."

Akbar used to be drug dealer. What's going on in his mind? Is he trying to absolve Nazir?

The third day of the trial.

A young man, apparently Nazir's current lover, usually sits alone behind Nazir. Today, an older man and a young woman, presumably Nazir's father and sister, sit with him. Nazir became estranged from his family after his conversion to Islam but now they seem to be rallying around him.

For the next two hours, we listen to a State witness, one of Nazir's former lovers. Did Nazir throw him out too? This young man claims he abandoned Nazir after the murder and is here to testify to Nazir's movements on the night after the murder and the following morning before the arrest. I wonder what Akbar feels about these other lovers. I don't ask. I know what he is and I don't want that put in words. With words, I would have to cut him off — *as I have cut off Ridwan ...*

When we go back in after lunch, we find that a special effort has been made to call in a high police official. Although he is a State witness, Vahed, who is leading the defence, has pushed for his appearance. Why? To elicit information that will place culpability beyond Nazir and Jannie? To get at the underlying truth, at the real perpetrators? ... But ... *a witness from the syndicate!* What games are they playing?

Apparently, this man Commissioner Nazir Khan was largely responsible for Nazir's conversion to Islam and is one of his mentors. He is in the Da'wah movement; he helped Nazir after he converted. But on the witness stand, he refers to Nazir with scorn, implies he is a hanger-on, condemns his sexual identity as an aberration; insists that the murder was an act of personal acrimony – lovers falling

out. The Commissioner confines his testimony to Nazir's personality and portrays him as despicable – a homosexual! – and therefore – corrupt. The top cop's evidence discredits Nazir, vilifies him, shows him acting in an individual capacity and divorces him from the syndicate. Vahed does not challenge; he elicited this prejudicial information – the defence has evaporated.

Clearly, Nazir is a scapegoat.

The fourth and fifth days of the trial.

Nazir takes the stand, does not deny the charges; insists he was carrying out orders. He implicates the top cop who gave evidence the day before.

Driving home after the fifth session, Akbar says, "To think I helped him spy on people. He is just a messenger boy, running errands for anyone who will pay – just a lowlife courier, a go-fetch boy."

Tears roll down his cheeks. He stops the car – asks me to drive. When he calms down, he asks, "Do you think his whiteness made the difference?" He is talking to himself. "Even though we got rid of apartheid, everybody still wants to be white. Did he see that and exploit us through our lack of self-worth? Did we embrace him because his whiteness gave us prestige? Did we want him as a friend, a Muslim, a lover because he is white?" He drops his head in his hands.

"Don't be crazy, man, racism – that's the past."

"This murder ... it isn't him ... it can't be ... why did he do it? Why? Why? Why? ... Solly was his big brother ... his patron ... I don't understand ... I will never understand ... I thought this trial would help me understand ... I thought I knew him ... I *do* know him ... this isn't him ... cannot be him ..."

The judgement a week later: Nazir is sentenced to life imprisonment.

Chapter 22

Akbar took off early today to visit Ridwan. He works in the shop now, a paid employee; has been for several months. I needed someone after Mohamed, Essop and Farouk pulled out. He is learning a good deal about computers from Ridwan and doing very well in the shop.

He has changed; his eyes have lost the look of hostile indifference. Did the trial somehow give him a new perspective on life? Force him to examine the life he was leading? Make him realize that there was no point to his pointlessness? Perhaps he came to respect and admire Solly Patel; he often refers to that powerful image of the man's strength of will as he lay burning on the grass; he says it made him realize how petty and mean his own existence was. He still doesn't pray or believe in God but he looks and acts like a man whose faith is being restored. Faith without God? Doesn't make sense to me? But he's back to normal and I am grateful.

I put the kettle on and begin to tidy up. At one of the stations, I find an open envelope addressed to Akbar. Without thinking, I pull out the letter and begin to read. It was sent soon after the trial.

My dear Akbar

I write to you because I saw you at the trial sitting apart from the Patel family with your Dad. I think I know why you came. And of all people in the world, you need to know the truth because of what we were to each other. I don't expect forgiveness or even understanding of what has happened.

I do not forgive myself. I can never forgive myself. I let loose the savage, caged within my being, and destroyed a kind, good man. Kind and good as he was, he was nurturing the beast within me ... because he saw my homosexuality as criminal. He believed it was a perverse choice not a natural condition.

But you had taught me otherwise – that I could be myself. I leaned on your strength, your acceptance of yourself and from

you learned that faith means belief in myself.

I love you. I will always love you. I would never have sent you away ... but Solly couldn't understand ... he made me choose between my love for you and God. He made me feel ashamed and I began to hate myself again. And as I hadn't yet seen that there was no connection between my love for you and religion, I allowed myself to be overruled and sent you away.

But I couldn't bear losing you. It was driving me mad and I began to resent Solly. My resentment grew and grew, became a poison that turned me into a monster. And when the syndicate wanted Solly dead and gave me the contract, I could have refused even though that would have made me a target. I did not – I was filled with hate and self-loathing. I could not forgive him. Now I cannot forgive myself. I lost him and I lost you.

I am justly punished.

I pray that you will find someone worthy of your love.

Nico

(I have reverted to my former name.)

I switch on Akbar's computer and begin a search. I find what I am looking for – the reply.

Dear Nico

I am grateful for our time together. We connected, not just physically, but emotionally and intellectually as well. We never had to explain ourselves to each other. And for the first time I experienced what it is to love, truly to love -- to be one with another human being. I had not understood what that meant before. To be One.

Man and woman are driven to one another for purposes of procreation; we found each other in genuine love. We had what everyone is searching for; the love that poet's sing about; a glimpse of paradise.

I struggled to understand why you sent me away. I am glad I now know the truth.

I have never stopped loving you. We will find each other again.

Akbar

I bang my head on the table – bang, bang, bang! Why the hell did I look for this letter; the foul taste of shame fills my mouth. I dash off to the toilet and retch violently. I drop to the floor and stay there. Cursed! I am cursed! To have such sons! Oh, the shame, the shame. And he's proud of what he is. Why did I read the letter? If I hadn't I could have gone on ignoring what he is. But there it is *in words*! I hear movement in the shop, drag myself up, pull myself together and go back in.

Khalil has come in. "I went to see Ridwan, last week; and guess what," he is smiling broadly, "he knew me ... he knew me." He laughs. "He's really come along. I don't know what Akbar is doing, whatever it is, it's working. Ridwan should be back in the shop one of these days."

I am ready to rush off to the toilet again. The thought of Akbar and Ridwan in the shop ... *Don't any of these people care what they are?*

"Hasina told me to be patient. It took sometime before he began to respond to her but after Akbar, he looks forward to her visits. It will be good to have him back." He is smiling. "I took him a laptop when he got out of hospital; thought it would help bring him back but he didn't touch it for a long time; looked at it as an alien object. That's changed now and he's teaching Akbar more advanced uses of the computer."

He's going on and on so I make tea. I wish he would go.

"He knows me now. He wouldn't look at me or speak to me before; would simply address the air above my head with one question, the same question he asked whenever I visited. He didn't ask anyone else, just me. "Why did my father have to die?" I had tried many

times to reassure him that you were alive and well, but he would stare vacantly, uncomprehendingly. Then one day, when he brought it up again, I said I didn't know – asked if he had any idea. He closed his eyes, "They got us on the same day; we had to die. We are people of Lut."

My cup crashes to the floor. "How can he say such a thing about me?" I grab my cigarettes and begin pacing about. "The boy's mad. Lut! Sodom and Gomorrah! That's not me! I married; I had a wife! I have children. This has nothing to do with me. It's his mother's fault. That's why her sons turned out like this. Damn, it has nothing to do with me."

"Calm down, Ismail, he didn't mean you." I stop pacing. "He meant Solly. Rashida explained it to me. In his mind Solly was his father."

Solly! He made a connection. But not to me!

"He was still in a *dwaal* then. He knows you are his father. He knows that now."

When I get home, I need a dose of TV to knock me unconscious; I need to wallow in mindless fantasy so I can forget my shame. My sons ... they *are* my sons ... this is *my* legacy ... I switch on the TV, ready to escape into its mindlessness and I get a shock.

What is she doing on TV?

I stare at the screen. But it's not Ayesha; it's Rashida. Rashida! Why is my daughter on TV? She did not want to get married – is she also ... Rashida, smiles at me out of her mother's eyes.

The programme presenter, Rifiloe Makena, introduces her guests: Marilyn Bloom, from the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Justice that is preparing the Sexual Offences Bill, Josiah Kumalo, a community leader, and Rashida Amin, representative of the Women's Forum. The panel is evaluating the need for such a Bill.

Hasina, coming into the lounge, glances at the TV, stops and stares. “Allah pak! Look, it’s Rashida. Why didn’t you call me?” She quickly switches on the VCR, pushes in a tape and calls Ma.

The programme begins with a video insert of a black man they call X. He takes us through the horror of having been raped. *Oh no! ... Not again!* I squirm in embarrassment and shame. Why do they show such things? Then it hits me! The Sexual Offences Bill! Oh God! That’s why Rifiloe invited her. She wants Rashida to tell the whole world about Ridwan! Once people find out, Ridwan is done for. People know about Akbar and Nazir. Everyone will point a finger at me, the father of such boys ... oh god!

X is saying he struggles with feelings of shame even though he knows it’s not his fault – he was the one who was violated.

Fighting to suppress feelings that threaten to overwhelm me, I blurt out, “What the hell, Moffie! You deserve what you got.”

Hasina and Ma look at me in shock.

X goes on. The experience was traumatic but he is working through it.

As he walks down the street to where it occurred, I see he is wearing a kurtah and a full beard. My god, Ridwan.

He stops where he was accosted by three men who took his money and watch. He leads us to the alley into which he was dragged and raped at gunpoint. He tells us how police dismissed the rape, said there was no such thing as male rape.

I am desperate to put distance between him and me. “There isn’t! There isn’t! You were asking for it.”

Hasina turns on me. “Is that what you think? That Ridwan was

asking for it? Is that why you haven't been to see him?"

I stare at the TV. It's X, not Ridwan.

X, in T-shirt and jeans – no kurtah, no topi – is saying he was not helped in any way; no HIV test, no trauma counselling. Instead he was mocked and insulted.

I am finding it difficult to breathe. "Well, he deserved all that. Why can't he be a man?"

Hasina's voice is full of tears. "He was raped! Don't you understand? Raped! Ridwan was raped!"

I stop my ears! That word. That word! That word! Squeezing the life out of me!

The insert over, Rashida exclaims indignantly to the programme presenter, "Do you see how callous our law enforcement agencies are? Their attitudes are sexist! Inhumane! No wonder we have the highest rape statistics in the world. The police are aware of the abuse that goes on in prisons, yet they choose to assert there is no such thing as male rape."

I shudder, "Shut up, Rashida! Shut up! Shut up!"

Hasina stares coldly, "If you don't want to watch, just go."

I can't. I can't trust Rashida. She is going to expose the shame in our family. Perspiration streams from my head.

Rifiloe turns to Marilyn, "Does the amended Bill acknowledge the abuse of men?"

Marilyn's response is somewhat touchy, 'The Bill is now gender neutral. Our laws and constitution are based on high ideals but our people are still contending with traditional, patriarchal values, values to which law enforcement officers at the interface also

subscribe. How can they provide compassionate support if the laws don't make sense to them?"

"Exactly!" Rashida interjects. "So does the Bill make it plain that there is such a thing as male rape; that sexual assault of males is a crime?"

Shut up! Shut up, Rashida! But she goes on.

"It's not enough to say that the law is not gender specific; it has to be made specific in naming both women and men as victims. You say ordinary police officers are having difficulty making the shift from traditional to liberal democratic values. How does the Bill deal with this? Will there be programs to help them bridge the gap? Will they be sensitised to all aspects of rape, including male rape?"

"Shut up! Shut up! You're going to disgrace us all."
Hasina snaps back. "You shut up. You should know better."

Marilyn looks at Rashida with quiet contempt. "The committee is doing its best to provide the kind of jurisprudence that will be effective. The operative word is effective. We do not want to crowd the Bill with utopian notions that are not generally understood."

"If the Bill doesn't make provision for extensive training of police personnel, abuse will continue to grow at the alarming rate that we see at present. This is an urgent situation. Isn't this the rape capital of the world?"

Hasina claps enthusiastically. "You tell them Rashida."

Marilyn is condescending. “We have made provision for the training of police officials.”

“To go into effect immediately?”

Refiloe smiles, “Hang on, Rashida. I know you’re passionate about this Bill but we have to get it passed first.”

“I can’t understand why there are so many problems around the passage of this Bill, especially with our rape statistics. Perhaps our MP’s are in need of training programmes as well.”

Rifiloe turns to Josiah. “Do you think the Bill addresses the needs of male victims?”

“It is no longer gender specific ... so yes. It has been difficult to get communities to acknowledge that men are also vulnerable. Now that we have a constitution that makes provision for sexual orientation, people need to change old macho notions of manhood. Those who see homosexuality as sinful, find it difficult to be sympathetic. As a result, most men do not come forward to report these crimes against them. Those who do, put themselves at risk of further abuse from members of their own communities.”

Hasina turns on me. “He’s talking about you, Chotabhai. You are sexist and prejudiced.”

“You are a Muslim woman, why are you defending the kafir? You should read your Qur’an. There is no place for moffies in the ummah.” Ma rushes out in tears.

Hasina is livid. “See what you’ve done.” A sob chokes her, “My poor Ridwan! You think he’s homosexual. You’re ashamed of him! My god, what kind of a father are you?”

A python is coiling itself around my chest. I stagger blindly to my room, slump on the edge of the bed, switch on the radio for calming music while I search for cigarettes. No music, just a talk programme

with people calling in. For God's sake it's about the Civil Unions Bill. Shit! Bloody damn hell! Everything is about ... I switch off and throw myself down on the bed.

I look up and get a fright to see Akbar standing in front of me. I don't want to hear him, look at him, talk to him, but I need a cigarette badly. "Got any smokes?" After I light up, I feel a little calmer.

"Just got back from Jo'burg, from Ridwan. For the first time he talked about the rape."

Oh god NO! Not again? I don't want to know!

"Poor guy, blames himself for what happened. Thinks he was attacked because he was wearing a kurtah. That's why he's given up traditional garb – doesn't want to look like a woman. I felt sorry for him, so I didn't laugh. With that full beard, how could he have looked like a woman? Today I found out why he sent for me that first time last year? " Akbar pulls out a cigarette. "Do you know why?"

I don't know; I don't care! Get out and leave me alone.

"He wanted my forgiveness. Imagine that! My forgiveness! It's taken him over a year to tell me that. I felt so sorry for him I put my arms around him and hugged him."

The cigarette is shaking in my hand. I stub it out clumsily in the ashtray. What good is Akbar's forgiveness; it's one sinner condoning another. This sin is unforgivable! The Qur'an is clear on that.

"Do you know why, Dad?"

No I don't and I don't want to know!

"He feels he has been unjust; that he judged me without trying to understand; without love for me as a brother. He believes that is why he has been punished. Not only because of the way he treated me, but because he failed to recognise," he makes quotation marks with his fingers, " 'the evil in himself.' " Akbar smiles sadly and shakes his head. "Poor guy, the rape has unhinged him. He believes it was his fault – that he provoked it. His homophobic paranoia has thrust him right into his worst nightmare. He thinks he's gay. He says he has no right to condemn me when he himself is 'guilty.'"

Why is he going on and on? Can't he see me squirming? I don't want to know!

"I tried to tell him he's not gay; that carjackers often rape to shame their victims so they won't report the crime. Ridwan is lucky they didn't kill him. But he just won't see it."

Oh shut up! Shut up!

"You know Dad, it so often happens with rape – the victim feels guilty, feels he has colluded with the rapists because of reflex actions he cannot control."

I don't want to hear! I don't want to hear!!

"Ridwan can't forgive himself – he ejaculated while he was being sodomised."

The python crushes my ribcage and the bones crack!

Chapter 23

From under my eyelids, I have become aware of movements; shadows floating in and out. Ghosts from the land of the living. Beyond them the glare of white. My slow exploring gaze raises white walls, rows of beds, bodies. Spectres flit in between. But the shadows on either side of me are still. As white melts into soft green, yellow and brown, they slowly begin to take form. Familiar shapes. Very familiar. A man, an old woman and a younger one. Three pairs of eyes – focused on me. I know these people. I have seen them before. As the fingers of my memory trace the features of their faces, I stare in surprise. My childhood friend, Khalil, my mother, my sister, Hasina. *What are we doing in Yarmouk Hospital?*

I close my eyes for a moment and feel Khalil's hand on my arm, "Ismail. Ismail."

Hasina leans forward as Ma touches my forehead. I look up at them. Hasina turns to Khalil. "He's still waking up; it's the sedatives."

They hover over me. I order them, "Leave! Go! Get back to the hotel shelters! Bombers overhead. Look! Look!" I point to all the maimed bodies – human shields. "Oh God! They got Neville too!" Tears stream down my cheeks. I beg them to get out before they are killed. "No more collateral damage. No more. No more. No more. No more. No more ..."

They are back. Hasina, Ma and Khalil. I feel tears rolling down my cheeks. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"Who ...? ... No one is dead, Chotabhai. Ridwan is fine."

"No, no, Ahmed! ... Ridwan? ... Who is that? ... Ridwan?" I stare into Ma's eyes as she wipes away my tears. "Those poor children in the next ward. Did you see them? Issa is only four; the only one left of his family." Tears stream from my eyes. "Go to Shireen, she can't walk; her legs were blown off ..."

Khalil brings a nurse. As she draws the curtain around my bed, I hear the Black Hawks overhead. Explosions! They are bombing the hospital. I am a blazing missile catapulted into the air ...

My body and other corpses, picked up at Baghdad market, enclosed in blue body bags are put on a US military truck. At the mortician's yard, Ridwan, Farouk, Essop and Mohamed load the bags onto a flatbed truck – seventy-two today. Solly Patel, the mortician, has made it his mission to bury all unclaimed bodies. The truck loaded, Solly and Ridwan get in the cab; the others follow in Akbar's car. Solly and his volunteers travel down from Baghdad every Friday to the Wadi al-Salaam Cemetery at Najaf, the holy city in the south, to bury this unsanctified cargo near the grave of the martyr Imam Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, to give them a chance for paradise.

At the cemetery, Ridwan removes me from my bag, sprays me with disinfectant, wraps me in a shroud and sets me next to my grave. He goes through the process mechanically never acknowledging me, moves to the next bag and repeats the procedure.

Ridwan turns to Solly, "Dad, do we bury them two to a grave."

Solly, shakes his head, "I think three, son. We have to include the ones we picked up on the way; they won't have prepared sufficient graves for all these bodies."

They are back again. Ma, Hasina, Khalil. They look at me with eyes that tell me they don't know I am back too. Ma leans over, kisses me, caresses my face and sighs, "My poor boy. My poor boy."

I squeak, "Don't look so sad, Ma. I am much better."

Her eyes open wide. I see uncertainty mixed with hope. Hasina and Khalil question me. When they are convinced that I am no longer hallucinating, that I know I am in Neemville, they settle into a proper visit with quiet joy. They tell me I have been here three weeks and will remain here until I am strong enough. Fortunately, this is a government hospital so I needn't have a relapse thinking of the costs. They say nothing about my sons.

After they leave, I cannot get the boys out of my mind. I'm back in the bedroom with Akbar. He's lighting a cigarette and putting it in my shaking hand. Completely absorbed by concern for his brother, he is totally oblivious of my panic and the imminent collapse that he is precipitating. His words come back to me; I go over them ...over and over ... three men overpowering Ridwan, violating him, and disappearing with his car, cell phone and wallet. A degrading attack that robs my boy of his soul. I was afraid to think about it; but the fear has gone now and I cannot stop the tears.

In the weeks that I lie here, I go over and over all that happened on the night of my collapse. I hear Hasina: *"He's talking about you, Chotabhai. You are sexist and prejudiced. They are not talking about homosexuals; they are talking about rape victims. That's what the man is saying; people like you can't see the difference."*

Why have I been so focused on sex? Rape is not an act of desire; it is a criminal act, an act of aggression, like murder. My sister could

see it, why couldn't I? I blamed my boy, my poor boy, the innocent victim of a crime ... I am the sinner.

I hear Akbar's words over and over again.

He believes it was his fault – that he provoked it. His homophobic paranoia has thrust him right into his worst nightmare. He thinks he's gay.

Ridwan and I plagued by the same fear. Akbar, who should be glad his brother is also gay, can see that Ridwan is under an illusion. His words – *Homophobic paranoia. He thinks he's gay* – ring in my head. If Ridwan is under an illusion, am I? Have I been all my life? Why is Akbar able to see more clearly than Ridwan or me?

I am being discharged today. I have been here seven weeks, overcoming depression and disorientation.

I understand now what Ridwan is going through. Poor Ridwan. I rejected him cruelly as ... unclean – he was just a victim. A helpless victim -- his life stolen from him in that moment, robbed him of his dreams, ambitions, his faith – *Oh god, his faith!* Now he is lost, wandering on the borderline of insanity. And I abandoned him. Thank God for Rashida! When he most needed me all I could think of was myself! I am *my* father all over again. Protecting myself! Oh Hassan! I am ashamed. So ashamed

Here come Hasina and Khalil to take me home. Even Rashida is here; she's going to stay over a few days.

When we get home, Ma welcomes us and ushers us into the dining-room for tea. She is very happy to see how well I look. She doesn't let me sit up too long, takes me to my room and tucks me in. I ask for Akbar. Ma tells me that he and Ridwan have gone hiking in the Magaliesberg.

I look up in surprise.

Ma laughs, "Ridwan is fine."

Is he himself again? No longer a prisoner in Rashida's flat? And he even has a job? ... *Oh thank god! Thank god! Thank god! Oh, thank god!*

I am disappointed that Akbar isn't here. He probably thought his presence would upset me. But I want to see him. I need to understand; only he can help me.

Monday morning. Akbar is back to open up the Internet Café. He has been running it in my absence. When I see him standing at the door of my bedroom, I have to look twice. It's the same Akbar, why does he seem different?

"Morning Dad, how are you feeling?"

I am still puzzled. Why does he seem different? I don't say a word.

"You rest Dad. I'll see you later." And he's gone.

I've been waiting all weekend for him, but I didn't say a word to him.

His eyes; it's his eyes! That's the difference!

Tuesday morning. Akbar comes into the kitchen where I sit with my tea and newspaper. He is carrying a VCR which he sets on the table. I look up.

"Your customers keep calling. I take on some of the simpler jobs."

He sets the recorder on the table and opens it up. I watch while he works – then come round to help. And we work quietly together.

In the afternoon, I go with him to the Internet Café. He is concerned but I assure him that I am fine. I spend most of the time at my desk while he moves around to help clients.

Within the next few days, I am back to full speed. And Akbar and I, working together, restore all my little operations and are busy.

Established in ordinary work-a-day routines, we are quite comfortable with each other. There was a time when I thought of these as mindless routines; now I see them as structures that hold people together making it possible to establish connection.

Saturday evening, relaxing in the lounge after supper, Akbar tells me that Ridwan phoned; he plans to go back to university next year for further studies in telecommunications. "He's already an expert; he taught me everything I know. He's been working at one of these PC outlets for about a month now, but he needs really challenging work."

"What about Da'wah, DYO, the Global Islamic Movement?"

"You know what happened there."

They disowned him as I had; I feel ashamed.

Akbar regards me intently, "Don't you think it's time Ridwan came home?"

"Does he want to? Can he forgive me?" I stare into my coffee. "I rejected him, threw him away."

"You and others. But he doesn't blame you. If you were the one who had been raped, *he* would have rejected *you*. Much worse than your rejection, was his rejection of himself. There was a stage where he went crazy, demanding to be sent off to the Middle East, so he could become a suicide-bomber and a martyr. Fortunately, he was strapped down in a hospital bed at the time. When he learned of Solly's death he went into a long depression.

Afterwards he said: 'Solly gave his life for his community; he was a true martyr. My quest for martyrdom was a selfish desire for my own salvation.'

"My poor boy! Whatever he believed, whatever we both believed, I am his father. I should not have abandoned him. But I condemned him because I thought he was ... I thought he had become ... I thought ..."

“Say it, Dad. It’s what *I* am. Say it. The word won’t kill you.”

“It almost did.”

“It wasn’t the word. It was your own fear that brought on your collapse. It was your homophobia, not anyone’s homosexuality. There I’ve said the word and you are still alive. Homophobia is the killer, Dad, not homosexuality. Homophobia – the morbid FEAR! And it does not mean fear of homosexuals; it means fear of *being* homosexual. You have never been afraid of me or Hassan. You are afraid of yourself. You have always been afraid that you are gay.”

I sit there staring without seeing.

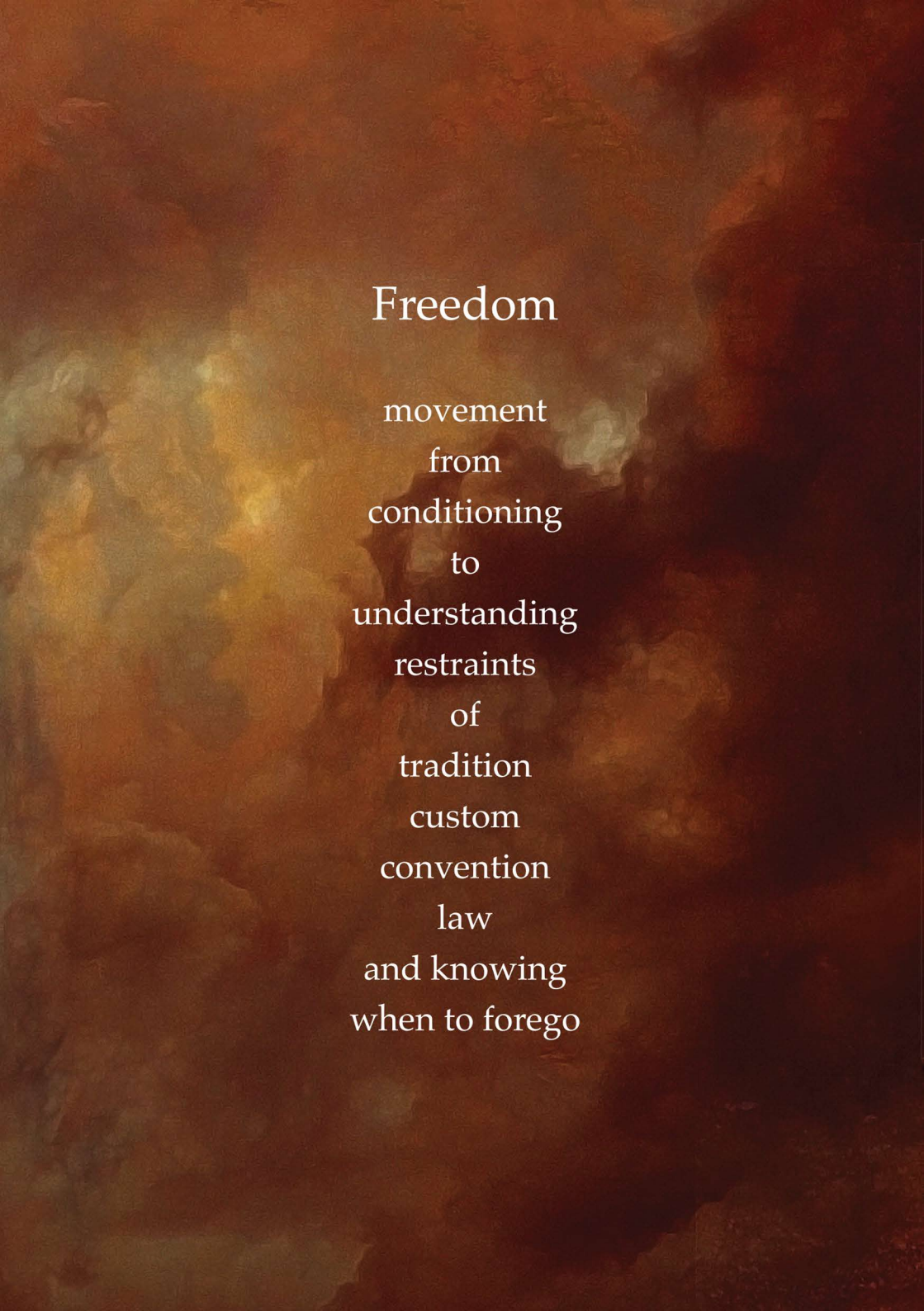
Wake up, Dad, you married, had children – you’ve paid your debt to society. Now you can be whoever you want to be.”

He’s right; I don’t have to prove anything to anyone, not even to myself.

“And Dad, I told Ridwan that you want him back home.”

Glossary

Abaya	a robe-like dress
Allah pak	the 99 names of Allah
Bakkie	pick-up van
Bhai	brother
Basiji	a paramilitary volunteer
Dhal ghosht	meat and lentil soup
Dishdasha	ankle length Arab garment, similar to a robe
Dupatta	stole
Dwaal	confusion
Foi	aunt, father's sister
Haram	forbidden
Hijab	head scarf
Hoof Straat	Main Street
Impimpi	traitor
Kaffiyeh	checked red and white cloth headdress
Kafir	unbeliever
Kurtah pajamas	a long shirt with close fitting pants
Lut	the biblical Lot
Makkah	Mecca
Moffie	derogatory term for a gay man
Muhrim	pilgrim
Munafiq	hypocrite
Nuh	Noah
Outjie	little chap
Qibla	name adopted by a militant group meaning in the direction of Mecca
Roti	round, flat pan bread
SAW	Sallallahu Alayhi Wasallam – peace be upon him
Seerah	biography of the Prophet
Shalwar kameez	shalwar (pantalons/drawers) kameez (body shirt)
Surah	a chapter in the Q'uran
Tablighi	a strict Muslim sect
Topi	skull cap, hat
Ummah	the Islamic community
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg



Freedom

movement
from
conditioning
to
understanding
restraints
of
tradition
custom
convention
law
and knowing
when to forego