

FINDING
Jesse

by Jesse Naidoo

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This book is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections of experiences over time. Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some conversations have been recreated.



FINDING
JESSE

Jesse Naidoo

CSA&G
CENTRE FOR SEXUALITIES,
AIDS AND GENDER

Foreword

In *Giving Up the Ghost: A Memoir*, Hilary Mantel states:

You come to this place, mid-life. You don't know how you got here, but suddenly you're staring fifty in the face. When you turn and look back down the years, you glimpse the ghosts of other lives you might have led. All your houses are haunted by the person you might have been. The wraiths and phantoms creep under your carpets and between the warp and weft of your curtains, they lurk in wardrobes and lie flat under drawer liners. You think of the children you might have had but didn't. When the midwife says 'It's a boy,' where does the girl go? When you think you're pregnant, and you're not, what happens to the child that has already formed in your mind? You keep it filed in a drawer of your consciousness, like a short story that wouldn't work after the opening lines.¹

Unlike Mantel's untold storylines, filed in the drawer of stories that didn't work out, Jess has told us her story, one which unfolds in this publication, a collaboration between Jess and the Emerging Scholars Initiative and the Centre for Sexualities, AIDS and Gender, both part of the Humanities Faculty at the University of Pretoria.

Jess's tale is a unique story set in a working-class Indian South African family in greater Durban, weaving in questions of gender, race, sexuality, illness and identity. It is a story of intersectionality. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an African-American law professor and feminist, in the late 1980s, intersectionality suggests oppression, discrimination and life opportunities and experiences are shaped by a combination of identity factors. These could be race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, physical ability, social status or any other characteristic that might create advantage or disadvantage.

In Jess's case, it helps us to see her formative years as shaped by the racial marginalisation of apartheid South Africa, by the requirements of heteronormativity, by the narrow confines of gender performance, and

1 Mantel, H. (2003) *Giving Up the Ghost: A Memoir*. Picador Modern Classics. p 20.

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by ideas of ableism, denying the validity of bodies which are different. The intersection of these (often oppressive) experiences has given Jess a unique story to tell, one which we are proud to showcase. However, it is not just a story of marginalisation; it is also a story of triumph and perseverance, of the power of love, of rootedness in a particular context, and of the importance of family, both biological and chosen. Finding one's place in life and feeling affirmed there are immensely healing.

Why is telling Jess's story so important for South Africa and its people? And indeed, for others beyond our borders?

Firstly, it allows us to think about our own history as a country, a history marred by colonialism and apartheid and serious social and economic divisions, many of which still operate today. As a country, we were in some ways ill-equipped, for example, to deal with the arrival of HIV in the early 1980s: the fact that it first affected white gay men meant that it could be ignored, mirroring the homophobic response in many northern countries. We did not yet have our pro-queer Constitution, a beacon of hope to many marginalised and excluded people. Even when we developed better and more inclusive HIV policies from the early 1990s onwards, the fractured nature of our health system and our ambivalence about HIV as a heterosexual phenomenon meant that our HIV response was too little and too late.

While stigma around HIV still persists to some degree, it is largely regarded as something one can live with into older age. But with regard to disability and disease, we are still very unequal and judgemental of frailty and difference. Jess's own struggle with vitiligo shows just how cruel people can be, yet she finds a way to navigate this with dignity and courage. As someone whose gender presentation and sexual orientation always made her an outlier, Jess's story is remarkable for its evidence of

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resilience and persistence. An inner conviction and determination to live an authentic life played a significant role in her finding a path of happiness and contentment. Intelligence and drive are part of this story, but her journey is also a testament to her strong family bonds and tight-knit community connections. A family's love can be a buffer against sinister social forces, but it can also be a twin-edged sword, and many queer people in South Africa face pressures to conform or conceal their identities and lives. Jess seems to have deftly navigated these dynamics, showing that survival and thriving are possible in the face of social and family pressures.

Despite our aspirational constitution, South Africa still treats people who are sexually and gender diverse with prejudice and disdain. As I write this foreword, there were reports of the suicide of a Grade 6 Thokoza learner, who had allegedly been told by a teacher to leave his "gayism" outside the school premises after the learner expressed disquiet about a homophobic slur from a fellow pupil. This shocking incident tells us how far we still need to go as a country to accommodate and welcome difference and diversity. Such cruelty to a young person, at a tender time in their lives, by someone who should nurture young lives, is deeply distressing.

Jess has been clear that she wants her story to be a beacon of hope, and to offer teachers and other educators opportunities to encourage openness and to celebrate diversity. South Africa is lucky, not only to have a protective constitution, but because we have dedicated people working in places such as the Department of Basic Education, who are determined to make schools safer for sexually-different and gender-diverse young people. Unlike some countries which are passing laws which outlaw such initiatives, South Africa is still a beacon of hope and sanity for diversity.

This hope and the activities which underpin it, must be protected at all costs. Jess's story reminds us that hope matters, that role models are important, and that progressive ideas must be nurtured and not taken for granted.

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Rather than living a life to please others, Jess has lived her own. Unlike Hilary Mantel, she is not haunted by the ghosts of what might have been; rather, she has lived and loved bravely and uniquely, against significant odds.

We salute this and invite you, the reader, to share this story, to have the courage to tell your own, and to actively work for, and protect, a more inclusive society.

Pierre Brouard

Acting Director

Centre for Sexualities, AIDS and Gender

Dedication

To my Mum, for always loving me unconditionally and protecting me from the world.

To my Daughter, for looking up to me, always reminding me that I am her protagonist, and giving me a purpose every waking day, for a better life for you.

To my Dad, my Soulmate, my Siblings, and my Nieces and Nephews – thank you for your care and support through my journey of life. Just know that I would spend time with you all again, any day. Until our souls meet again!

Here's to the tireless Researchers trying to find a cure for Vitiligo. Just know you are often thought of and much appreciated!

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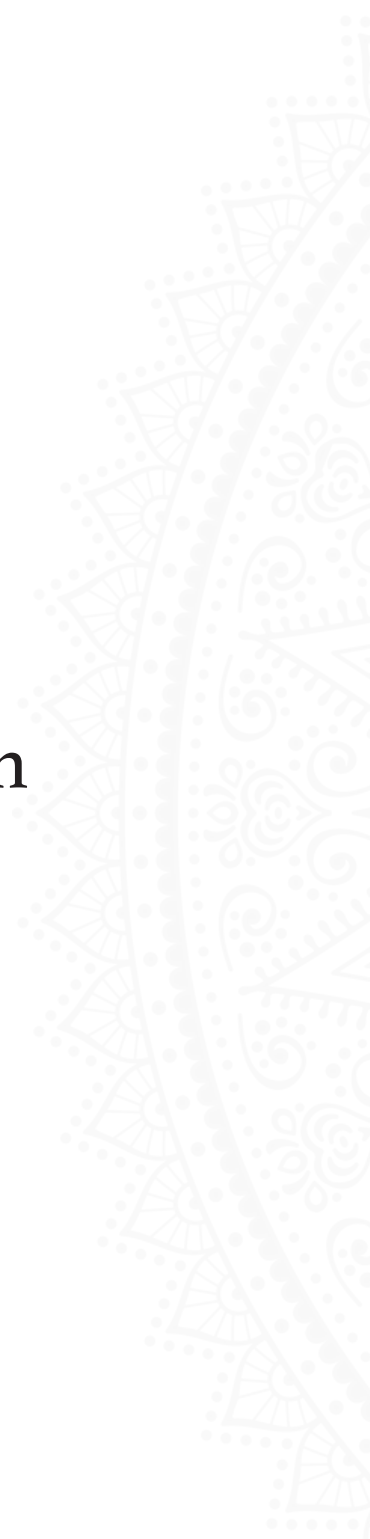
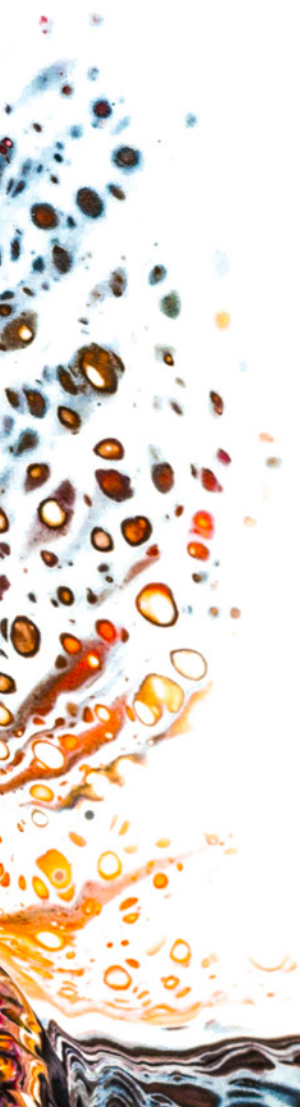
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Introduction



All my life I disliked reading. I never finished a book during my teens unless I had to read it for school. The only book I ever read from cover to cover was a matric textbook, *Great Expectations*. Yet here I am trying to convince you to read my story ... how ironic is that!

The truth is my dislike of reading probably came from growing up in a home where my Mum preferred reading new recipe books and Mills & Boon novels when it was my time with her. As a young child I sucked two of my fingers (my left index finger and left middle finger), while holding onto my Mum's hair with my right index finger. This was comforting and helped me fall asleep in the mid-afternoon, so Mum could catch up with her reading. We didn't talk at all. She used to say to me, "You need to sleep now". And that was that!

I belong to a family of five: Mum, Dad, my sister Annalisa, my sister Divia, and I. My parents were teenage sweethearts who got married in October 1971. My oldest sister was born a year after they married. Divia arrived in 1973, and I came into the world in 1974. So my sisters and I all arrived a year apart from one another. You might assume that we were very close siblings. All I remember about growing up is that

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we fought like cat and dog. We argued about the most trivial issues – at the time every battle seemed important. Mum was never shy to line us all up and give us all a good hiding because of the racket that we made. My earliest childhood memories were of a fairly ordinary life, although sometimes we seemed to be better off than other people. I was born in Durban (South Africa) during the apartheid era, so we lived in a racially-defined community and attended a segregated local public school. Apartheid was the policy of racial segregation which was introduced by the all-white government of South Africa in 1948, and it remained in place until 1994. Under apartheid, whites had access to better public facilities and services than people of other race groups.

I was born in the mid-1970s, so I had some experience of apartheid. I realised that people of different races existed when my mother employed a part-time domestic worker while I was quite young. The domestic worker was a black woman. I had no idea where she came from or where she lived. I caught glimpses of her once a week when she worked in our yard. What she was expected to do was launder our clothes outside of the house, sweep the yard and get up on a ladder to wash all the windows of the house. When she took a lunch-break she sat outside on our stoep and ate our leftover food. I noticed that a separate cup and a separate plate were kept for her exclusive use.

There were no black children in our neighbourhood, only children who were Indian like me. We were permitted to play outdoors for hours on end, since the adults around me were apprehensive of people who were a different race, but implicitly trusted Indians. So we were allowed to walk home from school on our own, while our mothers stayed at home and our fathers worked somewhere ‘in town’.

Whites and coloured people weren't to be seen where we lived. If we wanted to go to the city centre of Durban, we had to travel in buses

or minibus taxis which had Indian drivers and which transported only Indians. If we went into a large department store to shop we encountered white people. In general we had little interaction with whites. As Indians we understood that whites ran the country. The general perception seemed to be that they were probably more important or in some way superior to everybody else. Feelings of racial inferiority were evident in older Indians. The way things worked seemed simple: we should look up to or respect people who were white, and look down on black people. When parents or grandparents needed us to listen to them and behave, they threatened, “The Bhululoo will catch you and take you away!” Bhululoo means “bro” or “brother” in Xhosa.

Beaches around Durban were segregated on the basis of race when I was a child. One beach – generally the biggest, best and easiest to access – was set aside for the exclusive use of whites. Indians were allocated a beach that wasn’t quite as big or as convenient in terms of access as the white beach; the same principle applied to the beach for coloured people. Despite constituting two thirds of the population, black people got the smallest and most inaccessible beach.

When I thought about it later on, I couldn’t understand why people of different races needed to use different beaches. The ocean in which everyone swam was vast and wide; ultimately we shared the same body of water. Perhaps the races were separated to prevent the germs of different races from mingling. Who knows? Today it all seems quite silly.

Growing up, the people I knew were so conservative in outlook that they hardly ever talked about politics. I didn’t know about Nelson Mandela until 1990. Just before his release from prison in February 1990, my Grade 10 mathematics teacher explained who he was. I was so naïve I didn’t understand what all the fuss about his release from

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prison was about. From the sidelines I observed the nail-biting political negotiations which culminated in the first democratic elections in South Africa in April 1994. Nelson Mandela became our first black President. Today I see things quite differently.

We knew little about the bigger world. South Africa only introduced television services in the mid-1970s: we were lucky to get our first full-colour Telefunken television set in 1981. Television broadcasting in the early years involved only one channel. Broadcasting began at 6.00 pm every day with a prayer from a white Christian minister, and ended at midnight with an epilogue, also in the form of a prayer. Television services were strictly regimented; in a similar way my sisters and I had disciplined lives. We woke up at 6.30 am, washed and then dressed for school, which began at 7.45 am. School finished at 1.45 pm, we then came home, took off our school uniform, had a light meal (generally slices of bread spread with peanut butter), finished our homework, played outdoors with our cousins and friends, and then watched cartoons for about half an hour. By this time our parents had arrived home from work. It was then dinner time, after which we watched a little more television. By 8.00 pm we had to be in bed.

Life was quite predictable, although my parents wanted more from life and were quite determined to better themselves. My Dad took a big risk: he sold our family home, and planned to take us all to Texas, which was the US state to which my Mum's cousin and her family had emigrated. In 1982 Dad went to London and then on to Texas to see for himself what we would be going to.

Dad came back from his trip with a great deal of enthusiasm and energy, which set the ball rolling for emigration. We applied for South African passports, interviews were arranged with the US embassy, our furniture was in the process of being sold. Preparations for leaving the

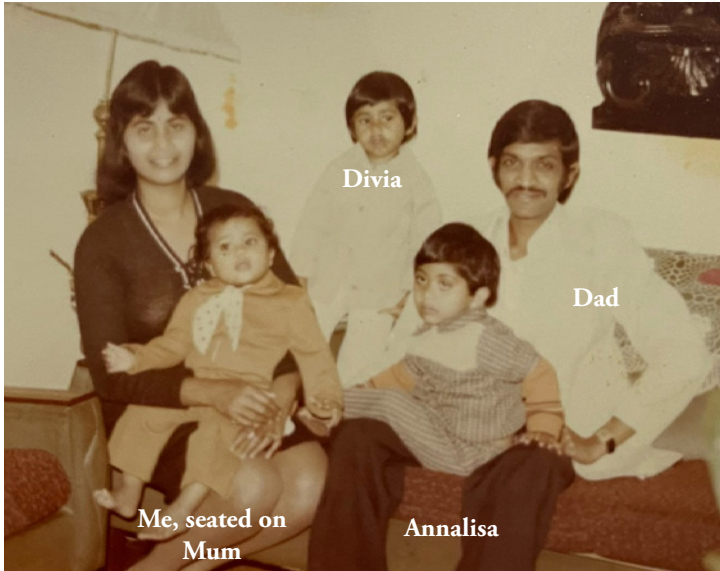
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country were well under way. And then nothing further happened. Months passed and still nothing more. Eventually my Dad realised that he had been conned by people who took his hard-earned income and squandered it, rather than investing it in Texan banks as they had promised to do.

As if that wasn't a sufficiently great shock, when he came back to South Africa, Dad was then subpoenaed to appear in court on charges of theft at a renowned outlet of the clothing industry, where he had worked. Coincidentally, *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, the only book I ever finished, can be summarised as a story of ambition and the desire for self-improvement. However, the novel has a more profound moral: in the end, affection, loyalty and conscience are more important than social advancement, wealth and class.

I am of the understanding that there is always a purpose in life for the random things we do and say and what we react to. At the time we may not know the reasons for what we do. However, somewhere down the road we will be able to glance back at the past, and recognise the unique reasons for our choices.

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My family in early 1975

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In 2009 I changed my name at the Department of Home Affairs. I was ready to live my truth and tell my story.

We are now in the twenty-first century. I am gay. I have lived with vitiligo since the age of five years. I have also recently been diagnosed with myasthenia gravis, a neuromuscular disease.

Nonetheless I am happily married. I have a beautiful daughter who is currently busy completing a law degree. I live in a lovely home which I designed. I drive a fantastic car. I have a meaningful job. But above all I am living the life!

Curious yet?

Well, let me take you through some of the most intimate moments in my life that have led me to believe that I am living my best life right now.

It was December 2019, the best end to the decade. Emotions ran high with excitement in my household, as the year came to a close. As a family we were in a good space. Love and togetherness, both emotionally and financially.

Every year we decide together which family member will host the Christmas festivities. This helps us all financially. In 2019 Veen and I were very excited. We went all out to host our best party yet. It's our thing, we love having dinner parties at home, having family over and just enjoying the festivities. I enjoyed doing this particularly as it was what I grew up doing. My Mum always hosted great parties for our extended family to enjoy. I continued with this tradition just as Mum taught us to do. Little gifts for the kids to get excited about. Recognising the high-achievers and encouraging those who did not really feel the festive spirit. In the end it brought the family together.

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The year 2019 was extra special for us. Our daughter Hirkanie had completed the first year of university and achieved two distinctions. Veen and I finally legalised our union: yes, we got married after living together for nineteen years.

We had a lot to celebrate at the close of that decade. We had a successful party, and we were fortunate to have some members of our extended family join us. Tania, my cousin from Texas, was visiting for the holidays and stayed with us for a few nights. After a great lunch, we played some exciting games, more of the “Minute to Win It” – this was such fun, after all the cheating, scratching, arguing and rolling around with laughter.

Food is always a highlight in our home, so let's look at our menu:

Starters:

Chip 'n dip, Patha pies, samosas

Main courses:

Roast leg of lamb
Grilled prawns in garlic butter sauce
Crab curry, with extra gravy
Fresh chicken curry
Roast chicken

Sides:

Roasted sautéed vegetables
Greek salad
A selection of breads

Desserts:

Trifle
Ice cream
Chocolate pudding with fresh cream
Gingerbread house
Chocolate eclairs
Freshly cut fruit (including watermelon, litchis, mangoes, and peaches)

Drinks:

A variety of wines, juices, and canned cold drinks
Coffee, cappuccino, café latte, and tea

Finding Jess

Finding the right title for a book is always a difficult task, since the title should have some connection with the book's contents. For me, the choice was *The Journey of My Life* or *Finding Jess*.

I credit identifying the right title to a wonderful team I had just met, together with my partner and my daughter, who would help me publish the book. It was the only title suggested that resonated with me and that seemed to sum up my life's journey. Over the years I've learned that we all search for meaning, such as finding your purpose in life. I wanted to know how I could give back to the world, what the world had taught me in my 49 years of life, having had to deal with all the adversities I faced. If my story helps just one reader, I believe I will have achieved something useful in writing down my story.

I urge you to take your time reading my book. As far as possible, allow what you read to sit with you for a while and to percolate. Perhaps reading my story might encourage you to find yourself, or to offer support to someone who know who is struggling with similar or different challenges. What they need most of all is just one person to accept and love them for who they are. I have been surrounded by love for most of my life. But I believe that each of us needs the unconditional love of just one person, to be able to find our inner peace, and learn to soar as the person we were always meant to be, just like the phoenix.

Hence the title of my book: *Finding Jess*.



My Family Tree

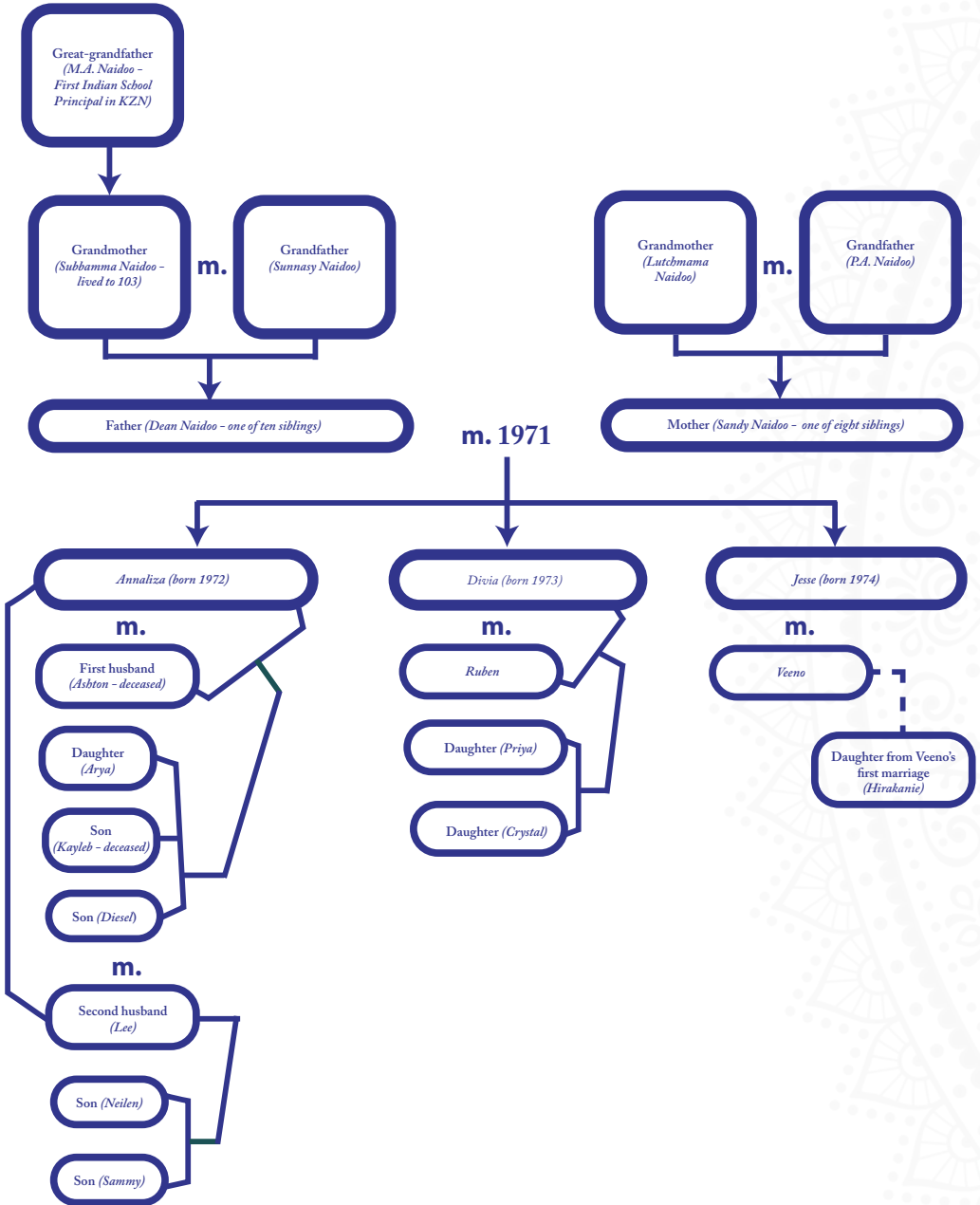
To help you understand who is who in my family, I should mention some important relationships.

My Mum and Dad were married in 1971, and this never changed. Annalisa married Ashton, and they had three children: Arya, Kayleb and Diesel. Ashton passed away tragically in a car accident in 2003. Twelve years later Kayleb suffered the same fate as his father. Then in 2018 Annalisa married Lee.

Divia married Ruben, and they had two daughters: Priya and Crystal. Unfortunately their marriage ended in divorce. However, they remain on friendly terms.

Then there is me. The story that follows describes my journey ...

FINDING JESS



My family tree



CHAPTER ONE
Abandonment

We can't always choose the music life plays for us, but we can choose how we dance to it.

silversurfers.com

It was the time of the 1977 Christmas holidays, and I was just three years and two months old. There was much excitement in the house, since Mum and Dad were taking my two sisters and I to the largest toy store in Natal, situated in the heart of Durban. Like us, many other families also saved through the course of the year to treat their loved ones with gifts during the festive season. I was told that at that time toys were dirt cheap and much more durable than the toys we see today.

We arrived at the store, and it was truly a children's heaven. As a child you set your heart on something specific for the year, by glancing through the weekly toy catalogues. But when you entered the store, you just wanted so many other things. The store was relatively busy with shoppers and their kids, some crying, some laughing, some fighting with other siblings, so it was quite a busy time.

The three of us were dressed in cute pink-and-blue mini frocks, with long bobby-socks and red cobbled shoes to complete our outfits. Mum generally dressed us all alike, as though we were triplets. We did not

know this at the time, but I found out afterwards that many people noticed us and expressed their admiration.

I wanted a piano, Anna longed for a guitar and Divia wished to have a saxophone – obviously all children’s instruments. I think we wanted to form a band at the respective ages of 3, 4 and 5 years. Fortunately all the musical instruments were in the same aisle. Mum gave us freedom to roam the aisle and choose whatever we desired. Somehow I wandered off because of the sheer wonder of the shop. Before I knew it, my family had lost sight of me. Mum did not notice that I wasn’t at her side, as my sisters grabbed all her attention.

Then I started to miss Mum. I could not see her. I tried to be brave, but I could no longer hold back the tears. All I could see were tall people who walked past me and stared at me, the lost child. I was so scared: I felt abandoned.

Then a security guard spotted me and escorted me to the information desk. The lady behind the desk asked me why I was crying. I told her that I couldn’t find my mother. More and more tears rolled down my chubby cheeks. I could not hide my sadness. “What is your mummy’s name?” I was asked. “Aunty Sandy”, I replied. “And what is your name?” I told her, “Jasantha Naidoo” (the name I was given at birth). The woman then made an announcement over the intercom system, asking my Mum to come to the information counter and collect her lost child.

It seemed as if it took forever for Mum to arrive. We were finally reunited, we purchased our presents, and we left. Mum scolded me for leaving her side, telling me that someone might have stolen me, in which case she might never again have seen me again. I was terrified. After that I never left her side, no matter how tempting life was.

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Growing up in a middle-class home, life was simple and loving. I remember loud roars of laughter filling our home, as my siblings and I found fun in every possible opportunity. We laughed until our stomachs ached and tears rolled down our red cheeks.

Mum often attempted to stop us, but usually ended up joining in the laughter. Dad was the more serious member of the family, and he had a somewhat reluctant way of joining in. The five of us were extremely close.

We lived in a house with three bedrooms in Riyadh, a suburb of Verulam, north of Durban. Mum and Dad slept in the main bedroom and we three children were in the middle bedroom. We knew the third bedroom as the 'God lamp room'. Although it was a functional bedroom, our God lamp was kept there. It was the cleanest of rooms, since we only went in the God lamp room when we had to do our evening prayers. More recently it became a guest bedroom.

In a Hindu home it is customary to keep the God lamp in a section of the house with less human traffic, the most peaceful and cleanest part of the house. If there is sufficient space the lamp is kept in a room of its own, known as the prayer room. In other homes the God lamp might be found in the granny's room, the lounge or the children's bedroom, depending upon the size of the home. The God lamp usually comprises a clay lamp with some oil and a cotton wick. Although the clay lamp has great significance, every home also has a picture of the deity that the family members worship. In our case we had images of Lord Krishna and Mother Luxmi. On special days Mum made a garland of marigold flowers to place around the frame of the relevant deity, so that we would know whom to pray to on that day. I wouldn't say that we were particularly religious. As we grew up and ventured out into the world, we discovered our own truths and found our own spiritual connections. I am utterly grateful

to my parents for one thing: we were encouraged to believe in God, a higher form of existence and a source of divine intervention in our world.

I remember Dad bringing home a puppy. Scamp was a black-and-brown Alsatian, a playful little creature who grew much bigger than the three of us within just a few months. This made it hard for us to play with him, since he wanted to jump all over us little people. Every Saturday morning Dad would take Scamp out on his morning jog. We grew very fond of our dog. Mum often scolded Scamp because he pulled the laundry off the washing line when it was nearly dry. He also ripped up many of Dad's socks and T-shirts. He was naughty, which made Mum furious. Yet for him this was all a game. The neighbours and other visitors were afraid of Scamp, because of his size and his loud bark when he didn't recognise a visitor. We usually played with Scamp when Mum and Dad were outside with us. One day while Dad was at work, Mum put out some food for Scamp. When she attempted to remove a bone from his bowl, he tried to bite her, which terrified her.

One Sunday afternoon a few months later Dad decided that it was time: Scamp had to go. Mum was afraid of him, the three of us were scared of him, and no longer wanted to play with him, and the neighbours had complained about him. It was hard to tie him up whenever we had visitors. What was Scamp's purpose in our lives? Was he a guard dog? Was he a pet? I don't know.

After Sunday lunch Dad told us that we were going for a drive, and Scamp would come along. We had a yellow four-door Toyota Corolla car, which really suited the family. There was enough room for Scamp to jump in with us. He was happy to come along for the ride, as his wagging tail showed. He probably licked us all too.

I do not remember how far we drove along an unfamiliar road before Dad brought the car to a sudden stop. Mum and Dad got out and

opened one of the rear passenger doors. Dad shouted at Scamp to jump out of the car. He did not immediately respond. However, after many attempts eventually he followed Dad's command. It was almost as if he knew what Dad's intentions were. He jumped out reluctantly and waited for the next instruction from Dad. Dad said in a commanding voice, "Stay, Scamp, stay!" The dog just looked at him and sat down. He did not attempt to run away or to run towards Dad, he just stayed there. Mum and Dad got back into the car. We three children propped ourselves up on our knees on the back seat, with our chins on the headrest, looking out of the car's rear window. Our eyes were glued on Scamp as we watched him stare back at us as we drove away. I do not know whether he understood that this was the very last day he would ever see any of us.

As the distance from where we had dropped Scamp grew, tears filled our eyes and ran down our cheeks. We sobbed uncontrollably until we arrived home. It was a truly sad day for all of us. We had abandoned a family member. Little did we realise that this would change us forever. I do not remember much after that day – whether we ever spoke about Scamp or about what we had done to him. All I know is that even now the three of us are unable to keep a dog as a pet. Our children love animals, but we can only love them from a distance.

Looking back, I believe my parents should have handled the problem with Scamp a lot better. Abandoning a pet on an unfamiliar road with no food or water or even a human in sight is cruel. Back then there must have been shelters for dogs where they could have left Scamp. I would never want my children to witness what I did. Today, I still reel from this trauma. Fortunately, Mum clarified the situation for me just a month ago. Dad apparently went back for Scamp and he was sitting in the same spot as he had left him. Dad opened the car door and called his name, and Scamp jumped in without any hesitation. My Dad drove to Chatsworth, where my uncle lived and he left Scamp there. My uncle

had three sons who all loved dogs, so Scamp was a good match for the family. Scamp lived there until he was old.

Life carried on. Later that same year Dad went on an overseas trip. I did not understand much about it at the time. As long as Mum was around, I felt safe. Dad's trip took him to London and Texas. He wanted us to emigrate to Texas, he was that ambitious. Mum was excited about the move, since her cousin lived in Texas and she believed that a change of this nature would be good for us as a young family. Dad went on the month-long trip, while we stayed in Chatsworth with Ma and Thatha, my grandparents on my father's side of the family. Mum was a housewife, and Dad's trip was scheduled during the December school holidays. The timing was, therefore, perfect. Texas experienced snow at that time of the year. It was the first time that my father had experienced so much snow.

Days passed. I didn't understand much, or perhaps I was not interested in adult conversations. I remember that it was Anna's birthday and Dad had still not returned. I didn't want to come down to the party. It seemed so sad, Mum was sad, Annalisa was sad, I too became sad. Where was Dad? All sorts of answers crept into my head. Had he died? Would I ever see him again?

I cried and cried – I thought Dad had died, and nobody had told me. I didn't understand where Texas was. I didn't understand what a map meant, I didn't know that people like my Dad could be in different places. I was naïve, and too young to understand any of these things. Had we been abandoned? It began to feel that way, because Mum seemed to always be sad. It was as if her smile had been taken away. On the inside we were an emotional wreck, but we never spoke about our feelings. Things changed when Dad came home. His return was a new beginning. He completed us, he brought back our smiles. We felt safe again, we felt whole again, and Mum's glow reappeared.

FINDING JESS



*That's me, all dressed up and ready for Christmas toy shopping,
the day I almost got lost*





CHAPTER TWO
My Early Childhood

FINDING JESS

The ego, however, is not who you really are. The ego is your self-image: it is your social mask; it is the role you are playing. Your social mask thrives on approval. It wants control, and it is sustained by power, because it lives in fear.

Deepak Chopra

On 14 March 1974 Mum heard the devastating news that her father - my granddad - had passed away. Also around this time Mum found out that she had been pregnant with me for a month. She grieved for a prolonged period, as her father had only been ill for a short time, and his death was sudden. He sadly succumbed to a heart attack, I was told.

On Wednesday 23 October 1974, Mum went into labour at 3.00 am, when her waters broke. Dad alerted the elders in the house, including Auntie Sharmla (Dad's oldest sister-in-law), who lived next door. She accompanied my parents to the hospital, about ten minutes from home. I was told that everyone arrived at the hospital entrance at the same time. There were no porters available to push Mum in a wheelchair into the hospital, so my Aunt, who was quite large of stature, a no-nonsense type of woman, picked Mum up and carried her directly into the labour ward. I was born later that morning at 8.00 am.

Mum must have looked at the little bundle of joy that she had just brought into the world with a mixture of emotions. A feeling of fulfillment, a sense of delight and a certain amount of pride must have overcome her. A closer look at the little newborn enabled her to start

to match up the baby's physical features with her own. I was told that I had some of my mother's features when I was born: her round face and her stump nose. My dark skin tone comes from my father, together with my thick black hair. A perfect little baby! Ten fingers, ten toes, that's what they said made me perfect.

It's strange, but in such moments there is never any apprehension of the problems that the baby may encounter later. Not for a moment do you think that this perfect little being could grow up to become a serial killer, a drug addict, a teacher, a doctor, a rock star or even a president. Such possibilities seem very distant. Instead, we say to the Lord, "Thank you for giving us a perfect little baby." Was it like this in my case?

Well, let's see ...

I was born at Khan's Hospital, which opened its doors in March 1969, five years before I arrived. My family's first home was with my grandparents, who lived in Chatsworth. My Dad was the youngest son, one of ten children. Our address was Road 730, Montford, Chatsworth.

FINDING JESS



October 1975 : My first birthday at my paternal grandparents' home in Chatsworth

My Thatha: his tough love for me

Thatha, my paternal grandfather, was my go-to person. Although he used to get very cross with me, I know that he loved me to bits. I was just that naughty kid who was all over the place. I would do somersaults on the couches, and make him run after me to try to discipline me. He would grind his teeth and mumble about me. I would always be fidgeting with his building tools, pretending to be a builder.

One such tool was a rough cast machine. The plasterer would fill the machine with wet plaster mix, stand to face the desired wall, and then crank the machine handle in a clockwise direction, enabling the plaster mixture to be sprayed onto the wall, after which it was allowed to settle and dry. Once the plaster had been painted it was a very attractive home feature. At that time the rough cast machine was a relatively new tool, and everybody wanted to introduce such features into their homes.

I was fortunate to be the grandchild of a very talented builder who was willing to try out such new tools. It was fun watching his strong labourers work with the tools. It looked quite easy. I would try my hand at using the tool and make a total mess of it. Imagine me, a skinny little child, four or five years old, trying to use a machine that was almost half my size. Thatha would get angry and chase me inside the house. But I always wanted to see what he was doing. He might raise his hand with the pretension of spanking me, but he could never come close to really whacking me hard. He was far too soft for that, and so I always got away with things. To keep me out of trouble he would try to carry me around and distract me with other things.

In my eyes Thatha always seemed old. He loved to have a tot of

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Mainstay or milk-stout every evening with his supper. He would talk about his day, sometimes complaining about his workers, but mostly he spoke proudly about something new he had done. He was creative and ambitious. He was a punter who loved horse racing, and he often lost. This did not deter him from trying his luck again and again.

I was nine years old, and I had to undergo an emergency appendix operation. The whole family was worried, but they knew that I would probably recover quickly. Thatha didn't come to the hospital to see me on the night after the operation, but I know Ma (granny) shouted at him when he came home drunk that night. She managed to tell him about me. The next morning I was woken from a deep sleep by someone holding my hand.

“Hallo Thatha, what are you doing here so early?”

“I came to see you today because I was very busy yesterday. Are you getting better?”

“Yes, I am, there is no pain now.”

He put his hand into his trouser pocket, and pulled out a crumpled one-rand note, which he placed in my hand. He said, “When you come out of hospital you must buy some sweets from school.”

“Thank you Thatha,” I responded.

He kissed me on the forehead and left, as though he had a million things to do and he was in a great hurry.

I wish I could have frozen that moment in time.

I recovered. Time passed, everything was as normal as ever. I was still the naughty child in Thatha's eyes, but we loved one other.

Thatha suffered from epilepsy. Every time he had a seizure we were very scared. We weren't allowed to witness his seizures. Until one evening, while playing on the floor of my parent's bedroom, I heard a loud thump. I ran in the direction of the noise. For the first time I saw what was happening to him and I was petrified. I felt so sorry for him. He was helpless while everyone hovered around him, trying to force a door key into his mouth, so that he wouldn't bite or swallow his tongue. Nobody noticed me in the room with my full attention on him. That night I remember when he came to, I kept asking him if he was okay. I asked him whether he was going to die. He just looked at me and smiled. I didn't know what this was all about, and I was too scared to ask my parents about what had happened. So I tried to ask Anna and Divia. They responded, "You are so stupid, you know Thatha gets fits!" As if I could understand what that meant! They acted as if they knew what they were talking about but they really didn't understand either. They were merely repeating what they had heard adults say, and pretending that they understood everything.

Two years after my appendix surgery, when we lived in Sandfields, Tongaat, Dad received a call to say that Thatha was sick with pneumonia, and that he had been hospitalised. We rushed back to Chatsworth and stayed at my grandparents' house. It took about an hour for us to drive from Tongaat to Chatsworth. Since this all happened on the Father's Day weekend, it made sense for us to remain in Chatsworth. All the adults were in and out of the house, visiting Thatha at hospital, but my sisters and I were too small to be allowed to accompany them. Then I was told that Thatha wanted to see me. On Saturday night Mum and Dad took me with them. I entered his hospital room. Thatha looked weak, lying on a bed with white hospital sheets. I remember Mum

saying, “Daddy, Jesse came to see you.” He was pale and didn’t respond. Did he understand what Mum was saying? I don’t know. I got onto his bed, placed a hand on his leg and called out, “Thatha, wake up, wake up, Thatha!” I must have said this several times before he responded, just saying my name. We left a short time afterwards. The next morning the devastating news that Thatha had passed away circulated through the house. People were very emotional. I do not know what I felt. I did not immediately cry. I didn’t really understand what death was. I remember his funeral. It was as though a celebrity had died, there were so many people in attendance. People stood along the road and squeezed in to get one last view of Thatha. Half an hour before the coffin was closed, all the grandchildren were called upon to light an agrabathi (incense stick) and walk with it around his coffin, while the hymn of Om Nama Shiva was sung and echoed around them. It was only then that I cried. Only then did I realise that I would never see or touch him again. Recalling all of that now, it seems as if it happened only yesterday.

We stayed on for a few more days until the appropriate rituals were completed. It was fun being around my cousins, even though it was a sad time for all of us. I still miss my Thatha, my hero.

Ma carried on living her life without Thatha, holding the family together and keeping the peace. I know it wasn’t easy, but she did so with grace and authority, probably because she had learnt this from her own mother. Ma came from a family of five children; she was an only daughter with four younger brothers. Her father, Applesamy Naidoo, was born on 30 January 1892. He was the first Indian school principal in Clairwood. Later he became headmaster of Clare Estate Primary School. He was admired and respected for his innovative teaching methods. He has gone down in history for introducing the phonic and syllabic methods of teaching reading which enabled children to make rapid progress.

And then there was Ma

Ma, my paternal grandmother, was the apple of her father's eye. She became sad whenever she related stories about him. I was told that he travelled to school on horseback. While still a little girl, Ma suffered the loss of her father one fateful stormy night when he failed to return home from school. Apparently a search party was sent out to try to find him, but to no avail. His horse returned without him. I was told that that his body was never recovered. Ma had to leave school and take care of the house and her brothers, who continued with their schooling, whilst her mother had to work as a hawker to feed the family. Ma was fluent in English and had a strong western accent. On 2 January 2020 she turned 101. Not much of her memory of the olden days remained. However, she could still recognise her children and her grandchildren. She stayed light of complexion, slim and tall. I remember growing up in her house, which was a grandchild's dream. She never raised her voice or lifted her hand at any of us. She had such a gentle way of making us aware of our wrongdoings that we didn't want to disappoint her. She loved my siblings and me tremendously. She always recognised me and knew my name.

On 21 January 2022 I took a day off work, and decided to give Ma a surprise visit. At that time Ma lived with my aunt, Dad's oldest sister, in Pretoria West, a ten-minute drive from my home. She was very frail. I entered her room and brought my face close to hers as she lay on her bed. Ma greeted me with an incredible smile, beaming watery eyes, and said, "Jesse, you came!" I smiled and embraced her, confirming what she had said. I helped her to sit up. My aunt explained that Ma felt very weak, and that she had a lot of pain in her right leg. She could not move around very much. When I asked Ma how she felt and whether her leg was sore, she replied, "I am okay, I got no pain." Who could

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argue with that? I told her if she did feel pain, I would rub her leg with ointment or take her to a doctor if she wanted that. She insisted with a smile that she was fine, and that I should not worry.

We continue talking, just like old times. I remember a few of the things she said to me: “You must always do things in moderation, eat, drink and sleep.” Also “Too much of anything will make you sick.” and “Don’t work too hard, you must save, and you must live too.”

Her messages for my family were: “You all must stay nice” and “You all must take care of Jesse”.

Her message for me then was “You will be fine, you must not worry. Your skin will become clear.”

Before I left, she took my hand in hers and kissed the back of my palm. I told her that I loved her and that I would see her again soon.

She was too weak to walk to the door. Seeing the glow of her face when I arrived and her disappointment when it was time for me to leave broke my heart. Afterwards I made a decision to try to visit her at least once a month.

I didn’t know then that I wouldn’t see her again. But I understood then how precious those moments were, and I knew that I would treasure them forever.

FINDING JESS



23 October 2022, my 48th birthday. I spent the morning chatting to Ma for the last time, two months before her passing at the age of 103

A letter to my dearest Granny

I stand upright, in front of your bed as I watch you take your gentle breath. You always sleep on your side, almost in a foetal position, right hand tucked away under your face and your left hand stretched out and resting gently on your hip. This is how I will always remember you at rest from as little as three.

At 103, I bring my face close to yours. You feel my presence and you open your eyes. Without hesitation and with a beaming smile you say my name: “Jesse”. I am told that I am the only one you recognise in an instant. I feel sudden overwhelming emotion. Tears well up in my eyes. I don’t allow them to roll down my cheeks, I blink quickly a few times, and I turn to you and see the spiritual connection we have.

Ma, my recent visits have been so meaningful to me, and I know to you too. Your constant worry about me never stops. I try to reassure you many times with every visit that I am really okay, but you still worry and care so deeply.

We talk about everything. Your attitude at your advanced age leaves me in awe. You articulate your words in such a way that I am left astounded. But I wouldn’t expect anything less from such a dignified person. Having grown up in your home I am reminded of just how lucky I am. Most of my cousins didn’t have this opportunity; however they know and feel your love and affection too.

I say that they don’t make grannies like they used to. Why is this, Ma? Your response to me is, “Yes, they don’t make grannies like the old days, because in today’s world mothers become grannies at a much younger age, and they want to compete with their daughters and daughter-in-laws, so they forget about the grandchildren.”

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“Jess, you mustn’t work too hard; I know you want nice things, so you have to work for that. Life is hard without money; things are very dear now.”

You sometimes forget that I have my own home, so I remind you that I do not stay with Mummy and Daddy. It worries you that I have to live alone, and when I tell you that I don’t live on my own, you smile, nod and say, “You got wife?” We both laugh and I reply no.

“I will come to your house,” you tell me.

“Yes Ma, when you come, I will make some nice mutton curry, dhal and rice for you.”

You respond: “Why you wanna make so many curries, just one curry is fine! You must come and pick me up on a weekend because you are working Monday to Friday.”

“But I won’t come now, we still got time, I will let you know when.”

I am amazed by the legacy that you and Thatha left behind.

Thatha and Ma’s descendants

Generation	Born	Deceased	Surviving
Children	10	3	7
Grandchildren	32	4	28
Great-grandchildren	42	1	41
Great-great grandchildren	12	0	12
Total	96	8	88

Our recent goodbyes were as follows: You caressed my hands, you kissed the back of my palms. I'd never known you to do such things, but you did this in those last visits. It's almost as though you didn't want to let go. Saying "I love you" rolled off your tongue so easily as you bade me goodbye and waved. And then, as we turned towards the door and walked away, you instructed my daughter and partner to take good care of me. Their response was "Yes Ma, we will". Then you were satisfied.

The day of my scheduled visit, 22 December 2022, you took your leave of this world just before sunrise. I kissed you one last time. As I felt your icy cold forehead I knew that you were no longer here and that you had ascended into the realm of the angels. You will forever be in my heart. I love you, Ma. Until our souls meet again ...

My school education

Year	Academic year	Name of institution	Location
1980	Pre-school / Grade 0	Some auntie's house	Chatsworth
1981	Class 1 / Grade 1	Lotusville Primary School	Verulam
1982	Class 2 / Grade 2	Rose Heights Primary School	Chatsworth
1983	Standard 1 / Grade 3	Rose Heights Primary School	Chatsworth
1984	Standard 2 / Grade 4	Rose Heights Primary School	Chatsworth
1985	Standard 3 / Grade 5	Fairbreeze Secondary School	Tongaat
1986	Standard 4 / Grade 6	Sterngrove Primary School	Phoenix
1987	Standard 5 / Grade 7	Woodview Primary School	Woodview
1988	Standard 6 / Grade 8	Havenpark Secondary School	Phoenix

1989	Standard 7 / Grade 9	Stanmore Secondary School (1 month) / Mountview Secondary School	Phoenix / Verulam
1990	Standard 8 / Grade 10	Phoenix Technical Secondary School	Phoenix
1991	Standard 9 / Grade 11	Phoenix Technical Secondary School	Phoenix
1992	Standard 10 / Grade 12	Phoenix Technical Secondary School	Phoenix

How did this all happen? How come I attended ten different schools in twelve years?

I was an average learner, and seldom got into trouble. I was always quiet in class and I kept the same friends. There was never any need for me to attract other people's attention, except when it came to ... my appearance.

Vitiligo – The white patches

I was five years old when I began to develop small white patches on the front of my legs. Initially I had a few patches or spots, and my skin felt very itchy before the patches appeared. Mum thought it was some sort of strange disease, and so she rushed me off to various doctors. The condition was unfamiliar to the doctors whom she consulted. In fact, even dermatologists had learned about it relatively recently. None of the doctors could identify the cause, and, therefore, they just referred to it as “white patches”.

Within a year the patches had spread right across the front of both my legs, and a few patches had developed on my feet and hands. The patches were accompanied by terrible itching, and all I could do

was scratch myself. I started school. The patches would appear and disappear. Mum tried to treat them with all kinds of medication, including almost anything anyone recommended. I was a human guinea pig, until one horrible, horrible day.

One day when Mum and I were walking down Beatrice Street in Durban, a woman from Prep Pharmacy stopped her. The woman told Mum about an apparently 'wonderful' medication that she said would tackle my problem effectively. Mum rushed me to the pharmacy, and purchased some ointment and capsules, noting carefully the accompanying instructions on how to use the medication. When we arrived home later that afternoon Mum told everyone at home about the new remedy. She vowed to apply the ointment to me the following day, which was a Sunday. When morning came I had a bucket bath, and Mum told me to remove all of my clothing except for my undies. She applied the ointment across my body, face, hands, stomach, legs and feet. I was completely plastered with the white ointment. I then had to sit in direct sunlight for several hours. I followed her instructions without complaint. I wasn't happy that I had to sit outside, as I just wanted to play like any ordinary child. Later that day I went indoors, and Mum gave me a bath. My skin went bright red and I was in total agony. That night I developed water blisters across my entire body. I cried and cried from pain, and so did Mum. Neither of us slept that night. Mum subsequently carried me around for days on end. My entire body had been burnt by the ointment and the harsh rays of the sun. It took two weeks for the blisters to heal. Mum vowed then that there would be no further attempt to treat the condition; we should learn to accept my misfortune.

Did she really accept it then?

Later I was taken to a homeopath in Mobeni Heights. I still remember queueing on a verandah outside their consulting rooms, and thinking that this healer must be really good if people were willing to wait so long to see him. When our turn came for a consultation, I remember the strong scent of sandalwood incense burning in his rooms. The homeopath was dressed in a white kurtha and adorned with a string of dark brown beads around his neck. Mum pointed out my white patches, moving my face in different directions to show the homeopath where the patches had developed. I was rather bored. Shortly afterwards he handed Mum a small white envelope containing several tiny white balls which looked like sago. He gave her instructions on how I was to take them, and told her that I should stop eating fish and oranges, as these were the main triggers of my problem.

No more fish and oranges for me!

As the patches grew, school became a nightmare for me. I was teased all the time. I sat alone during most lunch breaks, which led me to strongly dislike school. Other children were nasty. I didn't complain, but I started to withdraw from other learners at school. I preferred being at home, since my siblings and my cousins, who played with me in the yard, accepted me just as I was. I continued to play outdoors in the sun, which reduced the size of the white patches, but also darkened my skin.

Name-calling is common among children. It is generally initiated by the more popular children, and others then join in, rather like sheep. But if any children came across me on my own, in the absence of Mr or Miss Popular, they didn't let out a squeak of nastiness. At different times I got called Map of Africa, World Map, Betsie the Cow, Moo Cow, Patches, Whitey, Ghost and Clown.

I remember that at some point Mum began to cover me up from head to toe. I was always dressed in long trousers, T-shirts or collared shirts, and jackets. I had to cover up as much as possible, so that only the palms of my hands and my face would be visible. I remember a black tracksuit top which had to be zipped all the way to the top, regardless of how hot it was. I perspired heavily in the tracksuit but I didn't dare to unzip it. I wasn't allowed to wear shorts when I went out. Mum thought that the more my skin was exposed, the more explaining she would have to do to people we came across. There were times when I didn't want to accompany the rest of the family to family gatherings because I knew I would have to be covered up. On such occasions I envied my siblings, who could wear anything they liked. The only time I felt truly comfortable was at night when I went to bed. I wore just a vest and a pair of shorts when I slept. Even today this is still the attire I find most comfortable.

School was a nightmare for me. But around the age of 12 years I began to reflect on who I was. I constantly asked myself what my best feature was. I realised that people could see enough good in me at first glance. I had excellent teeth, a great smile, a friendly and approachable personality, and a decent command of the English language. I was a listener and, above all, I loved myself.

I knew that I had enough assets at my disposal to help me. Modest though it might sound, I gave a big smile to every person who stared at me out of curiosity. Whenever I smiled, their expression would change, and virtually every time I received a smile in return.

Today people are more accepting of such physical difference. Living with vitiligo is no longer seen as a curse. People with white patches are unafraid to be seen in public. Today public figures with vitiligo include famous models, actors and members of parliament. Support groups for parents of children who develop vitiligo have also emerged.

I know that my vitiligo affected my entire family. As much as I was accepted, people still felt sorry for me. I wasn't expected to have much of a life. I would probably never get married. I would in all likelihood be a liability and burden to my parents for the rest of my life.

What people didn't realise was that I still had ambition. I didn't see only what they saw, which made it easier for me to move on. I don't look at reflected images of myself as I walk the streets of life. I was able to take some giant steps proudly. I relied on my creative ability and acquired knowledge, and I embraced my journey. There will always be some disappointments, but I try to focus on the positive.

Vitiligo and albinism

How does vitiligo differ from albinism?

Vitiligo (vit-ih-LIE-go) is a disease that causes loss of skin colour in patches. The discoloured areas usually get bigger with time. The condition can affect the skin on any part of the body. It can also affect hair and the inside of the mouth. Normally, the colour of hair and skin is determined by melanin.

Symptoms of vitiligo are:

- Skin which develops milky-white patches, often on the hands, feet, arms, and face. However, the patches can appear anywhere, or
- Hair, which can turn white in areas where the skin is losing pigment.

Globally, about 1% of the population has vitiligo, which means that

about 80 617 545 people worldwide have vitiligo right now. So if you have vitiligo you are definitely not alone.

It's possible that vitiligo may be triggered by stressful events, such as childbirth. The trigger theory makes sense to me. I am certain that my vitiligo started when I had my first experience of abandonment. As a little child when we had to let go of Scamp, the family dog, my heart was broken, and I sobbed for a long time. I had my first encounter of stress.

In comparison, albinism is a health condition that starts at birth and continues through life. It involves partial or complete absence of pigment in the skin, hair and eyes. A person with this condition may appear very pale, and they sometimes seem to be almost translucent or semi-transparent. Albinism occurs when an individual inherits the recessive gene alleles. The albino person does not have the enzyme involved in the production of melanin or skin colour. Albinism is particularly associated with problems of the eyes or poor eyesight. Absence of pigmentation makes people with albinism more susceptible to sunburn and skin cancers, so they should always protect their skin and eyes when they are outdoors. Africans and some Native American communities have a higher incidence of albinism than other groups. In the past people with albinism were stigmatised, but attitudes have begun to improve. What has helped to destigmatise this condition is greater visibility of public figures with albinism living successful lives, including actors, singers, fashion models, artists, social activists and political leaders.

FINDING JESS



January 2021, Vitiligo at its best - 96% of my body had turned white

My mother's cry

Mum says, "I have been worried about you!" My reply is always, "I am okay, Mum. No, I really am."

I have always been my Mum's favourite child. Everyone knows that. Even my nieces and nephews are aware that Mum cares deeply about me. She puts my needs first, and always remembers my favourite things. My wellbeing has been her main concern all my life. Am I eating properly? Do I have enough money? What stresses me out? Do I have friends? These are her constant concerns, like many other mothers I would imagine. However, I recently discovered that she had gone even further in terms of her care for me.

Recently Mum sat us all down and told us how she had dealt with my misfortune. She started by saying that she loved all her children equally. The response she got was, "Yes Mum, we know, but Jess was a little more than us." Divia, Annalisa, Priya, Crystal, Arya and even Diesel responded in this way, and everyone chuckled.

"I always asked God why he made you like this, with the white patches." (Note that to this day Mum won't use the correct medical name refer for my condition – vitiligo.)

She continued, "I must have done something really terrible in my previous life to have been given a child with this condition. Growing up I was a spoilt little girl, my mother always gave me the best, whether it was my lunch for school or cakes or clothes, I was just too spoilt by her. I didn't like anything that looked funny or felt funny, I would always turn my face away in revulsion. My brothers and sisters used to get irritated with my fussy ways."

FINDING JESS

Mum often gets carried away with her stories and digresses. We have to constantly remind her of the point of the discussion, which is quite funny. I suppose that she loves talking about her childhood. Dad wouldn't always listen to her, so who better to listen than her children and grandchildren?

Although school was hard because of the behaviour of my school-mates, I was able to cope. I also had to deal with the pity of my parents' siblings. I know now that some of my aunts and uncles did not believe in me. Some saw me as a defective, albeit loving child. When confronted, they usually denied this. They did not see me as a normal human being who would one day evolve into a great individual. They might have been too scared to say anything, but their behaviour and body language said it all.

To add insult to injury, my maternal granny once said to my Mom, "Jesse speaks very well, but shame!" What did that even mean? How is my verbal ability related to the appearance of my skin? My paternal granny made comments such as, "Nice if you was all white, eh?" Almost to the point of giving in and saying, accept it but it must make you all white, whatever that means. However, I mean no disrespect to either of my grandmothers. I love them both, and I understand how my appearance saddened both of them. As I got older, I derived less enjoyment from visiting members of my extended family. Mum always instilled in us that we should go out together, everywhere and anywhere.

Her daily prayer is as follows: "Dear God, please don't let people see Jesse with her patches on her face. Let them see her as a flawless person. People shouldn't judge her before getting to know her as a real person. May she be successful in everything she does. Only you can make people change their minds."

Apparently, this has been her constant prayer since the time when vitiligo first appeared.

It makes sense now that the people with whom I have had close encounters over the years should see me as a capable person, and not just as someone with scars or white blemishes. My relationship with friends who became lovers, with my work colleagues and with bosses have been incredible. My mother's faithful prayer has carried me through the years without me being aware of it. Mum says she hasn't stopped praying, and that she will continue praying for as long as she lives. Her ongoing demonstration of kindness is incredible, given that she could have just prayed for her own health and prosperity.

A particularly vivid memory in my life journey reflects the impact of her miraculous prayer.

Dad contacted his niece, who lived in Johannesburg, and asked whether she could assist me to get a job. He did not know what work experience I had, and therefore asked her to help me with any position that was available. It so happened the company which employed his niece's husband needed a temporary filing clerk. No problem! Accommodation and travel arrangements were sorted out, and I went off to Johannesburg, 650 kilometres from home. When I arrived my relatives were pleasant and welcoming. Kashiv, the niece's husband, said that he would confirm the job with his manager before I went into the office. Meanwhile I should chill at home with his mother-in-law, my Dad's sister. Every day I waited for Kashiv to come home from work, and tell me when I should come to his office and start work. One evening after another nothing changed. Kashiv said that he hadn't had an opportunity to chat to his manager, as the office was very busy. This carried on for almost two weeks, at which point I decided to return home.

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I told Mum that I needed to finish a computer course before I could start working. She then arranged for me to return home by minibus taxi. The return journey took a long time. I remember trying to convince Mum that the job would be mine once I had completed the computer course. I did not want her to think that I had failed when I hadn't even been given an opportunity to show what I could do. So I arrived home and registered for a crash computer course. I learned how to operate a personal computer, to open Word documents and to create Excel spreadsheets. Looking back, it doesn't seem that there was much to learn, but the course gave me enough skills for me to feel competent. After some time Kashiv called my father and told him I should return to Johannesburg, as the company wanted me to start immediately. Reluctantly I made my way back, hoping that I would not need to spend more idle time waiting in his home for work. I arrived on a Sunday and began work on the following day.

I remember walking into the company offices, which were cramped and cluttered. The credit controllers filled an open plan office space, with the manager in their own office. I was introduced to the manager, Veeno. Nobody asked me much about myself or what I was actually able to do. I was given a pile of documents to sort out numerically, with each document having a unique identifier of more than ten digits. There was no space available in the open plan office, so I was instructed to share an office with the manager's personal assistant. She was reluctant to share her workspace, but identified a spot for me in the creditor's office space next to the communal printer. I did not mind, as long as I had space to work.

One day the managing director of Ethnic Hair Products, Paul Stewart, noticed me sitting in this awkward space. He introduced himself, and welcomed me to the company. Being a real gentleman, he also asked who I reported to. Unbeknownst to me he spoke to my manager,

telling her to find me a proper space in the department. The newly appointed credit manager, Jenny Samuels, explained to me that we would soon be moving office, and that where I was currently sitting was just a temporary arrangement. She seemed to see something in me that I was not even aware of, and she spoke to me as if she had known me for a long time. That evening I mulled over the events of the day. That day nobody had noticed my vitiligo; all they had seen was a young person who was hungry for work.

This job was an opportunity of a lifetime, and the first real day of my career. I embraced every challenge that I faced. Some days were more difficult than others, but I persevered. I did not want to go back to having little or nothing, as had always been my fear. Since that day many more doors have opened for me. I have learned to stop focusing on my appearance, to make myself approachable and to become indispensable in the work that I do.

I am always grateful to Mum for her prayers. I know that she still worries.

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Mum and I always together. On this occasion we were making a potjie for Dad's birthday



CHAPTER THREE
Who Am I?

When I started Class 1, I had already begun to develop my own sense of who I was.

Two things I was sure of:

1. I wanted to be a boy more than anything else in the world, and
2. I wanted to become a police officer.

Vitiligo provided me with an escape. And I never replaced the earrings I lost. Later in this chapter I'll explain what I mean by these statements. I became more withdrawn. I had a terrifying anxiety that Mum was going to leave me and just disappear. Every time we visited relatives, I tried to play with one of the kids outside, while keeping a close eye on Mum. Now and then I would slip inside, just to check that she was still around. Then I would go back to playing. I was terrified that she might abandon me.

By the age of five, I had lost all interest in wearing dresses. I tried to avoid wearing them, in spite of the fact that my Mum often selected a dress for me to put on.

However, I was totally comfortable wearing the long pants and shirts that my mother dressed me to conceal the vitiligo, because I truly admired my father and he wore similar attire. I wanted to be just like my father: I wanted to dress just like him and walk like him, and even comb my hair like he did. In his day he was quite a looker and he was fancied by many of the young ladies. During dress-up time with my sisters, I would slip my tiny body into his voluminous shirts and pairs of trousers. I would go the extra mile and try to knot his tie (which was always an epic failure!), and don his Carducci blazer, which dragged on the floor like a maxi dress. I loved his John Drake shoes, although they were oversized. I never gave up. I put on the shoes, and then I was ready to play house.

This became a new norm for me. People started to refer to me as “the tomboy”. I was totally comfortable about this.

As I grew up, I don't remember troubling my parents for toys such as spinning tops and marbles. If one of my cousins in the yard lent me their marbles to play with, I was good at winning my opponent's tops and marbles, and making up my own collection. The boys in the yard, who were around the same age as me, felt quite intimidated when I challenged them at these games. Some would go home crying if they lost all their marbles to me. This seemed quite funny to me. But there were times when I just had to give back their marbles.

I lost my earrings during an accident in a park. At the time I must have been about four or five years old. On a family outing, all the kids were playing on the swings. By accident I ran into the path of the swing on which my cousin Randhir was playing. The violence of the swing's impact propelled me right across the park. I landed on my side with my ear bleeding. Mum picked me up, and removed the earring from the injured ear to help stop the bleeding. It felt very sore, but I was

relaxed about losing an earring. I asked Mum if I took out my earrings, would that make me a boy? She probably laughed at me for asking such a strange question. All I remember is that that was the end of earrings for me.

Dressing for school was a complete nightmare. Most days I would put on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt under my school pinafore. On the way home from school I would take off my pinafore, knowing that I had shorts and a T-shirt underneath it. By the time I reached the gates of my house I only had shorts on. I followed this daily routine until I finished Matric. Now I understand girls are allowed to wear long trousers to school, and I think it is wonderful. Slowly we are moving into an age in which people are more open, and where they are allowed to be whatever it is they really are.

Souls do not have a gender.

Many books have been published that report on research that looks at souls. One particular book that I had the privilege of reading was *Journey Of Our Souls*, written by Dr Michael Newton.

Why did I feel the way that I did about boys' clothes, and why did I have different ideas about girls' clothes? As I grew up I became more aware of who I really was. I spent less time playing outdoors with my friends. Instead, I found myself using the excuse that I had homework to finish. I wanted to make sure that I was always clean and that I had a pleasant body odour. I made use of my Dad's Brut deodorant and the cocoa butter lotion for his skin. Once I had applied cocoa butter to my face and hands I felt I was good to go. I preferred wearing long trousers to wearing shorts. Long trousers were more appealing, and made me feel more comfortable.

My best friends were boys, although I was also attracted to girls. I must have been about 12 when I started to feel this way. I did not tell anyone about my feelings because the fact that I had a girlfriend confused me. I didn't want anyone to make fun of me. I loved dancing but was sometimes too shy to dance at social functions. I was a big fan of Michael Jackson: I loved both his music and his personal sense of style. I collected all the character cards that showed Michael Jackson's music video poses, and any other Michael Jackson memorabilia I could get my hands on. Everyone knew how I felt about Michael Jackson, but I preferred to practise his dance moves when I was on my own.

I adored celebrities from the 1980s. The boys I knew doted on Cindy Crawford, but I preferred fashion models and actors with a fair complexion and dark hair, for example, Demi Moore.

It never occurred to me to confide in Mum about how I felt. And nobody asked any questions. Who I was, was my secret, even though it was written all over me. I wasn't shy about wearing boy's clothes because I believed I was a boy. I felt more comfortable in male clothing. I never wondered whether my mind was playing games on me, or thought that I should try to adjust to the female gender which I had been assigned when I was born. Sometimes I cried myself to sleep, wondering why I was born this way. Why couldn't I be a son to my mother and father rather than being their daughter? It was easier for me to deal with the condition of vitiligo than to deal with having a male mind trapped in a female body.

I managed to be OK with these contradictions until I turned 12. Between 12½ and 13 my body started to tell a different story. I experienced excruciating pain in my nipples, despite the fact that my chest was still flat. I was very skinny. I told no-one. Hair began to sprout in places I wasn't expected it to grow. It wasn't cool. I had to

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My 14th birthday, with my grannies. Mum had made a tuxedo for me for the first time - one of my happiest moments as a teenager

stop wearing shorts and vests when I went out to play. I started to wear a vest under my T-shirt. As soon as my breasts started developing, I began to wear larger and looser shirts, so that my friends wouldn't notice the changes in my body. We could still enjoy playing outdoors in the sun every day.

At some point in time the amount of time that I could spend outdoors became limited. I found myself lying to my friends that I was busy helping my sisters to tidy up or that I had homework to do. I realised that I would have to endure the monthly menstrual cycle, just like my sisters did. Every month I wished it wouldn't happen to me. I tried to hide myself away from the world during my four menstruation days each month. These periods were the most depressing times of my life. Every time that I menstruated I cursed the process. I tried to calculate how many more years I would have to experience all of the agony. The inevitable process messed with my mind. Even when my monthly period happened, I didn't feel that I was a girl. I kept asking: what is the point of all this? It was in my life and here to stay. I had to make peace with it, having discovered that the average girl or woman had to endure 35 years of monthly pain and discomfort.

The universe's opportunities, or the perfect suitor

I tried to be like my sisters. I did not know how to see boys in any other way than just as friends.

Fast forward to 1990: it was the week of Valentine's Day. I attended Phoenix Technical Secondary School. The total school enrolment that year was 810 boys and only 8 girls. Almost everybody was trying to find a Valentine and make sure they wouldn't face rejection on 14

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February. I wasn't interested in any of this, but I enjoyed watching the hustle and bustle in the corridors during break-times every day until the actual day.

The day arrived, and to my dismay I found myself receiving gifts from a young man called Timothy, who was a tad shorter than me. I hadn't realised that by chatting to him over several weeks I had won his heart. He bought me a bouquet of red plastic roses, a slab of chocolate, a small white teddy with a tiny red heart and a card that declared his love for me. I received the gifts politely and told him we would chat later that afternoon. He seemed to be on Cloud Nine. I anxiously tried to think of a way to let him down gently. I told a friend about my dilemma. She advised me to let him be, and perhaps tell him about my real feelings the next day. Which I duly did. The poor guy practically begged me to go out with him. I eventually gave in and promised friendship instead. He cried and cried, I don't understand why. Afterwards he wouldn't speak to me again. He really believed that I had feelings for someone else in the school, which was far from the truth.

The following year Sheldon asked me out again, offering me a slab of chocolate and a card. By then I was really over him, as I was in love with a girl from my home town. My friends at school told me that many girls fancied Sheldon, and longed to receive something from him. He was quite a looker. I suppose I was the lucky one. I turned down his invitation, but we remained friends. After we matriculated he joined the South African Navy.

The same year a boy with the nickname Trucker became a friend. He said he needed my help with mathematics. However, I later found out that he had come by my house to get my attention. It was so short-lived that I can no longer remember his real name.

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In my final year I decided not to attend school on Valentine's Day. It was just too much for me. I felt relieved when I finished school, thinking that this stuff would now be over, and I would be free to live my life the way I wanted.

I could never convince myself I could change what my heart felt about boys and look at boys differently. To do so I would have had to be disloyal to my true feelings, and I would have been miserable.

Later, there was another attempt by the universe to change my mind. It was the year I turned 21, Pranesh came to the panel-beating workshop where I worked, to request a quote to repair his vehicle. I assessed the car, but I needed prices for replacing certain panels, so I asked him to return the next day for the written quotation.

He came back the next day and we got chatting over a cup of coffee. Dino, the workshop owner, had gone away on a trip to Babanango, and so the workshop was quiet. That day I learnt a lot about Pranesh's family. He lost his father at a young age, his mother had to raise him and his sister, who was now an attorney. He was a site manager at Esson Construction. I told him that his car would have to be written off, not repaired. He had a sentimental attachment to the vehicle and wouldn't hear of this. I enjoyed chatting to him, and he said he would stay in touch.

The next week he returned for 'just a chat'. After that he dropped in regularly, usually at lunch time, to eat his lunch with me or to bring us all lunch. We became good friends. The people at the workshop enjoyed his company and did not mind him visiting.

Then he said to me we should go to a movie together or go out to lunch over the weekend. Since the invitation sounded harmless, I agreed to

go out to lunch. Little did I realise that he was developing feelings for me. I started to distance myself from him: I refused to take his calls, and I hid away when he came to the workshop.

One evening he showed up at my home and wanted to meet my family. Mum offered him some cakes and made him a nice hot cup of Milo (which I thought odd since I had never met a man who drank Milo!). My niece, who was about 18 months old and quite bold, walked up to Pranesh as he lifted a snowball cake off his plate. Priya grabbed the cake right out of his hand, took a bite out of it, and threw the rest on the floor. Clearly she hadn't liked the taste of it, and she'd decided that if it wasn't good enough for her, it wasn't good enough for Pranesh. We scolded Priya for being so naughty, but she was the type of child who took no notice of what we said. The incident did not seem funny at the time but it is funny to me now.

All I can say is that Priya knew that this man was not for me. On the evening of my 21st birthday Pranesh gave me a bracelet engraved with the words "I love you".

That night he asked me to go out with him. I replied, "Why do you want to go and ruin what we have right now?"

He tried over and over again to persuade me to fall in love with him. He bought me flowers, he bought me teddy bears, he bought me chocolates and CDs. He really tried and I just carried on saying no to him.

One day one of Pranesh's friends noticed me and an ex-girlfriend at the beach. I don't know exactly what he saw, but he reported what he had seen to Pranesh. Pranesh must have realised I was not into him and that I would never be what he wanted me to be.

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It was an awful way for him to discover the truth, but it was bound to happen. After that I never saw him again. Perhaps I also disappointed my parents.





CHAPTER FOUR
Young Love

I reached the age of 13 in Standard 5 at Woodview Primary School. I became more self-conscious as my body began to develop, along with the sexual parts of my brain. In the last year of primary school conversations shifted. Nobody talked much about The A Team or Knight Rider. Instead there were comments such as “He smells so good” or “She has nice peaks” (referring to breasts). Talk was about adult issues, which seemed mind-blowing to me. I felt as if I was in a different time zone. Not too long ago we had been chatting about the latest TV games and programmes, and suddenly we were launched into more adult conversations. The fast pace of change seemed insane. Mind you, I had no problem with the change, since I was just as interested in the bodies of others as anyone else was. Yes, I was starting to mature.

I noticed a girl at the front of the class. She had a beautiful fair complexion, black flowing shoulder-length hair, plump cheeks and a shapely body, with no evidence of chubbiness. Her breasts were exceptionally pronounced, probably because she wore adult bras, rather than the training bras designed for our age group. Both of us belonged to the same group of friends, but she appealed to me more than anyone else in our group did. All the boys adored her, and everyone wanted to

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go out with her (or to engage in what we today call dating). However, she had a boyfriend in high school, whom she had met during the school holidays. The boyfriend was Muslim, and her parents knew about him. I don't know whether or not her parents accepted him. Nobody else in the school had met him.

My friendship group included Candy, Suhana, Vinny and Eloise. Zakiyah, Bridget, Nishaan and Veevek were also friends, although they belonged to other groups. Nishaan and Candy were the only boy and girl in the class who were open about liking each other. It was cute young love! The two sat together in every class they attended. Nobody dared to take an empty seat next to either of them when we transferred to a different classroom, because everyone knew they would have to swap seats when the other one arrived.

The girl to whom I was attracted was Eloise Govender, who lived in Havenview Drive, the main road to my house. Every day for the remainder of the Standard Five school year I walked her home. Most boys and girls lived on the opposite side of the suburb, so our walk together was the ultimate treat for me. It usually involved just me and her. Sometimes her younger brother joined us when he had had extra-curricular activities at school and he had finished late; then we had to walk home with him. I didn't mind, since he was a cool, chubby little boy, who generally ran on ahead of us.

Eloise and I had some deep conversations. She told me about life at home, and how her family was heavily involved in church and Sunday school activities. Most of her extended family still lived in Chatsworth, and so over most weekends she and her family travelled to the south of Durban. I wanted to go to her Sunday school, but my family was Hindu, and church was taboo for us. She often asked me to join her and her siblings at Sunday school, but I couldn't because I usually had

family engagements on Sunday, such as picnicking at Blue Lagoon or the Japanese Gardens, or visiting my mother's relatives.

I recall that Eloise had soft sweaty palms and she always carried a face-cloth to dry them. She liked my T-shirts and Kung-Fu shoes (which were at that time the in-thing). She wasn't afraid to borrow my clothes over the weekend, to show off to her cousins in Chatsworth.

I didn't mind lending them to her, since I was in love with the most beautiful girl on the planet. During the exam period, if she wanted to borrow any of my books, I would lend them to her in a heartbeat, just to feel close to her. She was kind to me. We enjoyed group activities at school, and she always wanted me to be in her group. On one occasion we had to do a sketch in the English class, which was part of the final individual Grade 7 assessments. Our teacher appointed us as leaders of different teams, because we were both strong personalities.

I was my team's playwright and director. The dramatic piece we chose to perform was a comedy set in a school, which involved children of various ethnic groups with different accents. I got the idea for the play from the sitcom *Mind Your Language*, in which various foreign characters attended a class in order to learn to speak English. We had great fun. Our teacher decided that our group had delivered the best performance, as our play involved multiple changes of character, it was challenging, and everyone in the group was out of their comfort zone. Eloise's group chose to perform a play about drugs in school, which was more serious than ours. It seemed relevant, given that learners were exposed to drugs and drug abuse was rampant.

Eloise and I remained close. During the Michaelmas holidays most of my friends were sent away to stay with aunts, cousins or grannies, but Eloise and I remained at home. She was the oldest child and therefore

had to take care of the house and her siblings, and to cook food before her parents got home from work. In my family we didn't visit other people's homes during the holidays – every school holiday we stayed at home. Just like Eloise, my sisters and I had domestic responsibilities. My responsibilities were to scrub the floor tiles, sweep the yard and vacuum the carpets. I loathed having to do them, because I wanted to be outdoors with my friends.

When the chores had been done, and if my friends were not around for me to play with, I would go for a ride on my mountain bike. I was not allowed to leave our street or to ride on the main road. Our street had a very steep incline. I hadn't figured out how to operate the gears on my bike, so if I raced down the street, afterwards I would have to walk with my bike all the way up, a boring task for me on my own. My sisters didn't play outside with me. One day I decided to ride on the main road. As you might have guessed, I ended up at Eloise's house. Her brother loved my bike and wanted to ride it while I spent hours chatting to his sister.

During one of my visits to Eloise a boy called Faadile arrived unexpectedly. He had received a lift from a friend who owned a car, and who had driven from Chatsworth to Woodview. Faadile had rather average looks and a stubborn personality. He and I greeted one other. Then he turned all his attention to Eloise. I felt like a third wheel, said my goodbyes and left.

I didn't always feel enthusiastic about going to school, as I was in my final year of primary school. I was in the process of maturing and developing new interests. My friends and I were asked to organise our year-end class party. I was tasked with organising the music. My family had a Blaupunkt stereo system which I offered to bring to the party. The event was a dress-up, bring-and-share party, so while others

would contribute snacks and cold drinks, I would bring the music. If we wanted to be seen as the coolest and best dressed we had to wear our most torn or most stonewashed pair of jeans.

I remember Eloise telling me how much she loved Chris de Burgh's song "Lady in Red". At that time we had to play music on a cassette player, record player or radio, since CDs and USBs weren't available yet. I couldn't afford the cost of an original cassette recording, so I had to record the song from Radio Port Natal (now Eastcoast Radio). I remember waiting next to the radio on a Saturday night for the song to be played, so that I could record it. Once I had made a recording, I played the song many times over in order to work out and write down the lyrics. I had to play the tape, stop it, write down the lyrics, rewind the tape, and then repeat the process, until I had worked out the lyrics of the entire song.

My sisters laughed at me when they realised what I was doing. But I was in love, which I thought no-one would understand.

At school the following Monday I looked forward to giving Eloise the song lyrics – it felt like a real accomplishment. It was the first time that she had been so appreciative of something I had done, and my reward was a kiss on the cheek. This was so unexpected that I blushed for what felt like the whole day. It was the first of many kisses on the cheek.

Eloise borrowed schoolbooks from me to finish homework or for studying. I didn't mind. She was my girl!

In the same year my sister Divia decided to celebrate her 14th birthday. My parents agreed to host a party for her at home. Family members were invited, together with school friends. A big party was planned, with a marquee, delicious food and a disco with a male cousin who

could DJ; his DJ services came with the name DJ Squares. My cousins were older than us, and so some of them assumed the role of bouncers and security guards. Since the disco was very loud, it attracted gate-crashers, whom my cousins refused entry to. My cousin Kaveer, who was then 22 years old, had an altercation with a male gate-crasher. When the party came to an end, Kaveer dropped his sister off at home. He noticed the gate-crashers he had chased away from the party had hung around at the top of the road. Kaveer stopped his car and confronted the group, asking them to leave. From what I understand, a few words were exchanged, and the gate-crashers – who were apparently gangsters – became angry. As Kaveer turned away to walk back to his vehicle, the group said something to provoke him again, and he turned around. As he did this, a youth called Shaun pulled out a sharp weapon and stabbed Kaveer in the chest. Kaveer staggered a few steps and fell on his car. The youths then ran away. Sadly Kaveer succumbed to his injuries. It was one of the saddest days of my life.

Before every exam, Eloise returned any schoolbook she had borrowed from me and gave me a kiss on the cheek for good luck. It seemed a shame when she didn't need any more books, since no more kisses would come my way. After the class party and the end of the school year, many students went away to their cousins for the holidays. Eloise left for Chatsworth. So I didn't get to see her during the holiday break.

After Standard Five, my classmates and I moved up to the nearest high school, which was Haven Park Secondary School.

On the first day of high school, we were eager to see our friends and catch up on news of the holidays. Much had changed. Eloise seemed even more attractive than before the holidays. She and I took the same bus to and from school. I remember that I usually ended up standing because by the time the bus arrived at my stop it was full. The bus driver often played Rick

Ashley's "Never Gonna Give You Up" during these trips.

Eloise and I, and most of our peers in primary school ended up in the same class in high school. School was fun, and the teachers were great. All seemed to go well.

Two weeks into the new school year I noticed Shaun at school. (Shaun was the gangster who had attacked and killed my cousin Kaveer the previous year.) I remembered the pain Shaun had caused my family, and I hated him. When I got home I told my parents I had seen him. We didn't talk much about Shaun, although I knew that the process of laying criminal charges against him for the murder of Kaveer had begun. At school I avoided him, and I looked forward to the day when he would be punished for the crime he'd committed. I spoke to none of my friends about Shaun: neither who he was or what he had done. I didn't want to talk about any of it.

One day in the middle of the year I noticed Eloise in conversation with Shaun. This disturbed me but I ignored the incident. Sometimes Shaun would just stare at me. I don't know if he knew who I was, apart from the fact that Eloise and I were in the same class. Before much time had passed, I noticed that she chatted to him every day and that they were dating. Eloise asked me to accompany her when she visited Shaun, and she wanted me to hang out with them, but I always refused. My feelings for her began to fade. I realised I was no longer attracted to her. She developed a bad reputation through spending lots of time with the boys in the school.

The year that I started high school my parents threw a birthday party for me. Family members who had been invited to Divia's party the previous year were invited to my party, and the same DJ was asked to organise the music. I was allowed to invite all my school friends to the

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party, and we had an amazing time. For the first time I felt comfortable in the company of all my friends. Mum arranged for a tuxedo to be made for me, and she designed and baked a birthday cake in the form of a race car. Afterwards my classmates talked about the party for the rest of the year, which made me very happy.

Now I focused on my studies. If I hadn't finished my homework or if I needed to study I told Eloise that I could not lend her books. That year I achieved much better academic results than she did. My focus differed from hers. I paid more attention in class, and she only paid attention to the boys at school. Vinny, Candy and Suhana remained close friends.

At the end of the year I moved to another school. I lost contact with my friends, as we didn't exchange home telephone numbers, and cell phones weren't around at the time. My family moved to a suburb which was further north. I had no idea what happened to Eloise, Candy, Suhana and Vinny after my move because we didn't stay in touch. However, I invited them to come to my 21st birthday party, and so we met again briefly. After that we parted company again for the second time. As I grew up I missed them terribly because we had had such strong connections. They were the only real friends I ever had.

In the early 2000s I searched for my Woodview friends on Facebook, but to no avail. I imagine that I couldn't find them because they had probably changed in terms of appearance as they moved into adulthood. I wonder whether I will ever reconnect with any of them in the future ...

Bullying

I generally regard myself as a calm, level-headed individual. I try to listen to others before judging them, and I try to avoid jumping to conclusions.

However, when I am certain about my facts I tend to stand my ground. And when I feel that I am not being heard I have been known to raise my voice.

I want to describe two occasions when I lost control of myself, both of which still haunt me today.

On the first occasion I was probably 12 years old. I suspect that I was struggling with all the hormonal changes associated with puberty, and so my thoughts and emotions were all over the place, even though I appeared to have everything under control. At that time there was a boy in my class named Dan. Dan was somewhat shorter than me in terms of stature, and quite mischievous. He developed an annoying strategy to grab the attention of girls in the class. He would stick a small mirror on top of one of his shoes. Then he would walk behind the girl he had chosen to be his victim, and slide his shoe between the girl's legs, and under her dress, and position the mirror in such a way that he could peek at her underwear. Whenever he succeeded he would shout out to the class the colour of the girl's underwear. He got everyone laughing, even the girls. I thought that his behaviour was immature – it annoyed me a lot. He engaged in this prank whenever an opportunity arose. The girls responded by rushing to sit down whenever they walked into class, to avoid being preyed upon and to Dan's annoyance.

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One day I decided that someone needed to put a stop to his childish behaviour. I wasn't worried that Dan might get to see my underwear, as I always wore a pair of shorts and a T-shirt under my school uniform. Even if he managed to get a shoe between my legs and under my dress, there would be nothing for him to see except my shorts. Dan tried his usual routine with me, to look under my school uniform and identify the colour of my underwear. He then informed the class that I wore red undies. As usual the class laughed when he made this announcement. As calmly as I could, I then approached Dan and asked him where he had got such an absurd idea. I challenged him to admit to the class that he hadn't been honest with them. He began to laugh and walked away. I challenged him again to tell the class that he was lying. Dan refused. I became so enraged that I grabbed him by the collar, lifted him off the ground and held him firmly against a steel cupboard. I repeated my words. Dan's feet dangled helplessly in the air, and he was so shaken that he cried. He admitted that he had lied, and he pleaded with me to put him down. He swore he wouldn't try the prank again.

The girls in the class clapped as I threw Dan down onto the floor. It was the last time Dan tried to ogle the underwear of a girl in the class. He was terrified of me, and avoided me as far as possible.

I was on a high, with everyone thanking me for sorting out Dan. The following week I felt remorse about what I had done. I kept telling myself, "That's not who I really am". Usually I'm neither violent nor aggressive. Or that's what I told myself. I believe now that everyone harbours some vestige of anger, and when sufficiently provoked, rage can be unleashed in the ugliest of ways. I regretted what I had done to Dan. Today I still feel distressed about the incident. Afterwards I thought that I had learned to control my anger.

However, after that I was provoked into exploding with rage in the presence of my family.

The second incident occurred on a Saturday afternoon when Mum's youngest sister, my aunt, invited us to visit her home in Clare Estate, south of Durban. My aunt and uncle have three children, all of whom are three to four years younger than me. We all got along well. My aunt's youngest son would gather together all of the cousins and write sketches for us to perform for the family. For example, he might persuade his sister to sing a song while we danced, and he wanted to direct everything. Sometimes he became very annoyed when we did not get it all right, and we would laugh our heads off at him.

On the afternoon in question, his father had just come home from work, and had got into the shower. We kids were sitting cross-legged on the bed in the main bedroom, watching TV. Everything was fine until my cousin became bored and started to play with the hair of my oldest sister, Annalisa. Annalisa had straight, black hair which hung down to her buttocks. My parents had persuaded her to let her hair grow because she was learning to perform classical Indian dance. At that time young Indian girls were expected to have long hair. Being an obedient daughter Annalisa complied with their request. (Later, once she had passed matric, she had her hair cut very short, without getting Mum's permission. Mum was furious. I wondered what all the fuss was about, since Annalisa with short hair was very attractive: she looked young and modern.)

When my cousin began to fiddle with Annalisa's long hair, he pulled her hair from behind and kissed her on the cheek. He liked to torment both of my sisters and his sister in this way. I didn't like this type of behaviour at all. My cousin then knocked me on the head with his finger and began to tackle the next girl. At this point everyone tried to

push him aside so they could watch television, My cousin grabbed me from behind and attempted to kiss me. I turned around and flung the back of my hand across his mouth. My face expressed utter rage and shock, as my cousin grabbed his mouth in agony, and his lip bled all over the place. His father stormed out of the bathroom when the boy screamed and the other adults rushed into the room.

I couldn't believe what I had just done. All I knew was that I was going to get a proper hiding from Mum for this. I remember that once the adults had managed to stop his lip bleeding we left shortly afterwards. When we got home I explained to Mum what had happened. She understood why I had responded the way I did, and I didn't get the spanking I expected.

My first real relationship

At 15 years of age, while living in Verulam, north of Durban, I made friends with kids from the district. The boys were allowed to play outside, but the girls would usually only come out when a district function was scheduled. I met René at a New Year's Eve bash in 1989, at a party in the street on which we lived. She was fondly nicknamed 'Babes', and everyone called her that. I couldn't bring myself to use this nickname, so I settled on calling her René. We chatted a lot that first night and we became really close. I initially thought of René as a 'farm girl'. ('Farm girl' is a rather pejorative term for a girl or young woman raised in a rural area.) Yet René was quite a dancer. I learned that she loved heavy metal rock music, her favourite band was AC-DC, and her favourite track was "Thunderstruck". She was short in stature, with a fair complexion, thin lips and beautiful silky black hair shaped into a bob. Usually she had a broad smile on her face. René wasn't the best learner in the class, but she could make heads turn. Although she was

three years younger than me, we just clicked. I grew very fond of her and started to visit her every day after school. We lived in the same row of flats. If she had free time that she wanted to spend with me, she would pop her head out of her yard and look in the direction of our flat, to see whether I was outside. If we recognised one another, we would then walk towards each other.

In February 1990 we were both invited to the thirteenth birthday of Sonny (also known as Sathish), which was held at René's neighbour's house. I received an invitation because Sonny and I were good friends, we use to ride our bikes together. The celebrations were going well, and someone asked René to fetch ice from her home. I felt a tug on my wrist, and I got pulled in the direction of the door. I saw that René was yanking my arm, in order to persuade me to accompany her. This was the first occasion that I saw the interior of her home. It was an open-plan apartment, kept neat and tidy. The furniture had an old classical style, and was mainly brown. We retrieved the ice. Then René wanted to go upstairs, and grab her sister's lipstick to apply to her lips. She invited me to accompany her. The stairs were carpeted all the way up to the bedrooms, which created a cosy ambience. The layout of my family's flat was largely the same as this. Upstairs were two bedrooms and a full bathroom. I followed René into the bedroom she shared with two older sisters. The room was rather cluttered, with two single beds pushed together, and two imbuia wardrobes. René stood in front of the mirror and applied lipstick. When she was done, she turned to me and smiled, asking me whether I liked it. In response I just smiled and nodded. Then quite suddenly and unexpectedly she pulled me closer and kissed me. I was in a state of total shock. However, I did reciprocate, and we continued kissing for about a minute. Wow! I hadn't imagined my first kiss would be that good. It felt weird yet wonderful. Two amateurs kissing like pros.

She then said: "Let's go before someone starts looking for us". Without

saying a word, I followed her. Back at the party I kept touching my lips, remembering what had happened earlier. I was still in complete awe of her. The party was great, and we had fun. I kept looking at her, but she didn't give me a second glance. That night she gave me mixed signals. Almost everyone at the party tried to pair her off with Sonny. Later I learned that Sonny's brother, Ashish, fancied her. The party came to an end, we said goodnight, and we parted ways.

I tried to see her the following day, but I was unsuccessful, as her father had decided to take the family to their home in Inanda. In the meantime, I daydreamed all the time about our kiss. From losing Eloise to a criminal to finding love with a farm girl, life was truly amazing. Was René just a tease or did she really like me? I would have to wait and see ...

I had to see her, I needed to see her. I sat outside until late that evening when I saw the family car return. It was too late to go visit her, as I couldn't come up with an excuse I could give her parents to justify visiting her so late. Perish the thought! I was forced to wait until school was over the following day before I could see her.

Around 3.00 pm the next day, I walked up to her front door and knocked cautiously. "Hello auntie, how are you? Is René around? I'd like to see her please."

After about a minute, René came out. "Hey Jess, what's up?" "Really?" ! I thought, "Did you not feel what I felt two nights ago?" My heart was pounding, but I needed to know what René was feeling. "All you could think of to say to me was: 'What's up?'" Had I dreamed all of this?

So I asked her to come outside so we could talk freely. She slowly closed

the door and walked with me. Once we stood alongside her father's car, she kissed me again. This time I stopped and asked, "What's going on here?"

Her response : "Didn't you like it?"

Of course I had liked it, and I wanted more. She started to chuckle and told me, "Lighten up! I have feelings for you, and I want to go out with you." I replied, "I love you too", and smiled. In that moment, I just wanted to hold her in my arms and never let her go.

As we continued, René asked, "Why didn't you say something instead of waiting for me?" I explained that I was shy, yet I loved spending time with her, and I didn't want to ruin that. We went out together for slightly more than a year. During that time René frequented my home. She loved coming over when my parents weren't around, since she was afraid of them. I remember one day René and I ran into our home to fetch something. I noticed a curious set of young eyes fixed on René and me. I quickly called out, "Hi!" and left, and the young observer just smiled. Later that evening I asked Divia who the person was, and why she had been in our home. Divia replied that she was Sonny's neighbour, and that she had helped her with some homework in the form of needlework. This was the very first time that our eyes met and locked for a few seconds. Who could have predicted what would subsequently happen?

After that René and I met every day, including on weekends. Our families were probably tired of always seeing the two of us together. We were in love: nothing and no-one else really mattered.

I remember one day we were playing cards on a bed in my house. René

was naughty that day. She exclaimed, “Let’s play strip poker!” I had no idea how to play the game. Before I knew it, she had embraced herself, which turned me on. I leaned over to kiss her, and my younger sister caught us in the act. “Hey, Jess!” she cried, standing in the doorway of the room. René pushed me away, pulled down her shirt and ran home. I had to think quickly how I should respond to some serious questions from Divia. I felt as if my whole world was collapsing. I just wanted the earth to open up and swallow me. I was scared of René’s family finding out what was going on between the two of us, but at the same time I didn’t want to lose her. I told my sister that I was planning to break up with René, so that she would not tell the rest of the family about us.

We didn’t break up. We spent even more time together, stealing moments here and there. Flat No. 7 was vacant – my Dad happened to have keys to the property because my uncle and his family were looking for a place to stay. René and I used the property whenever we wanted to be alone and out of sight. We spent many hours there, just chatting or exploring one other. It was fun: we were typical love-smitten teenagers who couldn’t get enough of one other.

Then came the day when my uncle agreed to move into the flat. We could no longer hide out in this romantic venue. Later we discovered that the apartment was not as romantic a place as we had imagined. In fact, a horrible and heinous crime had been committed there.

Flat No. 7 had been the temporary home of Nirmala and her new boyfriend, Charles. They appeared to be a happy couple – they seemed to be very private people who minded their own business. They were the type that merely greeted you, and then walked off, into their home. People noticed Nirmala’s exceptional beauty and her radiance – one couldn’t miss her. She had beautiful long, black hair. Nirmala was so

stunningly attractive that she could be mistaken for a model.

Charles was soft spoken with exceptional manners. He would always open the car door for her, and sometimes when it rained, he would stop his car close to the front door, so that his princess would not get wet getting into the vehicle.

They seemed to be the perfect couple. But hidden away was a dark and monstrous man. Charles was a very jealous person. He didn't appreciate other men admiring Nirmala, and she wasn't allowed to converse with anyone.

One fateful stormy night the couple returned home from an outing. Charles was already furious. He kept slamming doors and pulling Nirmala by the hand, almost dragging her into the house. Nobody could hear much of what was going on, owing to the pouring rain and raging thunder. Something terrible must have happened for Charles to do what he did. His jealousy turned into intense fury that night. During a fight, he started beating and choking her, eventually strangling her in the master bedroom.

Charles then packed up his belongings and drove away, after setting the room alight, burning almost everything in it. Neighbours noticed the blaze and called the fire department. The neighbours expected that both Nirmala and Charles would be found dead inside the flat. However, the police could only identify the bodily remains of Nirmala. All evidence had been destroyed in the fire and there were no witnesses of what had happened. An inquest ruled that Nirmala had taken her own life. Later we found out that the property had been rented in Nirmala's name, and nobody knew Charles. He was never seen again. Only the neighbours knew that he had been with Nirmala that night. They continued to talk about what had happened for a long time, but

were too afraid to approach the police with their suspicions.

The property was renovated by a new owner and was still rented out. No evil spirits or ghosts ever appeared to frighten anyone. I suppose it had been Nirmala's time to move on, even if her demise happened in such a ghastly way. Her spirit didn't need to linger within those walls. There was turmoil in our house. I was in Standard 8, while Annalisa had been out of school and working for a year. She had fallen in love with a boy from up the road, and my parents were furious about this, as they believed that he wasn't good enough for her. He didn't have a degree or a stable white-collar job. Little did they suspect that he was a man with big dreams and endless ambition. He worked for his father's shipping company. At the time the business wasn't doing well, but it was able to support a household of ten children.

Mum and Dad decided that they needed to break up the relationship by moving. Dad took Annalisa and Divia to Johannesburg to live with Mum's brother and his family. I had just started Standard 9. It was too late for me to change schools, so Mum and I moved to Newlands West to live with her younger brother, Deshan, until I had completed my school education and could relocate to Johannesburg.

I had to break the news of the move to René. It was tough but there wasn't any time to mope. I moved but stayed in telephonic contact with her. We sat on the phone for hours on end, without anyone knowing about it until the telephone bills skyrocketed, and we had to stop calling one other.

By March 1991 I felt I couldn't cope with how far away René was, and René's nagging about when we would never see one other again. So I plucked up my courage and asked Mum whether I could stay with René's family for a weekend. At first she was opposed to the idea, but

later she changed her mind. Mum gave me sufficient money for taxi and bus fare to visit René and return home by Sunday. Cell phones were not in general use at the time, but I was sent off in good faith on my own.

The road trip from Newlands West to Verulam and back was amazing. I felt confident about using public transport. I hopped on a bus to central Durban, and then walked to Prince Edward Street, where I caught a taxi to Verulam. Then I disembarked at the famous tennis courts and walked to Brindhaven. Half an hour later, around 9.00 am, I arrived at René's front door. I felt that I had achieved so much, travelling on my own between the two suburbs using only public transport. I felt all grown up.

René's family greeted me with love and affection, something I had missed. It reminded me of my own home when we had all been together.

René and I spent the weekend on our own, since the rest of her family went to the family home in Inanda. Being away from one another had been an eye-opener for both of us. René and I chatted a lot. Both of us had grown so much and so quickly in the months we had been apart. We knew that our friendship was solid, but we also understood that long-distance relationships seldom lasted. It was horrible when we realised that we had drifted apart, since my family had to move again, and the long-distance relationship wasn't going to survive.

Both René and I were clear that we needed to focus on different things. My focus was on finishing school and moving to Johannesburg as quickly as I could. René's focus was on learning more about the world, since she had just turned 14, and wanting to explore more and experience life. I knew that my journey would take me on a different

path and to a different province, although I hated the thought of all of that.

The following day it was time for me to go home. René and I said our goodbyes, and I left. I got back to my uncle's house in a sombre mood. Part of me knew that this marked the end of a chapter. As the days passed René and I made fewer and fewer calls to each other. I started to take responsibility for my actions – I could no longer run up big telephone bills, since this wasn't the right thing to do. Nevertheless my uncle never complained about the bills, because he was so kind.

Annalisa eloped to Verulam with her boyfriend, Ashton. In November 1991 my parents agreed that they could marry. It was a rough year for my family.

Dad took ill at the time of the wedding and could not attend it. My mother's eldest brother and his wife stood in to give the bride away. Annalisa and Ashton had a lavish wedding at the Luxmi Theatre in Verulam. We got to know the Ramlukhans – our new in-laws – much better after the marriage.

Ashton and Annalisa moved to Dawncrest in Verulam, and insisted that I move in with them in my final year of school. My parents agreed to this, since both of them now lived in Johannesburg, and so I moved from Newlands to Verulam. The new home was rather cramped for three people, since it comprised just one room separated by a room divider. It was humble beginnings for the couple.

The relationship between René and me was over. I missed her, and wondered whether she ever thought about me after our final meeting. With her I experienced what it was like to be loved by someone outside the family, and the experience made me more confident. There was no

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unpleasantness at the end of our relationship. I just took it one day at a time, and continued with my journey on my own.

I don't know what happened to René. The last I heard of her was that in the early 2000s she lost her father and then moved to Cape Town to live with her oldest sister. I don't know whether she is married and whether or not she has kids. I tried to look her up but could not find her.





CHAPTER FIVE
**Crossing the Line of
Friendship**

How do you know when you have found your one true love? Does it happen when you reach puberty, when you become a teenager? Or is it perhaps just a moment in time, regardless of how young or old you are, when you have this crazy butterfly feeling in your stomach whenever you see, think, or hear about a particular person?

Let me tell you my story ...

On Saturday 11 July 1992, during my final year at school, I was returning home from extra Physical Science lessons. I was 17 at the time. I went past our landlady's front door to retrieve my house keys, which were left at my sister's house when nobody was home. When I had picked up my keys and was walking home, I heard someone shouting from a distance. When I turned towards the person who was shouting, I saw Uveka Siddartha waving at me. I waved back. She then signalled to me to move closer as she wanted a quick chat.

Uveka and I knew one another slightly, as Divia used to assist Uveka with her needlework school projects. Uveka lived in Brindhaven, a few doors away from the home of my sister and her husband. Uveka's parents were busy with final, last-minute touches to the venue for her sixteenth birthday party. I didn't know much about her, because we had dissimilar interests and moved in different friendship circles.

Uveka was a reserved, hardworking young lady – calm and polite with perfect manners. There was no reason for me to pursue a friendship with her, although we had met a number of times. She had sought my younger sister’s friendship, and, therefore, made frequent appearances at our home.

Divia often alluded to the fact that Uveka often expressed interest in my relationship with René, and I noticed the curious looks she gave me when we were together. As the district of Verulam was quite small, René, Uveka and I – as well as our respective parents – were already acquainted.

I walked up to Uveka and engaged her in conversation. I said: “Hi Uveka, how are you?”

She replied: “Hey Jess, I hope you are coming to my party this evening.” I then responded: “I don’t know, I have tons of homework to complete for winter school classes.”

Uveka urged me to change my mind: “Please come, I’d really like you to meet my friends. And besides, your friend is going to be there too” (referring to René).

Since I was not really a party person, I reluctantly answered, “OK, I will see what happens, I will check with Anna.”

I headed home, pondering our conversation. Uveka seemed quite excited and had given me a seductive smile. I thought that it would be nice to see her in a different social setting. And she was very persistent about the invitation!

The evening of the party arrived. Annalisa and Ashton insisted that I take a break and attend the party with them. Anna was very fond of

Uveka's mother, firstly because they were neighbours. After Anna got married, Uveka's mother treated her as if she was her oldest daughter: Uveka was actually the only daughter in the family, with three brothers. I remember that Uveka looked radiantly beautiful on the evening of the party. She wore a stunning diamanté halter-neck blue ball-gown. Her long straight hair had been arranged in a charming bouffant style. She had been transformed into a stunning young lady with curves I haven't noticed previously. Before the party she had dressed rather conservatively, hiding her body in oversized T-shirts, or in long skirts and dresses. That night she stood out from the crowd attending the function and looked gorgeous.

When the party formalities were over and people began to mingle, I caught sight of René, now my ex-girlfriend. I went over to catch up with her. We were enjoying a chat when René glanced over and noticed the birthday girl staring at us. René suggested I go over to Uveka, since my new friend looked like she needed me. I glanced back at René and frowned. I then asked René whether I could visit her once the dancing started, since I wasn't really a party person. René agreed as she too didn't want to stay too long at the party. We agreed and parted company.

The disco music began. Fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds partied up a storm, with every dancer trying to impress the others with their latest hip-hop dance moves.

While everyone was dancing, I snuck away to René's house, in the suburb where we had previously lived. It was within walking distance of the party venue.

I arrived at René's home. We sat outside and chatted for a long time, until her father shouted at her to come indoors as it was getting late. Both of us then stood up hurriedly, startled by his request. We hugged

one other for what seemed like a long time, which led to a passionate kiss. In that moment neither of us wanted to say goodbye. René then rushed indoors, closing the door behind her. I turned around and left to return to the party without delay, before her father reappeared and yelled again.

The birthday girl stayed on the dance floor for every song that was played. All the boys wanted to dance with Uveka; she was in her element.

When the music changed to a Bollywood song, more adults joined in the dancing. Uveka was unhappy that the DJ didn't stop with the Bollywood mix. She got annoyed and stormed out of the party, and went home.

So when I arrived at the party tent, there was no sign of Uveka. I asked what had happened. Someone directed me to the inside of her house. I walked into her home and searched for her, room by room. In some areas I noticed aunts and grannies having tea and biscuits, appearing quite exhausted. I discovered little children hanging onto their parents, half asleep and wanting to go home. Finally I found Uveka's room. This was my first real visit and exploration of her family home. Her parents were very wealthy, prominent people in Verulam.

I stood in the doorway of Uveka's dimly lit room and asked whether I might enter. She nodded to indicate consent. I turned on the light in her room. I noticed that she was sitting on a tan suede-leather couch, hugging her legs and with her knees tucked against her chest, rocking backwards and forwards. She had a snotty, swollen red nose. I did not notice whether or not her make-up was smudged. I suppose she had used expensive product, which girls like her were able to access.

She had been crying all alone. I hadn't known what to expect. Would she throw me out? Would she even talk to me? Nervously I sat down next to her, not daring to ask about the reason for the tears. I felt more comfortable saying that there had been great moments at the party and that everyone was having a really fantastic time. This wasn't the time and place to ask questions. Uveka complained about what she expected her friends to say when she went back to school, and how humiliating it would be if they remarked that they had gone to Uveka's "Bollywood bash". This was clearly a phase in her life when it was all about image and being the coolest person. I comforted her and assured her that I would help the DJ change the music. However, I let her know that her drunk uncles would probably be upset about different music. We both laughed. I remarked that we should go back to the party.

Little did I realise how well we got on when we were alone. I know Uveka felt totally comfortable with me and trusted that I would do something at the party to make her happy. Uveka reluctantly stood up and straightened her clothes, adjusting her sad but pretty face. Before we left the room, I bravely reached out to give her a friendly hug and reassure her that everything would be OK.

We left the room and headed back to the party. I was unaware that I had Uveka's lipstick smeared on my collar from when we had hugged. I felt rather embarrassed because everyone asked about the lipstick smear. I brushed away questions with a smile, and didn't try to explain the accident.

As the evening continued, a boy named Mario asked Uveka to dance. For the first time I was envious. Mario was the person she had wanted to dance with right from the beginning of the party. I think she had a crush on him. But she wanted him to ask her to dance rather than have to approach him. As they slow-danced together, whenever she

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turned to face me at the DJ box, she looked at me with an expression of disbelief. I smiled back at her, as if to say, “Just enjoy the moment.” The song ended and I switched to a faster music mix. I watched as Mario and Uveka parted and moved in different directions, to join other groups on the dance floor.

After many fast songs had been played, we switched to a love ballad once again. At the DJ box I was able to gauge the crowd and its tiredness, noticing at this point that many people had sat down for a break. This time, to my surprise, Uveka asked me to dance. As I held her close and we swayed to the music, I remember the sweet scent of her perfume, one hand on my shoulder, and her other hand soft and gently settled into mine. I remember the entire time dancing with Uveka. She talked about Mario: how good he was at dancing, how cute he was and how good he smelled. The comments just didn't stop, and I don't think she even noticed the song we were dancing to – “Masterpiece” by Atlantic Star. No doubt Mario was very handsome and popular with the young ladies.

During the moments of close physical contact with Uveka I kept getting random butterfly sensations in my tummy. Was I falling in love with her? Were my feelings for her growing? That night, each time I questioned my feelings, reality would hit me, and I would remember her going on about some boy at the party. I realised that she just wanted me to be a friend, and I shook off my feelings. The song ended. I thanked Uveka for dancing with me, as I knew I had not had the courage to ask her to dance with me for a love song.

After several more music tracks the party came to an end. Everyone had had a great time. I helped to clear up. When it was time for me to leave, Uveka was on a real high and begged me to stay. I asked Anna if this was OK. She said that it was fine and that she was happy I had

made a new friend.

The house was packed with extended family members staying overnight. I clearly recall that the birthday girl and I made a bed for ourselves on the floor of the lounge with cushions from the sofas. She made sure I had the more comfortable side. Everyone else went to sleep, but Uveka wouldn't stop talking about the evening. I eventually fell asleep listening to her stories.

Two days later, during the school holidays, I was lying in bed and heard someone call my name. I moved the curtains and peeped through the window. To my surprise I saw Uveka outside, signalling to me to open up. I opened the gate using a remote and she ran down the stairs to meet me. She had come to ask me to accompany her to the Department of Home Affairs in Verulam, also known by locals as "the village". Uveka had just turned 16 and she wanted to apply for an identity document. I agreed to go with her after a quick shower. As we walked to the village and talked and talked, I discovered that I really enjoyed being around her. We made each other laugh till our stomachs hurt and tears rolled down our cheeks. After that day I knew I had a new best friend. We could talk about anything. I got to know about her previous relationship with a guy much older than her but whom she really liked; however, the relationship was short-lived. She often went to the village with her friends after school and I think that is how she got introduced to him.

Time passed and it was back to school for both of us.

I'd been living with my oldest sister and her husband after my parents relocated to Johannesburg. It was my final year of school, before reuniting with the parents.

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Although Uveka and I had just two months to build a friendship we grew fond of one other. On the evening of 31 July 1992, Anna asked Uveka to join us for dinner and stay the night because her parents were away for the weekend. I remember that night vividly, as though it was yesterday. After dinner, sitting outside on a cold staircase under the most beautiful starry sky, we chatted. There was something magical about that evening. Perhaps we even missed a shooting star above us because of the magic. Neither of us were tired, nor did we have the urge to go inside. Instead, we hung around outside and cherished every moment. After many laughs and serious discussion about a range of issues we decided to retire to the house. With lots of giggling, pushing and pulling, we finally made a bed on the floor with cushions from the sofas. This time I made sure Uveka had the better side to sleep on. After much tossing and turning we eventually fell asleep. I remember being woken up in the early hours of the morning by a soft hand around my waist. Was I dreaming or was this really her arm? Nervousness and confusion flooded in. I did not know whether to push Uveka's arm away or pull it closer to me. Uveka's breathing became quiet. I was too afraid to open my eyes and watch her sleeping – I did not know whether she was awake or sound asleep. I faced a dilemma: should I just hold her close or move away and ignore what had just happened? Although scared of rejection, I made a move and got closer to her. As I put an arm around her, she snuggled up against me. I got my right arm under her neck with ease, and she nestled against me, resting her head on my chest, almost on my shoulder. My heart raced. Would Ashton or Anna, who were sleeping in the next room, wake up and find her in my arms? How in the world would I explain to both of them what had just happened? Then I realised that Uveka was awake. She didn't utter a sound. We enjoyed the comfort of one other's embrace in that moment. I was too afraid to move, as I feared that if I moved too suddenly she would pull away from me. So I just lay there, not going back to sleep until sunrise and time to get up. I remember clearly the

strange butterfly feelings in the pit of stomach repeating and repeating. In the morning Anna and Ashton got up early and left for the village. Uveka and I were already up. We brushed our teeth and had the breakfast that Anna had left for us. We kept smiling at one other, but didn't talk about what had just happened. Eventually we just continued as before. It felt as if there was an awkward silence between two people who were hopelessly in love.

My head was filled with many questions and my heart was pounding. Did Uveka feel the same way I did, or did she regret what had happened? I felt hopelessly in love with her, and I wanted so much to share my feelings. This felt somewhat different from being with René. With René I realised it had been infatuation. With Uveka I felt more mature emotion; every little breath, every movement, every sensation of closeness felt more meaningful and left a distinct image in my memory.

I do not know why she didn't stay the following night – this really bothered me. I could not stop thinking about her or about that night. We didn't see one another or talk again during the week that followed. On Saturday 8 August 1992 we met again when Uveka's dad, Mr Siddartha, invited Ashton, Anna and I over for dinner, to thank us for having taken care of Uveka the previous weekend. Uveka's mum insisted I stay over and give my sister and brother-in-law time alone in their home. I stayed over, not a bad thing at all, but an awkward silence between us made me want to return home. That night we found ourselves sleeping next to one other again. Strangely enough, we were paired off by our families without any of them knowing the repercussions of their decision.

So we spent another night together, this time in Uveka's room. We waited for everyone to go to bed, and then snuggled up together like an old married couple. I felt relieved by the response of Uveka's body

to mine. We finally got down to talking – or rather whispering. I asked about the previous night we had spent together and how she felt about me. She blurted out, “I don’t know, I think I love you”. Stupidly I responded with something along the lines of: “Oh, no big problem”. She pulled away from me. I then had to try to explain to her my response – really dumb of me, I thought.

That night I told her how much I loved her, and that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I knew she was scared and that she did not appreciate advances from me, so I did not pursue the matter any further. I just held Uveka close, hoping she would trust me and feel safe in my arms, just like she had done the first night we were together. We were an item, now that we had admitted our feelings for one another. Days went by; we could not stay away from one another, nor could we resist stealing special moments here and there, without anyone noticing.

Almost a month passed. One day I was in Uveka’s mother’s kitchen, standing by Uveka’s side and watching her wash lunch dishes. Chatting about various matters, I suddenly got serious. I enquired whether I could ask a particular question. Judging by her tender smile, she anticipated what I was going to ask.

I blurted out my question: “When can I kiss you?”

She responded rather hurriedly, “No, not here, not now!” Almost as if I was intending to kiss her right there and then, before she had time to respond. I laughed at her reaction. She later explained that there had been too many people in close proximity to us in that moment.

I respected her and tried to change the topic of conversation, by helping her wipe dry the dishes. I knew she did not want to rush things, and I wanted to savour every moment. For me it was a case of wanting to know whether or not I was just an experiment. Or did she have genuine

feelings for me? I guess I still felt insecure in that area of my life.

Many days passed, and we continued to talk on the phone. We were keen to meet on the weekend or at other district gatherings. Our times together always seemed to be too short. I remember one night out of the blue, Uveka called me to ask whether I wanted to come over when everyone had gone to bed. I agreed without a moment's hesitation. Her home was five houses down the road from where I stayed; therefore, it wasn't difficult to visit her without anyone knowing about it. It was the first night I had snuck out of the house while the others were asleep. It seemed to take forever before I heard in the house someone start to snore. Only then was I convinced that my sister and brother-in-law were both in a deep sleep, and I could attempt to open the front door. Thankfully, the door didn't creak when I pushed it. I snuck out quietly, ensuring that I wore my takkies, so neither of them would hear my footsteps on the paving. There was absolutely no reason to wake anyone up because of my silliness. Once I was safely off the property, I ran down the road to Uveka's house, not wanting to lose any time. When I got to her home, the house was in total darkness except for a little light in the front doorway. The door was open, as though someone was expecting a guest. On hearing my footsteps, Uveka appeared. I glimpsed a shadowy outline of a most attractive shapely body. I moved cautiously into the house, not wanting to make a noise. I scanned the surroundings and noticed Uveka's books scattered on the dining room table. It was her idea of a pretext for being up so late – should her mother get up in the middle of the night, she could pretend to have been studying.

That night Uveka wore a navy-blue dress with a print of tiny black flowers, reaching down to her ankles. She looked stunning in her rustic attire. Her hair hung loose with a few strands falling on her cheek, just the way I liked it. She had wonderful straight black hair that hung down to her bottom.

She doesn't let her hair hang loose at such an ungodly hour. If her mother had seen her, all hell would have broken loose. She bore the scent of a fresh fragrance, somewhat overpowering owing to the fact that she must have sprayed it on just before I got there. I hope I hadn't overdone it either. I guess these are the little things one becomes overly conscious of when one is in a love relationship. It's about creating a perfect version of yourself for your partner, making yourself more pleasant and noticeable.

We approached each other slowly. As we got closer, I gently pulled Uveka towards me. It was the first time since the dance that I had held her in my arms whilst in an upright position, my body pushed close to hers. My breathing quickened, and I felt as if my heart was pounding in my chest, as though I was on some sort of heart monitor machine. Her seductive eyes gleamed in the dimly lit room, and she stared into my smiling dark pupils. Her arms wrapped around my waist. I slowly moved my arms up to hold her face in the palms of my hands, focusing on her soft smiling eyes, I tenderly touched her lips with mine. With the sense of closeness came an explosion of her fresh breath. Her lips felt soft and naturally relaxed. I moved my right hand up to her mouth. With my fingertips I cautiously traced the shape of her perfect lips, to which responded with a seductive smile. As our passion grew, we moved in unison towards the sofa. We got onto the couch and could not stop kissing one another. Although we were young and inexperienced, it felt as if we knew what we were doing. One thing for sure: there was more kissing and embracing than talking that night.

Uveka said she did not want me to ask her for permission to kiss her. Rather, she wanted it to happen spontaneously when it was right. She claimed that it wasn't romantic when I wanted her permission. There was a lesson to be learnt here. I felt like a total idiot, and apologised for my excessive caution. After that I never asked her for permission to kiss; I just let things happen when the moment felt right.

We were so in love and we couldn't get enough of each other. Stolen hugs and kisses just kept on happening and happening again. I snuck out of the house most nights, and so did she on occasion. Some days we even missed school to spend time with each other.

The end of the year arrived, and I finished matric. It was time for me to move to my parent's home in Johannesburg and find a job. I did not have a choice, I told Uveka. She hated me for leaving. I remember how she cried, because she thought I was going away and I would never come back. I hated myself for having to do this.

I moved up to Johannesburg, and found a job at a Chicken Licken, making burgers and sandwiches. I missed her. I did not have a cell phone, and therefore I could only sneak a quick call from the home phone in the evenings. I did not eat out or socialise much. All I did was go to work, return home, wait for a missed call from Uveka, and then call her, so we could talk. A missed call was the code that we worked out, so that we did not run up an excessive phone bill on either side. We spent hours on the phone every night whispering to one another, trying not to get caught by our parents. We were miserably lonely but we never admitted it. We spent more time chatting about our long days and weeks, which always ended up in lots of laughter, poking fun at the silliest of things and temporarily forgetting our unhappiness.

I fell ill with severe 'flu and depression, which meant I had to stay home for almost a week, during which time I plucked up the courage to tell my parents that I could no longer live with them. All I wanted was to go back to Durban. I had no life in Joburg and I wasn't willing to shift my perspective on the dry province of Gauteng, where I felt lonely because I had no friends. After repeated efforts to convince my parents that I was right, they agreed that I could return to Durban, and stay with my sister and my brother-in-law, as I'd previously done. I wanted a

reason to justify my going back, and so I decided to take a crash course on instrumentation at Sastri College. I did not really care what form of work I would do after completing the course; the course was simply a justification for me to return to my love. Getting back to her was more important than anything else in the world. Uveka was ecstatic when she heard I would come back only three months after I had left. She was now in her final year of school, and we rekindled our relationship, becoming more open and comfortable with one other. It was time to take the relationship to the next level.

We usually surprised each other with little gifts, none of real great value, but each gift conveyed an enormous sentiment. I usually met Uveka at the local village library, where she spent most of the days when she wasn't busy writing exams. The previous evening we had talked on the telephone and came to an agreement about the time when we would meet.

Her father drove her to the library most days, and I would make sure I was not visible when he dropped her off. I would stand at a nearby electronic store and watch as he drove off, making sure that he did not see me. This happened regularly, to the extent that the electronics technician and I became good friends, while I passed my time waiting for Uveka. Every time I walked into the library the librarian would give me a strange look, as if he suspected my real intentions coming to the library, which certainly didn't involve being an avid reader. His dark eyes would follow me from the time that I entered the library until when I left. Hey, I didn't even have a library membership card, but I was there at every opportunity. The librarian didn't dare approach me as I never caused a disturbance to other library users.

I would quietly find a seat opposite Uveka, so that we could whisper to each other or attempt to lip read what the other was saying. Time would fly; Uveka didn't get much studying done with me hanging around. I was a major distraction, but she did not discourage me from spending time with

her as she loved the attention I gave her.

Then back to our usual late-night meetings, and things started to heat up. Uveka knew I wanted more and gathered that I wasn't going to ask again after the last occasion, which had been such a dampener on romance. I could see she wanted the same, but we did not dare talk about it. Every time I attempted to move a little closer to her, she would accept it, unless she thought that it was too much, in which case she would talk back to me. That was my cue to slow down and or back up a bit. Until the day when we were left alone in her house.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and her parents were on their usual round of visiting family and friends. Uveka did not accompany them, since she had given the excuse that she wanted to stay at home and study. As soon as they left Uveka asked me whether I wanted to come over for a short time and I eagerly agreed to do so. I got to her house. After knocking at the door once or twice I entered and called out to her. She was in her bedroom, busy changing. She told me to sit down and wait, and said she would join me in a minute. I sat at the head of the dining room table – which gave me a clear view of the passage, with her bedroom at the end of it. I would notice her the moment she walked out of her room.

As I waited I became a little impatient, tapping my feet in time to the beautiful sounds coming from the hi-fi. Unexpectedly I caught sight in my peripheral vision of a gorgeous figure coming out of the bedroom and into the passage ... Wow! It was a jaw-dropping moment. Was this really Uveka? Or was I dreaming?

Her hair hung loose and free, floating behind her as though moved by a gentle breeze. A flared blue mini dress was adorned with tiny flowers of many colours, and the dress had a certain flounce as she stepped towards me. The dress was sleeveless, with two thin straps tied together at the back of the neck, creating an open back, which showed more

bare skin than I had seen previously. Uveka had applied light make-up to her face, including her favorite lipstick – crazy plum – which emphasised the perfect shape of her lips. She seductively bit the corner of her lip as she approached me. I was in absolute awe of her.

I could not contain my response. I stood up hastily, and took her in my arms. We had a few passionate kisses before she took my hand and led me to her bedroom.

We connected in every possible way with immense passion which we could not control. Despite this being her first time, she allowed me to take full control of the act of love, but reciprocated whenever she knew how to do so.

Later that evening her parents returned. They saw me, and asked me to stay over, which I gladly agreed to do. Her parents were exhausted from their long round of visits during the day, so they retired to their room soon after they got home. We watched TV for a while. When everyone else had fallen asleep, we sat on the bed and talked for hours and hours. I remember telling her how gorgeous she looked, and how I would love to see her looking like this all the time. It was a perfect end to a great afternoon.

I remember how much her style had changed since the first day we met. My visits became more frequent, as did my stay-overs. She loved to sing to me. I thought that she had a superb voice even when she just whispered a tune in my ear. Her favorite song to sing to me was “All I want to do is make love to you” by Heart.

By this stage we were so much in love that we had identified ‘our song’, which best described our love for one other, as many couples do. Our song was “Masterpiece” by Atlantic Star. Whenever I hear the song it takes me back to the day that we met.

We had pet-names for one other. I addressed Uveka as “Pumpkin” and she called me “Lovey”. Sometimes in haste we just called one other “Babe”.

Our favourite dance movie was *Dirty Dancing*.

Our ultimate romantic movie was *Titanic*. We watched the movie four times in all, and cried every time.

Our most inspiring love-story movie was *Ghost*, particularly since it inspired us to adopt the code-word “Ditto” to mean “I love you”.

Finally, our favourite Bollywood movie was *Khutch Khutch Hotha Hai*.

After school

Uveka finished matric; as usual she passed with flying colours. Unlike me she knew exactly what she wanted to do in terms of her career. Her application for the Bachelor of Architectural Studies degree at the University of Natal was successful. I was so excited for her, and I knew that one day she would be a professional careerwoman. Since she would be the first person in her family to graduate from university, her family were especially proud of her.

The new year started. Uveka stayed focused and cut me out when it was time for her to study. I hated those times, but I knew the importance of this to her.

We had many stolen moments together. We often argued about issues such as: “When am I going to see you again?” and “You don’t miss me

as much as I miss you”, and so forth.

We passed our driver’s license tests in the same year. Uveka’s father bought her her first car. I did not have a car of my own. It didn’t really matter to me as I used my parents’ vehicle most nights and weekends. I worked as an admin clerk for Ashton who was involved in the shipping company business, and earned an average salary. However, I gained experience and had the privilege of driving Ashton’s company vehicles. I guess this meant a great deal to me at the time. I just needed wheels to get to Uveka.

I started to meet Uveka at the university. Most evenings she enjoyed studying at the library on campus. After work, as night fell I would drive out to the university and park my car under a lamp post where she could glimpse me from the library window. There were times when I fell asleep in the car waiting for her to come down. Every occasion my Mum made something nice for dinner, I wouldn’t eat with the family. Instead, I brought helpings of supper with me for both of us to enjoy together in the car. We loved every moment of it.

We could not spend much time together, since Uveka needed to get home. I could easily have taken her home every night, but it wasn’t right for her parents to always see me bringing her home. They trusted her wholeheartedly, and we did not want to abuse their trust. She was a good girl with great values.

If Uveka had driven to university on her own, I would follow her home, so I knew that she was safe. However, when her father fetched her, I made sure I was nowhere in sight: I needed to leave shortly before or shortly after he fetched her.

Life was great. I had a gorgeous girlfriend who was at university and

had her own car. I loved her and she loved me. I had a job that paid sufficient to get me through the month. I did not care about anything fancy.

My parents had a shoe stall at the flea market, so I helped them with it every weekend. I did not mind working seven days a week, as long as I was able to see Uveka almost every evening. Sometimes she joined me at the flea market stall when my parents were too tired to manage the stall themselves. It was hard work erecting the gazebo, and then carrying boxes of shoes from the car to the stall. At the end of the day unsold boxes of shoes had to be taken back to the car. Hey, but we enjoyed it: as long as we spent time together nothing else mattered.

My parents had moved back to Durban and so I moved once more. Mum knew about my strong feelings for Uveka, and grew fond of her. During university holidays Uveka used our home as her study base – on weekdays our home was extremely quiet. When my parents arrived home, Uveka would pack up her stuff and want to leave. However, my parents would insist Uveka stay for dinner. She usually declined the invitation and went home before I arrived home from work. Uveka knew how persuasive I could be in getting her to stay, as I had done many times. I would find a note from her under my pillow expressing her love for me ... it was the cutest thing ever.

My mother really liked Uveka and told me that she would make a great daughter-in-law someday.

I don't think I ever told her this, for so many reasons.

She spent many nights talking to me about her future, and about how much she wanted to become a partner in a firm of architects. She wanted to get married at the age of 24 and have her first child at the age of 26.

As the months passed, I noticed that she talked about her plans more and more often. Knowing how focused she was, I thought her career ambitions were realistic. I loved children and she knew this. She wanted a single child (because the cost of raising and educating a child was so high), and she wanted a girl. I told her that I wanted to have ten children. We would laugh at our strikingly dissimilar views about children, and agree to compromise at three children.

At this point reality began to dawn on me. The more Uveka talked about the future, the clearer it became that she did not envisage me as part of her future.

Often I would lie on my bed and think about this. I never questioned Uveka about our widely divergent dreams of the future, or told her about how I felt. I knew in my heart that our relationship wouldn't last forever. As I write this, tears stream down my cheeks. The harsh truth cuts like a knife, and I hear the echoes of her voice in my head.

She was the perfect human being, but I was just an experiment!

Because I love her so much, I wanted what was best for Uveka. And I was not what she wanted.

I start to understand Uveka's routine. As she approached the final year of her university education, the times she spent with me got shorter and shorter. She had a new set of varsity friends – young men and women who took the same courses at the same time, and should, therefore, graduate simultaneously.

Uveka often spoke about her new friends. She observed that many female students admired a particular male student in lectures called Anil. She had also noticed him. In the beginning, she seldom spoke

about Anil, but as more time passed, she talked more often about him. I suggested to her that we use Anil as our alibi, i.e. to conceal from the world the true nature of our relationship. She started to talk about Anil at home. They starting to chat more regularly, and she got to know more about his background, his parents, his siblings, where he lived, etc.

At this time I was still the love of her life, and she was the love of mine. One afternoon I made a surprise visit to her home. Her mother told me that Uveka had gone to Balito to drop off a book for a 'varsity friend'. I wondered why Uveka hadn't spoken to me about this arrangement. Likewise, I hadn't mentioned to Uveka that I would come over to her house. Then she came into the kitchen, all dressed up and noticeably shocked to see me. I told her that I would drive her wherever she needed to go to drop off the book. She seemed flabbergasted, but agreed to my suggestion.

We drove together in silence. I felt betrayed and angry, and my heart was sore. It was the first time that we had fought about another person – someone who had become a part of our relationship.

I did not know what to say. I asked Uveka why she had put on make-up just to drop off something for a friend. Were they going somewhere special?

She started to cry. I had no idea why.

In a stern voice I asked, "What are you crying for?" Uveka didn't answer. After a while she said that she had just felt like getting dressed up and wearing make-up. I wondered: why then are you crying about this? It was the first occasion that she had cried when I confronted her, which seemed odd.

She wiped away her tears before we arrived at Anil's home. She went into the house, met his relatives, and found out that Anil wasn't home. Since I was waiting in the car, she hurried back. As I drove out of the driveway, a car approached from behind. I refuse to stop and allow her to say hello to Anil. I just drove away. We did not talk much, but I knew that something wasn't right ...

This was the first of many lies. Can a perfect human being become a perpetual liar?

I started to question Uveka's comings and goings. Usually I am not at all like this. I never thought that I would be so badly betrayed.

As the days passed, she developed a more extensive social life with her campus friends. Did I feel envious? Not at all. I encouraged her to go out with her new friends, as I knew she wanted to enjoy varsity life with her classmates. I trusted her. I did not get to meet her friends, and it was probably better that way. She kept me sexually content; in fact, I think we were both happy. There was, therefore, no reason to suspect that somebody else posed a threat to our relationship.

Sometimes Uveka would turn up at my workplace to surprise me. At the time I had a job in a panel-beating workshop in Verulam run by her dad's friend Dino. I worked as an estimator, providing quotes on cars that had been damaged in an accident. My job was interesting and I learned a lot. I had somewhere to go every day and I got paid for the work I did. The uncle and aunt were delighted when Uveka came to visit. However, she tried not to visit the workshop when they were present. She was afraid they would bring our frequent meetings up in conversation with her parents. Her parents did not know how often she saw me at the workshop. I had to tell her when the coast was clear for her to drop in. Time passed, and life was good.

I loved the Friday once a fortnight when I had to draw cash from the company bank account to pay employee wages. On a day like this I would leave work early, so that I could stop off at the library and meet Uveka to catch up on some couple time together. Unfortunately, every time before I realised it, our time was up, and I had to rush off to First National Bank to make a withdrawal at the bank. My regular excuse for taking much longer than expected to return to the office was that the bank had been extremely busy, and so I was late.

We still could not get enough of one other. We would regularly make plans to meet at night or on the weekend, which became increasingly difficult. This did not deter us in any way.

Dino's panel-beating business was struggling, so he retrenched many of his staff members. He moved premises, and started a sand pit business. I relocated to new business premises in Canelands, still in Verulam, but just outside the village.

Ashton noticed that Dino's business was going through difficult times, and so he offered me a job in his shipping business. The position involved reconciling creditor accounts, as well as the daily routine of taking his children to and from school, picking up spare parts, etc. I was fond of Ashton, but he was a tough boss and hard to please. At the time he appeared to be oblivious of the fact that I was in love with his neighbour. He may at times have had suspicions. But if that was the case, he never breathed a word about it all to me.

We tried to keep our love affair out of the public eye, but I knew that we were hopeless about concealing it. Anyone who was in the same room as Uveka and I could feel the love and energy that just filled the space. We kept glancing at one other, smiling at each other, sometimes whispering, and making naughty gestures at each other.

FINDING JESS

At district gatherings, there would be a great deal of rivalry and competition, but we stayed out of it. Our love for each other just grew and overshadowed whatever was going on. We didn't take sides, we didn't analyse what happened, and we never bothered to talk about events afterwards. That was absolute true love!

Life continued. Uveka graduated from university, and got her first job with a South African architectural firm. She loved the work, and was passionate about it. This was her thing, and nobody was going to stop her.

On the other hand, I had been offered a job in Johannesburg. My parents decided that I should relocate and start a new career there. I was opposed to the idea, but eventually agreed to my parents' proposition to move to this unfamiliar province.

I remember one particular evening when I got dressed up to meet Uveka. That evening I had to tell her that I would leave for Johannesburg. We spoke for hours, and she made me feel completely comfortable with my decision. It might turn out well or it might not. In the latter event, I should come back to Durban. I promised her that I would return if things did not work out. We started talking along the lines of when I felt settled, she would come up too, and maybe we could start a new life together. Things looked more promising than I had imagined.

My family came to fetch me on a Sunday in mid-October 1998. I felt very unhappy, the drive seemed endless, and in the car we felt squashed together. We reached our destination late that evening. I was shown where I would be sleeping for the time being. It wasn't great accommodation, but it provided a place to sleep. I woke up the following morning with nothing much to do, as the job hadn't started yet.

Two weeks passed, and I was still hanging around the house. Uveka and I spent hours talking on the phone. I was unemployed and bored, and the telephone bills escalated. I asked my parents whether they could arrange for me to return home, so that I could attend a crash computer course, and be better equipped for the new job. They agreed to help me.

I travelled down to Durban via minibus taxi. That evening Uveka and I planned to meet and catch up. I remember we met in the Umdloti Beach car park, our usual meeting place. It felt so good to see Uveka again, and I couldn't keep my hands to myself because I missed her so much. She explained that her work had become very demanding as she got assigned to various clients. It meant longer working hours and regular travel away from the office.

Just being with Uveka felt amazing. I held her in my arms, we promised one other the world, whilst watching the waves crashing against the rocks. She said on that occasion that it was only when she had cried so much when I had left that she realised how lonely she actually felt. She kept herself busy with work, so that the days would pass swiftly. At this moment I thought we were made for each other and that we would be together forever. We felt complete just being in each other's arms, as we listened to the sounds of the ocean.

I started with my computer course, and continued to see Uveka every night. Within a week I had completed the course, and by the end of the following week I had been summonsed back to Joburg. My new employers were ready to take me on. Yet again I had to share the bad news that I was leaving town. This time it would be within two days. We arranged to go watch a movie. When we got back Uveka's mother asked me to stay over. We experienced awesome passion that night, and I decided to talk more about leaving again. She cried and cried and

cried until she fell asleep. I felt awful, as I anticipated us experiencing even sadder moments. It was as if I could no longer make her happy. I explained to Uveka that I needed to apply myself seriously to my career, and earn a decent salary. We made magic one more time, and it was even more intense than the previous time. It felt as if this could be our last night together. We kept on reminding one other how much we loved each other.

Before we knew it, I had to leave for my return trip. I arrived in Joburg late that evening. The following morning I hit the ground running, and began to work. My life seemed to turn around. The new job started on 28 October 1998, but by the first week of December I had been offered a permanent position with the company and my salary had doubled. I remember that when I heard the good news I was in my element, or maybe on cloud nine. My first instinct was to pick up the phone to call Uveka and share my amazing news. She said she was happy. But when I recall that moment, deep down she seemed sad, since it meant that I wouldn't come home. Our future seemed doomed.

I remember working long hours day and night to earn sufficient money in the shortest possible time, because the holidays were not far off. All I did was work, weekends in and weekends out.

My parents were happy. They had already begun rearranging their lives, so that they could move to Joburg. That December I took leave from work, and flew down to Durban. Uveka insisted on fetching me and seeing me the minute that I reached Durban. Unfortunately, my sister and my brother-in-law, and Uveka all came to the airport at the same time to fetch me. I felt both excited and shaken to see all of them together. That night was a grueling experience. My parents waited and waited for me to come home. My Mum had made all my favourite dishes. However, all I wanted was to be with Uveka. I just wanted to hold her close and I didn't want the

night to come to an end. We made love in the car – we didn't care, as long as we were in each other's arms, that's all that mattered. I got to Mum late that night – she wasn't impressed.

The next morning Mum cooked me a delicious breakfast and we spoke for hours – mainly about my future at the awesome company. I told her how well liked I was at my new workplace. My manager trusted me so much that she asked me to fetch her children from school, which about 50 km from the office. I opened my bags and distributed gifts I had bought for the family. My niece and nephew were so excited, they were my angels.

Later that evening Uveka and I went to a quiet, romantic restaurant in Musgrave Road. She didn't have much of an appetite, so we ordered something to share. When we were done, I remember asking the waiter for the bill, paying and hurrying out with her. We just wanted to be alone. The waiter ran after us to thank me for the hefty tip he had just received. Uveka then asked, "So, how much did you actually tip him?" I didn't know, and just smiled. Mundane aspects of life, such as tips, didn't really matter when we were together. Time with her was all that really mattered.

Today I wish that things had worked out differently. I imagine what a relationship with Uveka might have been like in another lifetime. I missed my friend and continue to miss her. I know that I would have preferred to have had a lifelong friendship with her than an intense seven-year love affair, which ended so abruptly.

We parted ways painfully. It was definitely the hardest thing either of us had ever done. Later my sister told me that Uveka had decided on a date to get married. I called her, and she didn't know what to say to me. She said that she had wanted to tell me herself about the wedding; she hadn't realised that I would get news of the wedding from my sister so soon. We could not talk freely as both of us were at work. We chatted again later that evening. Uveka

said she felt that she had to go through with the marriage – there was too much going on in Durban and this was the only way to keep everyone from talking. Towards the end of the call that night she told me: “You will always have a special place in my heart. Please pay attention to the lyrics of “You’ll be in my heart” by Phil Collins, from the movie *Tarzan*, and you will understand.”

Time passed. I missed talking to Uveka daily, sometimes even twice or three times a day. Then things began to change, we chatted only once a day or sometimes not at all, although the emails continued. However, there came a time when she stopped taking my calls altogether.

Every afternoon I sent Uveka an email, telling her about my day and pretending that nothing was wrong, until she stopped responding even to the emails. I knew she had to be strong and break ties with me if she wanted things to work out for her. Sending her emails every day gave me a sense of relief that someone who knew me had read my story for the day, even if I didn’t get a response from her. I yearn for that friendship more than anything else.

My performance at work deteriorated – mistakes I made were piling up. I got called into the boss’s office far too often.

Unexpectedly one day Uveka called me. I was excited to listen to her voice again, only to hear these words: “Please don’t call me Babe anymore. I love Anil now.” My body went cold with shock, and I asked her how I could stop doing this, since our relationship was all that I knew. I don’t remember how the call ended. All I know is that after I heard her words I just wanted to die. Even now I can hear that phone conversation echoing in my head.

I wanted to end my life. I couldn’t live another day. I started drinking heavily to make the pain go away, it was all too much for me to handle

FINDING JESS

alone. I had no-one to talk to. One evening after work I decided to swallow all the contents of a full bottle of paracetamol tablets. During the night that followed I really suffered. I vomited for such a long time that my ulcers became perforated. I vomited coffee that looked like bile, it was so dark in colour. I was admitted to the local private hospital, where I spent two nights, for something only I knew I had done and only I knew why I had done it. My world was too painful for me to deal with. I had lost faith in everything.

Uveka called, and we chatted for a long time. I told her what I had done and how life was so difficult for me. She said she understood and she agreed to meet me. I remember her writing a long letter, expressing how apologetic she was and saying that she couldn't imagine a life without me. Things seemed to be back on track, and we started chatting again. In November 2000 she came to Johannesburg with Anil, who had job interviews. Yet again we planned to meet, this time at my parent's home in Centurion, since nobody would be there. Once again passion filled the room. It was easy to fall into each other's arms and embrace one other, It was as if we had never tried to create distance between ourselves, knowing that Uveka was to be married off in just six months. I needed her and she needed me. It was not our best love-making experience because of the anxiety that overcame us, but it was the last time we ever spent time alone together.

I had to drop off Uveka at her hotel. As I drove her there, I asked her whether she would be okay if we had an affair after she got married. In response to my question, she put her right hand in my left hand, which was on the gear lever, and gave me a gentle smile, without saying a word.

We understood that we could never be alone together. We didn't need to put it into words. We just knew that it was forbidden.

During this time, I kept thinking about my actions and my own selfishness with regard to the one person that I really loved and who really loved me in return. I took a step back and reflected upon what I had done.

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I realised that having to let go of Uveka and losing my friendship with her was my greatest fear.

It didn't relate to her wanting to get married and have a family of her own. I wanted her to feel complete and enjoy the happiness she longed for with me.

I finally let go, knowing that nothing would ever be the same again. In April 2001 I lost my best friend forever.

The last time I had news of Uveka, she had relocated to Dubai owing to a great job offer at a leading architecture firm in that country. She was living with two grown-up daughters and a son. With regard to her husband – or rather her ex-husband – he remained in South Africa.

We have now been estranged for so long that if anyone were to see us together, they wouldn't believe our story and the risks we took in crossing the line of friendship, for love.



CHAPTER SIX

A Soul Connection

What you are the world is. And without your transformation, there can be no transformation of the world.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

Whether it was fate, circumstances or being on the rebound that brought me to where I am now, I don't know. What I do know is that I have once again found love, and I am here to stay until the very end.

How did I get here?

You will recall me mentioning in an earlier chapter that I was asked to come up to Johannesburg in October 1998, as there was a vacancy for a filing clerk at Ethnic Hair Products. When I arrived I stayed with Kaveer's sister and her family. I sat idle at their home for almost two weeks. Then one day Kaveer's sister's husband, Kashiv, chatted to Veenoo on a smoke break. Veenoo was the Credit Manager for Ethnic Hair Products and Kashiv reported to her. He mentioned to Veenoo that I was staying with him, that I had come up from Durban, and he asked her when I could expect to start work. Veenoo immediately wanted me to come into the office and start working. I felt excited but nervous.

I hadn't wanted to come up to Johannesburg because I feared that everyone there would be white and only speak Afrikaans. My narrow-mindedness had led me to believe this. South Africa was now in a post-apartheid era. The country was experiencing rapid political and social change under a new democratic government, with Nelson Mandela as the new President. It was time for all people of colour to be granted

redress for the discrimination and trauma they had experienced under apartheid.

When I got to the office I was introduced to the team. Veenoo had just left for a three-week holiday in Asia. She had won a BMW convertible in a cell phone competition. What were the odds, I wondered, of something like that happening? They happen to a few lucky people, and Veenoo was one of them. After a month Veenoo sold the car, which improved her financial position, and made a holiday overseas affordable. Later in the week I was introduced to the newly appointed credit manager, Jenny Samuels. The first task I was given was to file supply chain proof of deliveries (PODs). The piles of PODs were high, and each had an identifying number with more than 10 digits. I dived right in, and just started sorting the documents. The easiest approach was to separate the documents into month order, then sort them into date order, and finally, sort them numerically. I worked like I have never worked before, and I took work home.

A month later Jenny took me under her wing and taught me everything I needed to know about credit control. Jenny decided to employ me on a permanent basis, and she doubled my salary within a month of me starting at Ethnic Hair Products. I was ecstatic and called Uveka to tell her my good news.

At our year-end Christmas party I got to know other employees much better. Veenoo turned into a good friend who always looked out for me. She was married, but had no children. Veenoo provided a sympathetic ear for my stories. We just clicked like old friends. Sometimes we hung out together over weekends. She introduced me to her family members, and I brought her to meet mine. We began to understand one other's vulnerabilities and flaws.

At one stage I earned a salary that was sufficient for me to pay for Uveka to fly to Johannesburg and stay for a week. I worked weekdays while Uveka stayed at a Town Lodge in Midrand. My parents did not know about any of this, only Veenoo was in the know. She invited both of us over for dinner. It was really pleasant, and we had a great time together. Veenoo's generosity came through strongly because, I later learned, she hankered after my friendship.

I needed what she needed ... we needed each other!

My career was going places while my relationship was on the brink of failure. Veenoo helped me to cope during this difficult time; we chatted for hours on end. I started studying through a college to help me climb the corporate ladder faster.

At this stage Annalisa's children – Arya and Kayleb – and Divia's daughters – Priya and Crystal – were toddlers. Veenoo took a liking to the little ones. I often encouraged Veenoo to think about having a child of her own. She usually responded that she wasn't yet ready to be a mother. I hoped that having spent some time with my nieces and my nephew, she would change her mind.

In 1999 Veenoo and I had a disagreement in the office, and she left to go home. The following morning when I got to the office, everyone talked about Veenoo having been in a car accident. Nobody knew much more than that her car had been a write-off and that she was still in hospital following the accident. I was stunned!

I called Veenoo's phone and her husband answered. He told me what had happened. I felt devastated about Veenoo being hurt, and I wanted to see her. I was angry with myself for having been so argumentative with her before she left the previous day. Thankfully, she was discharged

from hospital, having sustained only minor injuries. However, her car was a total write-off. I visited her at every opportunity.

Veeno related to me what had happened. She said that a quick glance in her rear-view mirror made recognise an accident about to happen. She knew she had to make a split-second decision before the vehicle behind her collided with her, and before she passed out. The traffic in front of her was stationary, and on her left a long line of cars had come to a halt. On her right a concrete barrier separated her lane from oncoming traffic. Veeno said that she had to make a rapid decision about whether to jump out of her car and let the accident happen, or pull up her hand-brake and step on the brake pedal, hence resisting the impact of the car about to collide with her vehicle. In that brief moment she noticed a “Baby on Board” sticker on the car directly in front of her. She said that her decision was instantaneous: she should pull up the hand-brake, step on the brakes and take the full impact of the crash, and prevent the accident involving the vehicle in front of her, possibly with a highly vulnerable baby in it.

This is a brave and selfless woman indeed, I thought! My respect for this human being rose to an even higher level. I knew in that moment that I wished I could be as selfless as Veeno was.

Our bond became stronger, and we drew so much from one other. If I didn't see Veeno or get to speak to her, I missed her. What was this feeling? Was I falling in love again? I had a strong urge to shake it off, since she was my manager, she was married, and we were 'just friends'. I needed to focus on someone else or focus on something else. If my feelings persisted, it would be even more painful if I ended up misunderstood or rejected by Veeno. Veeno knew all about me, my family and my past relationships. There was nothing left to explain. We were great communicators.

Veeno recovered quickly after the accident, but had no vehicle of her own to travel to and from work. Uber hadn't been invented yet. So I reassured Veeno that she shouldn't worry about getting to work – I would pick her up every morning for work and drop her off every afternoon at home. For a few weeks we travelled together in this way until Veeno was able to buy herself a new car.

Our relationship developed and the bond between us strengthened. We missed each other over weekends. Veeno often invited me over for dinner or for a drink, which I always accepted, because I loved her company. We could talk about anything at all, and we felt so comfortable together. We discovered that our teen years had been spent in the same town in KwaZulu-Natal.

I believe that our souls had passed each other on many occasions.

As mentioned earlier, my family and I had lived in Sanaa Township in Verulam. I learned that Veeno and her family had lived in the suburb of Mountview in Verulam. I found out that the position of our house meant that we looked down on Veeno's family's home, despite our homes being in different suburbs. Only an earth bank had separated the two properties.

My Dad had worked as a salesman at a furniture store in Verulam. As the youngest child it was my duty to accompany Mum to the market every Saturday morning. Aside from the trip providing a legitimate reason for me to escape doing boring housework, I always looked forward to being bribed with a pie and a milkshake from the village. In return I was expected to carry all the morning purchases to Dad's workplace. The packages were sometimes very heavy, and I was small. After having lunch with Dad, Mum liked to visit the neighbouring shops to see the

latest fashions. I didn't enjoy that at all, but I had to accompany Mum. Mum says she remembers a store called Eye Catchers, which had a very pretty girl who worked there on weekends. She was very fond of this young member of staff and always asked her for assistance. It was the type of store where a customer was allowed to request that an item that they fancied be set aside for them. The customer then undertook to make regular payments until the item was fully paid for, at which point the customer was allowed to take the item home. This was called a lay-by purchase. Mum did this sometimes at this store.

I remember back then that Mum mentioned how beautiful the girl in the shop was.

Chatting to Veenoo I learned that as a teenager she had worked in the village on weekends, to earn pocket money. She had worked at Eye Catchers, the shop Mum had liked. Like me, she too had faced the tough challenge of going with her mother to the market some Saturdays.

Putting all the pieces together, we realised that Mum met Veenoo in the late 1980s at the Eye Catcher store. The young girl that she admired was in fact Veenoo.

Veenoo doesn't remember me from that period in her life. I can understand that because she wouldn't have given me a second glance even if she had noticed me, since she was four years older than me. Our paths didn't actually cross at this point.

Veenoo's parents bought all their furniture from the store where my Dad had worked. It had only two salesmen, one of whom was my Dad. The salesmen always arrived at the same time. Veenoo's Dad remembers back in the day and says that my Dad's face looks very familiar to him.

Whenever I spent time with Uveka, I helped Ashton with maintenance of shipping containers on weekends. This required me to work weekends in Uveka's neighbour's yard. The Ramlukhans had a basement which they rented out to families in need of a home. I remember one particular family that stayed in the basement, and comprised a widow with two young daughters and a son. Some days, if it rained, I fetched these girls and dropped them off at school when instructed to do so by Ashton's father. I didn't mind helping out, since the girls were in primary school and they had no father. I was fond of both young girls, whose names were Carol and Daisy.

I learned from Veenno that her parents often visited the same family on weekends. Veenno says that she didn't accompany her parents on such visits, although her sister did. Yet again, there was an opportunity for our paths to have crossed.

Looking back at all these ways in which our paths could have crossed, sometimes I wish I had a drone that could have recorded these constant almost crossings and shown them to me now. It would be fun to watch, just as my soul guide is doing right now.

The people whom we were acquainted with, also knew about us. Our time to meet was not early in life, but rather later, in a different province. Both Veenno and I needed to move to Johannesburg before we were able to meet and get to know each other. I believe that what is meant to happen to each of us will eventually find its way to us, no matter what.

I often spoke to Veenno about having children, but she always brushed me off and told me that she and her husband were trying to have a baby. However, she never went completely off the Pill as she was undecided about whether or not to have children. I tried to get her to appreciate

the joy a baby brought to a home and the personal happiness that she would experience. The more time she spent with my nieces and nephew the more convinced she became that children might complete a home.

In late September 1999 Veeno fell ill and asked me whether I would take her to her general practitioner. He told her that there was nothing wrong with her, except that she might want to see a gynaecologist. He thought he saw something significant on the ultrasound that he did on her, but wasn't sure about it. She agreed with him, managed to get an appointment and off we went. At Purelane Clinic we filled in various forms, and Veeno received the usual request for a urine sample.

When Veeno saw the gynaecologist, he read the report she had brought with her and examined her. He had two things to say. He confirmed that she was pregnant. However, the foetus was currently in Veeno's Fallopian tubes also known as an Ectopic pregnancy. It had not moved into her womb.

The gynaecologist predicted that the foetus could either drop into the womb within a few days, or continue to develop in the Fallopian tubes, in which case we would have to consider some form of medical intervention. The message elicited mixed feelings in both of us. The doctor helpfully drew a diagram, to show us exactly where the foetus was. As we sat listening to him, I remember thinking how wonderful all of this was. "We are having a baby," was the message that registered with me. I didn't understand much about the Fallopian tubes and their role in the female reproductive system. I already hoped that it was a boy. I was really fond of boys because of my two nephews. The gynaecologist arranged for Veeno to be booked off work for a few days. He said that rest would help sort out the position of the foetus.

I remember driving us to Veeno's place. On the way, I wasn't shy to express my feelings of elation about the wonderful news. I knew that Veeno was worried about the position of the foetus, but I wanted to help her remain positive and I prayed for a miracle. I dropped off Veeno at her home. I told her I would see her again the following day, because I knew she now had to tell the father of the baby about the good news. The following day, before I went to visit her, I stopped at a local florist in Morningside. The woman who worked in the florist greeted me: "How can I help you, sir? It is spring and so we have the best spread of flowers available." I was still thinking about what flowers to give Veeno. Should they be roses, a bouquet of mixed flowers, or perhaps just lilies? At the time I knew that she loved sunflowers. I told the florist I felt confused, because my friend had just found out that she was expecting a baby and I wanted to surprise her with a beautiful bouquet. However, I didn't want to give her a bouquet if it would make things difficult between us. The florist told me to choose all the flowers that I knew Veeno liked; she would arrange them in the most appropriate bouquet. I followed the florist's advice and left with a beautiful bouquet. I was very impatient to get back to Veeno and give her the flowers.

When I arrived she was happy to see me. She told me that she had informed her husband about her pregnancy, but there was no emotional response from him, he didn't get her flowers or any other form of gift, so she felt sad and disappointed. I tried to revive her spirits by telling her that every time she felt sad, the baby would also experience sadness, so she needed to switch to a more positive mood immediately, in order for her mood to not affect the baby negatively. I assured her that I would always be at her side regardless of circumstances, so we should enjoy every moment – after all, we were having a baby.

After that, I had my work cut out for me. I wanted this baby too, so I had to make my presence felt. I was at Veeno's side every moment I could be there: weekdays, at work, and weekends, at home. My family saw less and less of me, which annoyed them. However, I was

developing a strong bond with Veenoo and the baby.

We spent lots of time at the casino. Even when she was heavily pregnant, Veenoo loved to go to the casino, and she would beg me to take her there. She had difficulty driving because of her big belly, so I took her most places she needed to go, because her husband was unable to drive.

They said I was going to be a dad!

On 18 April 2000 Veenoo called me at the office. "Please come, I need to go to the hospital, I don't know what's wrong, but I have terrible pains," she said. I agreed to fetch her shortly. It took me about 20 minutes to drive from Midrand to Polo Fields, Sandton, to fetch Veenoo. I called Veenoo's husband and told him that I was about to leave the office, and take Veenoo to hospital. Would he meet us at the house or at the hospital? His unexpected response was, "I'm busy at work and I can't leave, let me know what the story is."

I get to Veenoo's home and was surprised to see her sister, Nirvana, and her boyfriend, as calm as ever. I didn't say a word, just picked up Veenoo's bag for her and we left.

I asked Veenoo why her sister and the boyfriend had not taken her to the hospital. She told me that she did not want to go with them. Anyhow we arrived at the hospital. I filled in various forms on Veenoo's behalf, and not long after that she was taken into the consultation room. I sat in the waiting area with other anxious mothers-to-be. I wasn't the talkative type and kept largely to myself, glancing every now and then at my phone, as if I was expecting an important call. It was awkward sitting there all by myself. Then I saw a nurse wheel Veenoo out in a wheelchair. I was shocked. My eyes wide open, I bent down and whispered to Veenoo, "What's happening? How is the baby, is it time?"

She just looked at me and smiled. I could see the pain in her eyes. She said quietly, “Baby wants to come, but the time is not right, the lungs are not fully developed, I need to stay in the hospital for a few days.” While the nurse collected Veenno’s medical files and booked a room for her, one of the women in the waiting room suddenly turned to me and said, “She is going to be fine, you are going to be a daddy soon. Congratulations!”

I glanced at the women and smiled. I was a little shell-shocked at the time, but I knew everything was going to be OK with Veenno and the baby. I did not know that sooner than I expected the words of that stranger would turn into reality as my journey continued. A certain pride came over me when it started to sink in – I was going to be a “dad”.

Once I got Veenno settled, I called her husband to let him know what was happening. He said that he would see Veenno after work, and the call ended abruptly. There was no sense of urgency at all on his side. A few days later Veenno was doing fine, with the baby still in the womb, and Veenno was discharged from hospital. Nirvana decided to bring her home from the hospital. I was still at work since it was month end, a time when things tended to get busy at the office.

Arrival of the baby

It was my Dad’s 51st birthday party. Nothing special about that number of years, but Ashton liked to throw a party for any possible reason. So he persuaded Annalisa to come up to Johannesburg and arranged a party with family and friends. Annalisa was 3 months pregnant at the time, and expecting her youngest son, Diesel. Everything went well. Veenno was also invited to the party, where she met most of my

extended family. The party was held on 6 May 2000. It was great fun to see everyone in such a jolly mood.

That night Veenoo and her husband left a little early. She drove them home. I remember her telling me that she felt very tired, and that the baby was getting heavy. We said our goodbyes and I promised I would see her the next day.

On Sunday morning it was so good to have Annalisa visit with Arya and Kayleb, as they always brought joy into our lives. Kayleb was the oldest grandson and was spoilt by everyone. We ate, and talked and laughed about the events of the previous evening and the time that had passed. I told Mum I was going to see Veenoo, who had returned from a final round of shopping for items for the baby. I said that I wouldn't be away long because the next day was a working day.

I arrived at Veenoo's home, and we had tea and biscuits. Veenoo looked really exhausted and complained about back pain. I massaged her back and waited for her to fall asleep. Then I left around 8.00 pm that evening.

The next morning, after I had had a shower and was ready to leave for the office, I checked my phone and saw several messages from Nirvana, Veenoo's sister. One frantic message said, "Veenoo's water broke, she's in labour, we are taking her to the hospital. Dinny the neighbour is driving us." I was in shock. It was 6.45 am, and I got into my car, put on my hazard lights, and drove like a mad person to the hospital. Purelane Clinic was quite a distance from Heuveloord, where we lived. It took hours and hours for the baby to be born. Hirakanie came into the world that evening at 5.50 pm. The wait, the dilation, the worry, the baby's slowing heart rate, the need for Veenoo to have a regular intake of sugar to keep the baby's heart rate up. It went on like this for hours,

until it was time for the little baby to show herself. She had fat chubby cheeks, strikingly enlarged pupils, a lovely pink skin tone, and she just wanted to look at everything – beauty at its best. I didn't care that the baby wasn't a boy. I was happy that we had a little girl, a baby at last. I watched as the nurses gave the baby her first bath and swaddled her in a warm receiver blanket. Their movements were so fast and seeing the vapour of the hot water they used upset me. But once they laid her in my arms, every ounce of negative emotion just disappeared.

It was the best feeling ever, something I will cherish for the rest of my life. At that moment, I promised this little girl that I would take care of her forever, that she would never feel alone or ever lack a parent's love. I would protect her from the world, and she and I would be together. In a few weeks she will turn 23. We still love each other to bits.

What's in a name?

As soon as a baby is born, a Hindu priest opens a book to check whether or not the child was born at a good time, if the stars were aligned and whether the universe is happy. Thereafter a few letters of the alphabet are given to the parent, to help them choose a name. The letters that were given to our baby were "H" and "K".

In the Hindu tradition, the naming ceremony is called a chuti, normally performed at home seven days after the baby is born. During this ceremony the baby is offered to the deities to bless the child, and there are prayers that the chosen name will bring the child good fortune, health and prosperity. For the first time my family was invited to be present at the naming ceremony, along with Veenó's family.

Veenó wanted an unusual name for her little girl. It had to have an Indian feel. We looked through many books, searched the internet, and asked family members for their ideas. Veenó just wanted the

perfect name for her little girl.

I was in love with the name Kajol – it made me think of beauty.

Veenoo's great reveal was a Sanskrit name, Hirakanie, meaning 'little diamond'. The name was difficult to pronounce, spell and get accustomed to, but it was perfect. The meaning of the name was the ultimate thing for us. After a while it grew on me. But still today I call her "Baby". Even now I find it hard to say the name Hirakanie, as beautiful as it is.

Life as we knew it

Time passed swiftly, and the bond between the child and I continued to grow. I saw her first smile, her first steps, her first tooth, and experienced her first hugs, and heard her first words. I embraced these precious moments. This was a time when my career really took off. I was selected by the company to have all my studies paid for, and I seized the opportunity to complete a Credit Management Diploma. I passed with distinctions in every subject, I won awards at the office, I was paid bonuses, but I still had time to spend with my little girl. It was a time in my life when everything went well.

My graduation day was 2 December 2000. Annalisa and Ashton had welcomed their third child into the world a few days earlier – a handsome little boy. Everyone said then that he was a splitting image of his father. It is still true today, 23 years later. I invited Mum and Dad to come up from Durban to witness my graduation. Annalisa was not happy with me, as she had just given birth and wanted Mum to help her with the newborn baby. But for me the ceremony was the greatest thing ever, one of my proudest moments.

I asked Veenoo to join me for the graduation. After the ceremony we went to my parents' house in Heuweloord. Veenoo and I spent the afternoon chatting about every aspect of life, all its bits and bobs. That evening, before she left for home, unexpectedly she gave me a hug and kissed me on my neck. I responded by holding her close, and returning the passion with a kiss on the lips. There was lots of emotion in that moment. Neither of us felt uncomfortable about what was happening to us.

Veenoo then left, going home to her baby and the baby's father.

I could not stop thinking about her. Was it true – did Veenoo have feelings for me too? I did not know what to do. That weekend we did not see one another. I knew I had to face Veenoo at work on Monday. So I sat down and wrote her a letter, since we would not have much time to chat at work. I gave her the letter, together with a red rose and a black leather folder. Her response was instinctive. She wanted to be with me, she cried, as her whole world had been turned upside down. She had a baby, she was living with a man whom she no longer loved, but her family would judge her for being irrational, she said.

It was the beginning of the rest of our lives ...

We stole time everywhere we could; love was written all over our faces. It was something new for her, but it was yet another turn of the page in my book.

What was happening?

At the time I was still talking to Uveka. There was also a Shantal in my life – we spent nights together at my parents' home or at her home, depending on the day.

So who was Shantal? She was my work colleague at an international cosmetics company. We hooked up on a Friday afternoon, while

having drinks at the office. Shantal was a single mother with a young son, and classified Coloured in terms of apartheid legislation. Shantal and I went out for a few months, but Veenoo did not know about us. Neither of us were too serious about our relationship, although who knows what might have happened in different circumstances, if I had not stumbled upon love with Veenoo. I realised that I wasn't the type of person who wanted to break anyone's heart, and so I continued to see both Veenoo and Shantal, while chatting to Uveka every evening. Shantal eventually found out about Veenoo's affection for me and ended our fling.

At this point Veenoo and I started to spend more time together. I stopped hanging out with friends from Daveyton and Springs, and paid more attention to Hirananie and Veenoo.

Veenoo filed for divorce from her husband, as she didn't want to continue living a false life. She endured some tough days and months. I was always at her side to help her through this time. She asked the baby's father to leave, and then rented the first home of her own in Lonehill. I was there most nights. Every day after we had fetched Hirananie from the crèche, I would bath her and Veenoo would prepare food for her daughter and our meal. After Hirananie had been fed, we would sit down to have supper, while she played. Once we had finished cleaning up another bottle was prepared for the baby, and she was then put to sleep. Usually by 9.00 pm we had time to ourselves. After our evening bath, we would generally talk about how the divorce proceedings were progressing, and what might speed up the process. Regardless of how civil a divorce is at the start of the legal process, it eventually gets ugly. Veenoo's husband did not contest the divorce or custody of their child. However, he did try to secure every cent he could in the divorce settlement. They had married with an antenuptial agreement. He had come into the marriage with almost nothing, but he expected more

than his fair share of the marital assets. Their two-bedroom house had to be sold and the proceeds split between them.

I assured Veenoo that she and I would start all over, and build a beautiful future for the three of us. I encouraged her not to be bitter. I told her that it did not matter how hard she had worked and what she had needed to do to come this far. The future would be bright if she continued to work hard. Today we see that this outcome has materialised. We stayed true and committed to each other.

When the divorce was finalised, we could move on with our lives. The ex-husband was granted visitation rights to see his child every weekend. Veenoo would take Hirakanie to spend the day at Sandton City with him, as he did not have a home of his own. At the time he was living with a previous ex-wife and her family.

He soon got tired of having to ask other people to give him a lift to Sandton City to meet Veenoo, as he could not drive. He stopped meeting Veenoo to see his daughter.

He eventually met another woman and married her. They have two children now.

This worked in our favour, as Veenoo, Hirakanie and I could continue to enjoy our lives as the beautiful family that God intended us to be. We were happy and we made every effort to enjoy life to the fullest. I stopped flirting with other women, and was committed. I knew that I could not live without Veenoo and her daughter.

With everything in place Veenoo knew we were well on our way to making a great life together. We bought our first home together in 2004. It was small but it was ours. I managed to take us both on our

first holiday out of the country. It was my first time overseas, but our first holiday together. In 2006 we left for a week's holiday in Mauritius. For me it was the best holiday ever. Thirteen years later I have been to ten countries around the world, thanks to Veenoo persuading me to see the world.

January 2016, and it was six months since we had moved into our dream home. In 2013 Veenoo and I had decided to take a huge risk and buy land to build a home together. By this time, we had already lived in eight different homes. We bought and sold homes to accumulate a sizeable amount of money to enable us to build our mansion in a golf estate. We were able to come up with a million rand in cash – even we were amazed at how much we had been able to save. I remember how everything was approved, from the land to the plans, and then finally the ground was excavated to start with the foundations. Once the trenches were dug and the builders were ready to pour concrete, our builder asked us to come and anoint the land and bury a piece of pure gold before the foundations were laid. This we did. It was just the three of us with aunty Lydia, our go-to pastor from Verulam, who often helped us with prayer.

As the building rose our excitement grew. But before six months had passed we started to experience problems with our builder. The men were not always on site or building materials were not available. All the while we had been paying the builder in terms of our agreement, and he was busy taking on other jobs. It was a stressful time for Veenoo and I, trying to focus on our jobs but also manage the building project. Trust me, such an undertaking is definitely not for the faint-hearted, it takes a lot out of a person. We had endless fights with the builder, with suppliers, with each other ... until a year and a half later, when the house was completed.

Fear of being abandoned again

I remember the evening of 26 January 2016, when Veeno was sitting on a dining room chair with both her legs propped up on an adjacent chair. We had just come back from seeing the chiropractor, as Veeno had experienced constant headaches and continuous menstrual bleeding for almost a month. Her GP prescribed lots of medication, none of which had helped, and therefore recommended a consultation with a chiropractor.

I knew Veeno experienced a great deal of stress, and her new job with an IT company consumed much of her time. Sometimes she would pull a 26-hour shift just to get things done. I could not keep up with her. She was very dedicated and deadline-driven. Nothing I could say or do would make her slow down.

We had just finalised payment for a month-long trip to Australia, which was scheduled for August that year. I gave Veeno some painkillers and we were still chatting when I observed something odd. Veeno began to slur her words, I found that odd but did not draw attention to it, and thought it might be happening because she was so exhausted. I noticed that she was a bit too pale, so I suggested that we wrap up for the evening and go to bed. I told her if she was not feeling well, she should not go to the office in the morning, and perhaps see the doctor. She reluctantly agreed.

But the next morning she was still the first person to get up and sort out our lunches, and then send me off to work. She got herself ready and drove Hirakanie to school. All the while her speech was slurred and at various points she would stop the car for no apparent reason. During the drive to school that morning, when they arrived at a stop street or a robot, Hirakanie had to remind Veeno to continue driving.

After dropping Hirakanie at school Veeno decided to fetch her mother, so she could accompany her to the doctor's rooms. The doctor said that Veeno's symptoms were the result of fatigue, gave her a vitamin B shot, put her on an energizing drip, and requested scans of her cervix. While the drip was finished, Veeno's mother called and asked me to take Veeno to Bayside Hospital for the requested scans.

I left the office, fetched Veeno from her mother's house, and drove directly to the Radiology Department at Bayside Hospital. I completed the necessary forms. Veeno, who was sitting on a chair, started behaving oddly. When I asked her for her identity document, she couldn't respond. Tears just rolled down her cheeks. I started shouting for help. Within seconds a staff member with a wheel chair was there to pick her up and wheel her directly to the Casualty Department. Dr Moodley, who was in attendance, asked me to complete admission forms for Veeno while she ran more tests. She ordered an immediate MRI of the brain and drips. Shortly after, Veeno was back. I was told that she had suffered multiple strokes within the previous 12 hours. My heart sank. I felt as if the walls were closing in on me, and I did not know what to do.

I completed all the admission forms, and got Veeno settled in a hospital bed. She looked terrified and confused, and asked me what was happening. I told her what the doctor had explained to me. We were both in shock, trying to process the news. Veeno was admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) for five days of tests, to monitor her and prevent further strokes.

It seemed unbelievable. Veeno was only 45, she was active and she weighed just 60 kg, so there seemed to be no health issues that might have contributed to a stroke. The doctors couldn't say what had caused it. We had to pick up the pieces, put aside our fears, and get our lives

back on track. God had given us a second chance; we needed to embrace this and move on. Veenoo would get speech therapy and physiotherapy. I noticed that she struggled to process conversations when more than one person tried to talk to her. She would become quiet and just stare at me. I had to explain to everyone present that they shouldn't get carried away and all talk at the same time, since this confused Veenoo tremendously. I had to insist on all these minor adjustments if I wanted Veenoo to get better.

My days were long and tough. I was allowed five days of family responsibility leave, so I would get up at 4.30 am, pack clothes for Veenoo, drop off Hirakanie at school, and get to the hospital by 6.30 am. I could only see Veenoo during hospital visiting hours. The rest of the time I sat patiently in the waiting area. At 10.00 pm I would leave to drive home and get some sleep. I followed this routine for five consecutive days. I accepted all of this: I just needed to know that Veenoo would be OK. If the doctors wanted to know anything I was right there. Over the five-day period I became a well-known face at the hospital. I found that many nurses and other hospital staff were willing to chat to me about Veenoo's progress.

Veenoo was discharged from hospital. As time passed, she grew stronger and better – she had a will to live and was determined not to give up, which made her recovery easier.

I was just grateful that she was home and that she had almost returned to her normal self. She meant the world to me, and I wasn't going to let anything happen to her. I knew I couldn't live without her, she was my soulmate.

My illness

It was January 2019, and we just returned from an amazing holiday in Istanbul and Athens. Hirakanie had been accepted for BA Law studies at the University of Pretoria. Emotions were at an all-time positive high as we embraced the new year. We believed that we had made a great start to the year.

I had suffered episodes of blurred vision, difficulty swallowing and fatigue for about two years. By 2019 the blurred vision seemed to persist longer than five minutes, which is how long it had been when the symptoms started.

By February the blurred vision persisted for up to 45 minutes, which was particularly debilitating for me when I was at work. I consulted an ophthalmologist at the Pretoria Eye Clinic, Dr Hamza. He was very accommodating, ran various tests and found that my eyesight was good. However, as I was short-sighted, if I wore prescription spectacles my eye-sight would improve. Dr Hamza said that the problem originated behind the eye, in the optic nerve. He referred me to a neurologist, Dr Singh. I was admitted to Unitas Hospital in Centurion for intensive medical tests, to confirm the diagnosis. Just thinking about being poked and prodded by health-care workers made me feel anxious and stressed.

I had an MRI brain scan, a chest CT scan and a stomach injection, and ten vials of my blood were drawn for tests. Various strength tests of my arms, my hand grip and my eyes were followed by a series of lifestyle questions. The second day I was given a single tablet of Mestinon in the neurologist's rooms. I googled online to find out when the drug was used, and discovered that it was prescribed by the military for nerve

tremors and to treat myasthenia gravis, a condition I'd never heard of. My curiosity got the better of me and I tried to find out more about this condition.

Within half an hour of me taking the drug, Dr Singh repeated the physical tests I had already done. He told me that his diagnosis was myasthenia gravis, a neuro-muscular and auto-immune disease in which the body's natural immune defences, i.e. its antibodies, wrongly attack and damage receptors in muscles that receive nerve impulses, causing muscle weakness. He told me that the disease couldn't be diagnosed through standard blood tests, and suggested that a blood sample be sent to Germany for further testing. Meanwhile I should start on a course of medication.

At this moment all I wanted to do was go home. I didn't want to hear any more about the disease, I just wanted to be in my own bath, my own bed and my own home. An hour after fetching my medication from the hospital pharmacy I got home. I had a bath and something to eat. Later that evening Veenoo and I sat down and chatted about what was wrong with my body. I was relieved to get a diagnosis, and acknowledgment that I was neither unfit nor lazy, but really sick. As I read more about the condition, I was able to match my own symptoms with the symptoms of the disease.

What did this all mean? My life expectancy wouldn't be reduced because of the condition. However, if I didn't get sufficient rest or if I overexerted myself, I would experience tiredness and exhaustion, and the myasthenia gravis symptoms could worsen.

But every day is a new day. By this I mean that today I might wake up energised to take on the world, but tomorrow I could feel very fatigued, as if I had worked a full night shift without getting any rest.

Sometimes taking a bath or walking up a flight of stairs is so exhausting that I am forced to take a nap. It may sound strange, but that's just how it is. I have a droopy left eyelid, and sometimes I struggle to swallow tea or food. It's not that my throat is dry, it just closes up, and I can't throw up whatever is in my throat, nor can I process the contents and push them down into my oesophagus. Tears roll down my cheeks, not because of pain but because of an uncontrollable sensation of choking.

My mind is still razor-sharp, but the words don't always come out as I think of them. At times when I am tired it takes me longer to express myself, but that's just how it is. It's not like this every day, but it is frustrating. I sometimes feel trapped and useless. I know the members of my family still understand and love me. I want to be in charge of my own life, but myasthenia gravis has taken away my sense of control. Searching the internet I found stories of people living with this condition, which gave me some hope. But when I experience any of the symptoms, I feel as if I am back to square one, and I ask the question, "Why me?"

Is this how it's always going to be? What will be the future implications in terms of income and medical aid? What if I can no longer perform to my full capacity at work? How much longer will work colleagues be so understanding? These are the kinds of thoughts that trouble me every time I experience any of the symptoms.

Explaining my diagnosis to my extended family has been difficult. I don't know whether they fully understand it. I encourage them to read up about the disease, which seems to provide a simpler solution, with me being asked fewer questions.

I suggested a similar strategy to my workplace financial manager, JP Viljoen. The following day he called me into his office for a brief chat.

He told me that he had taken the time to read up about the condition to get a better understanding of it, and wondered how I felt when I first got the diagnosis from my neurologist. I really appreciated that. Since then he hasn't treated me differently. For me it was important that he understood why I took more sick leave on random days.

Then there were more tests, and repetitive nerve stimulation (RNS) of both eyes and both cheeks. This was the most unpleasant and painful experience I had ever had. I cried like a baby as I felt increasingly intense electrical shocks applied to my face. The process went on for about an hour, with a mini-break in the middle of the process. The treatment had to be paid for upfront.

More blood had to be drawn for further tests at a particular point in time and the blood kept at a particular temperature, and then sent to a German laboratory. Another medical intervention to be paid for in cash.

The evening after my diagnosis I told Veeno, "I just can't do this anymore, I am so tired. I just want to live, I want to be me, I hate feeling like this."

Veeno contacted our financial advisor, Alice, who is an understanding friend. Alice advised that we should submit an insurance claim to help with the increased costs of medical treatment and lifestyle changes. She had been medically boarded three years previously because of fibromyalgia and multiple sclerosis, and her battle was ongoing. It was reassuring to talk to someone who also suffered from a condition that no-one usually noticed and only the person who was suffering from it felt it.

The medication led to some improvement, and in May 2019 I received a payment from my lifestyle protector policy. My medical aid scheme

agreed to fund the most expensive medication as a chronic benefit, so that my medical savings are not depleted as quickly. If this wasn't the case, I would need at least an additional R24 000 a year for my medication. Each visit to the doctor costs R900, which has to be paid upfront. Veenoo and I are fortunate in that we have no debt apart from payments for our cars, our house mortgage and Hirananie's university fees.

Myasthenia gravis has taught us to live better, to be more aware of our expenditure, and to devote more time to connecting with family. Plenty of getaways, more time just chatting and taking leave from work to spend time with one another. I started to pray daily for healing and for the energy to get through yet another workday. Every morning is a blessing, and every blessing is a bonus. I'd rather be sick at home during the night, than sick at work during the day.

If you met me, you wouldn't know I have myasthenia gravis. I am fortunate in that I'm still able to walk, talk and see. It's a shame that it took a threat to my health for me to really appreciate how important my health was.

When an illness like this is not visible, it can be hard for other people, even loved ones, to understand the impact it has. It also affects my nearest and dearest – my wife has to pick up the slack when I'm not well.

I have seen changes in my vitiligo. I've noticed pigmentation appearing in skin areas that were previously completely white. My doctor confirmed that this may be due to the medication I take daily for myasthenia gravis.

Commitment and marriage

They say that your heart knows within six months of beginning to date someone whether you will be with them forever, or that the relationship won't last. Veenoo and I never spoke about marriage, but we were committed to one other. There was so much going on in our lives. The divorce was just behind us, but we had a child to raise, and we needed to build our future. Therefore, marriage was never on the table. Besides, same-sex marriages in South Africa weren't legalised before 2006.

In 2010, with the excitement of the World Soccer Cup competition in South Africa, I thought that it would be our year to make things official and have a lavish wedding. During the year I kept dropping hints to both Veenoo and HiraKanie about how nice it would be for us to get married. I started to investigate wedding venues: Avanto was my favourite. One weekend I took Mum to a jeweller in Centurion to help me choose a ring for Veenoo. I made reservations at our favourite restaurant, Sunny Beach Bohemia, in Sunninghill. I told HiraKanie about my marriage plans: she was only ten years old and got really excited. On the day of the dinner reservation I got up early to write on a paper serviette, "Will you marry me?" and place a ring box on top. On the reverse side of the serviette, I asked Veenoo to meet me at our favourite restaurant, and give me an answer to my proposal. I left home before she came downstairs.

We didn't talk at all that day until the time that we met at the restaurant. I was anxious to be there before Veenoo and HiraKanie. Veenoo looked as beautiful as I had imagined. I could see the extra-special effort she had taken to look so lovely. Both mother and daughter wore beautiful white dresses, and were radiant.

We hugged and kissed one another, sat down and ordered our drinks. As usual, we talked about how the day had been. As usual, Hirakanie insisted on first telling us about everything that had happened at her school with great enthusiasm. We ordered food. Then Veenoo said to me, “I love you with all my heart, but we can’t get married.” Her response shocked me, and I waited for an explanation. She told me that she loved the idea of us getting married, but there were other factors to take into consideration, including her family. She believed that family members would not be keen on us getting married, particularly her brother. I was disappointed but decided not to pursue the matter any further. We finished dinner with minimal conversation.

However, Veenoo wore the new ring and we carried on as before.

Over the next nine years we didn’t discuss the possibility of marriage or any other form of commitment. I wasn’t bitter – I understood Veenoo’s position, and I didn’t want to lose her. She kept on reminding me that marriage involved just a piece of paper, and our love meant so much more.

Hirakanie matriculated in 2018 and her heart was set on attending Pretoria University to embark on a BA law degree. We had always saved so that we could afford anything that Hirakanie desired, especially further studies. Neither Veenoo nor I had attended university because our parents hadn’t saved up for it, and they couldn’t afford the fees. I wasn’t really the studying type, but I never discourage anyone else from pursuing any form of further education. To get ahead in the corporate arena, Veenoo and I had taken various courses through colleges whilst we worked.

At the end of 2019 I was eligible to obtain a R60 000 bursary to fund Hirakanie's university studies. However, to seal the deal I had to prove that we were a family. The simplest way I could do this was by getting that piece of paper that Veenoo had mentioned nine years previously. One evening I came home and told Veenoo and Hirakanie that we would register our marriage that December. Both of them just stared at me, but they began to understand when I explained the bursary opportunity.

Veenoo agreed that we should get married. She said that she would do some homework and find a priest to officiate at the union. Within a week we were able to secure a wedding date and a priest.

With the help of my oldest niece, Arya, we found a beautiful designer gown for Veenoo at the F & N store. She got very excited when she laid eyes on it. It was a straight long halter-neck dress in a pearl colour, perfect for the occasion. We found a 1½ carat diamond ring for Veenoo and a titanium ring for me, and once our vows were decided and written out, we were all set for the day.

We got married on Sunday 1 December 2019, and our marriage was officially registered the following day. The wedding day was filled with joy and excitement. Hirakanie, Annalisa and Lee witnessed our union. I booked a table at the Somet in Menlyn for lunch with Annalisa's family.

Later we visited both sets of parents to share our news, which they received with much love. Photos were taken later to capture our moment forever.

It was the best day of my life. Finally I felt truly complete.





CHAPTER SEVEN
A Broken Heart

Loss happens. Failure happens. Sorrow happens. I can't always control where I'm headed either. Sometimes sadness is the destination, whether or not it's where I want to go. During my time there I had to learn to trust that I was visiting for a reason, but that it would not be my permanent place of residence, my forever state of being. That, like water, I would flow past it eventually and end up where I was meant to be.

Priyanka Chopra

I really thought I had experienced the impact of a broken heart after the expectations of society had defeated love. Even though the emotional pain was so bad that it cut me like a knife and I felt like I had stab wounds in my chest, I wasn't prepared for what came next. When this event happened, every ounce of the passion, love and emotion I had felt seemed as insignificant as a droplet of water in a storm, compared to the new pain that confronted me.

I now understand the real impact of a broken heart. It is to experience the most intense excruciating pain in the heart region, but without any evidence of a heart attack.

The unexpected departure

On 9 May 2015 we arrived home after a visit to my in-laws, and we were watching a late-night DVD. By the time we got home Hirakanie had fallen asleep in the car. Everyone felt tired, but after each of us had taken a bath and gotten into our pyjamas, we were all wide awake again. Hirakanie brought her laptop into our bedroom, and we started looking at all the old photos of the family. We laughed at our silly selves when we were younger, particularly noting how different Kayleb,

Priya and Diesel looked when they were young. At 10 years of age Kayleb's chubby cheeks and crooked teeth cracked us up with laughter. His genuine smile made him the most adorable person in the photos. After a great deal of fun, noticing how late it was we retired to bed and immediately fell asleep.

Around 2.00 am my cell phone rang. By the time I got to the phone the call had ended. I noticed that the caller identification reflected Kayleb's phone number. So I called the number. A male voice answered: "Hello, is this Jesse?" I replied "Yes, but where is Kayleb, the owner of the phone, and who are you?" I heard, "My name is Joe, I'm from ABC Towing, Kayleb was in an accident." I froze in shock. I asked, "Is he okay, did he get hurt? Who are you, again? Where is he now? Why is everything so silent in the background, are the police there, why can't I hear anything?"

Joe replied calmly, "He is breathing; he has been taken to the hospital by the ambulance. Can you come down here now? We are at the corner of the K101 and Allandale Road. Do you know where that is? Where are you coming from? I will direct you."

I told him that I knew the location, and I would get there, and enquired whether the accident had been reported to the police. "Yes", Joe responded. "Please come urgently. I am waiting here for you." I said I would be there as soon as I could and the call ended.

I asked Veenoo to call the local police station to see whether an accident had been reported. I wanted to establish that the phone call reflected a real accident and not a car hijacking. If the latter was the case, we would have to secure a police escort before we arrived at the scene. By this time Veenoo and I had got dressed and were ready to leave. With all the commotion Hirananie woke up. We explained what I had heard on

the phone and told her to sleep in our bedroom, while we went out to establish what had happened.

The people at the local police station asked us a number of questions but were unable to confirm whether or not an accident had been reported. As we drove away from the police station to the reported scene of the accident, Veenno and I shared a few disgruntled remarks about the inefficiencies of the police. Then we caught sight of the accident scene. I said, “Oh my God, that’s Arya’s car. It’s true!”

At this moment my cell-phone rang. This time Veenno answered, and it was a call from a private hospital in the vicinity, with the caller wanting to speak to me. The caller explained that Kayleb had been brought to the hospital and that his personal information was needed, so we should get to the hospital as soon as possible.

With some difficulty I parked at the scene of the accident, as the curb of the road was high, and I scraped the bottom of my vehicle in my haste to park. We got out of the car, and Joe approached us and introduced himself. I walked over to Kayleb’s vehicle for a closer inspection, whilst Joe explained what he had witnessed.

Joe said that a Polo vehicle was crossing over the K101 highway, when a Toyota jumped the red traffic light, and hit the side of the Polo, causing it to roll over several times before landing on the island in the middle of the road. The Polo came to a halt when it collided with a pole. Kayleb, who was the driver of the Polo, had not been wearing a seatbelt at the time of the accident and was, therefore, tossed around the car like a ragdoll, causing his injuries. When the paramedics got to the scene of the accident they found Kayleb’s head between the steering wheel and the foot pedals, and half his body between the passenger seat and the driver’s seat. Apparently he was unconscious, with blood oozing out of

his nose, mouth and ears. The driver of the Toyota ran away, leaving his girlfriend behind.

I took some photos of the accident scene, by which time the police had arrived. We wanted to take Kayleb's belongings out of his vehicle, but the police stopped us. We had to apologise as we did not know what the correct process was. The police took down all my details and stated in their report that I was a relative of the driver of the Polo, so I was allowed to take his belongings, which I signed for. The nephew of the driver of the Toyota then arrived on the scene and started shouting, "Who did this, where is my uncle?" He reeked of alcohol and shouted at everyone. The police restrained him and pushed him against the Toyota. They searched him and threatened to arrest him for his unruly behaviour.

We then left the scene in a great hurry to get to the hospital.

I drove as fast as I could, wanting to get to Kayleb as quickly as possible. I parked at the entrance of the casualty department at the private hospital. We rushed in and were told where to go. A doctor and a nurse were attending to Kayleb. The nurse approached and stopped us before we could get to him. From where we stood all we could see was the foot of his bed, and we heard the frantic noise made by the machines he had been hooked up to. I wanted to see Kayleb and talk to him, but the staff said that I had to complete the necessary forms and that they were still busy assessing his X-rays. Once they were done I could see him.

I started filling out the forms, and was asked whether Kayleb had any allergies and whether or not he had medical aid cover. I heard a conversation about moving him to the nearest government hospital, but the doctor said that he was too fragile to be moved. Since he had

no medical aid cover, the hospital demanded an upfront payment of R100 000. At this point I didn't know what to do. I said I would sign surety for any treatment he needed and cover his hospital bill, so they should do whatever they needed to do to save his life.

I then called Divia to inform her about what had happened and to confirm the information I had provided regarding medical aid and allergies.

The nurse then said, "You can see him now". We went to his bedside. There were tubes coming out of his mouth to draw blood out of his chest. I was told his breathing was only 12% of normal capacity, and that a machine was assisting him to breathe. I started to talk to him. His breathing became laboured and the machine began beeping, louder and louder. I told Kayleb to calm down, and that I was there for him, and that he would get better.

At this point Veenó's blood pressure dropped, and she had severe chest cramps. The nurses brought her water and made her sit down further away from Kayleb's bed.

"Aunty Divia is on her way", I told him. "Ma knows and is on her way with Thatha, Arya and Diesel, so is Mum." At this point, tears streamed from his eyes and down his face. "Kayleb, you are going be okay", this was my mantra to him, standing by his bedside. I put a hand under the bedcovers and held his ankle, whilst I talked to him. I felt a slight movement of his ankle. I talked and talked to him, and moved closer to his head. I prayed, asking God to make him better, and stabilise him so that the doctors could move him if necessary.

As one family member after another arrived at the hospital, I was separated from Kayleb, since I had to give others an opportunity to sit close to him and talk to him.

My prayers became more and more urgent.

Kayleb was hooked up to various machines, and wheeled into the X-ray Department for other scans. I was on the phone to my sister Annalisa, informing her of what was happening while she boarded a flight from Durban to Johannesburg. Out of the periphery of my vision I noticed two casualty doctors in scrubs running past me. Annalisa said that her plane was about to take off and she had to switch off her phone. I saw two doctors wheeling Kayleb's bed, whilst a third doctor performing chest compressions on him. Kayleb's eyes were wide open. The doctor kept pumping his chest to get his heart started again but there appeared to be no response. A few minutes later, the nurse approached me. The nurse explained that they had done everything they could, but Kayleb had passed away. I dropped to my knees and wept as I realised that Kayleb was no longer with us. Around 6.30 am, as daylight broke, Kayleb had given up the fight and succumbed to his injuries.

Earlier days

I remember Kayleb as a youngster: From the time you started to crawl, your curiosity always led you outside towards a car or a truck, or indeed, to anything with wheels. The minute the gate was left open, you would dash out to find the nearest open car door to get into the vehicle. Regardless of how hot or cold it was, you just wanted to get into the car and sit in it. Dummy in mouth, bottle in hand, you just headed for the cars.

The moment anyone showed any evidence of going out, you would cry to go too. I guess it wasn't as bad as when Dad had to go somewhere: you would throw yourself on the floor and kick everything, even Mum

couldn't console you. Dad hated to see you cry like that, so he would try to sneak quietly out of the house. Sometimes he succeeded. But you found out about his strategy, so you couldn't see him and you suddenly heard a car engine start, oh boy, your tantrums would begin. You used to get so cross that you would push all Mum's papers off the desk. Nothing calmed you down except being allowed to go outside for a walk and being told a story.

Then you were old enough to start creche. You were very excited – you were going to Arya's creche!

On the first day, you were so scared that the teachers seemed to be incapable of calming you down. Your teachers, Beverley mam, Daya mam and Martha mam, all tried to persuade you to go to school, but none of them succeeded.

I remember you called me to wish me for one of my birthdays. You said something along the lines of, "Happy birthday, Jess. I got a big present for you when you come". I asked, "What did you get me, Kayleb?" You replied, "I can't tell you". By the time that I saw you, both of us had forgotten about the "big present".

Every birthday you had the same message for me. As young as you were, you wanted to give me something really big. I imagine that it was bigger, much bigger than you, just like your heart.

You thought that you were my younger brother and that we shared the same mother. The woman you thought of as your mother wasn't actually your mother, but actually your granny. I was fine with this because I loved you so much that I didn't feel as if you were competing for my mother's love.

Cars were your passion. You knew so much about them. You taught me so much about the latest features and models. It was so easy to converse with you about these things. My father's cars were yours, from the Toyota Zip to the 1400 bakkie, from the Isuzu to the Hyundai to the Jaguar, you behaved as if you owned all of them. On a Saturday or a Sunday we would sneak off together to the car wash, and spend hours chatting about everything from the family to girls to work to cars, anything you could think of. Two or three hours later we would return home and tell everyone that the car wash had been very busy. Do you remember, Kayleb?

We used to meet at Ma's to polish the cars. You and I loved doing this. When it got to boning the polish, you would take photos and admire your work of art. I miss you so much, my boy.

We share our fond memories of Kayleb at family gatherings.

Sometimes I find myself chatting to his photo. He always called me Jess, he never questioned my sexuality, and to him I was an older brother. We were very comfortable with one other as he grew from a teenager into a young man. We could sit together and chat for hours about so many things. My fondest memory is of Kayleb and I each buying ourselves bunny chows² and half a litre of cold drink at the local curry den in Midrand. We would sit in the car park and enjoy this, washing the spicy bunny chow down with the cold drink.

More than seven years have passed since the day of the accident, but it still feels as if it was only yesterday that you left us. Some people say that your purpose in this lifetime was to be a light and love to

² A bunny chow is a Durban-based form of fast food, consisting of a quarter of a loaf of bread which has been hollowed out, and the cavity filled with curry, most often a mutton curry.

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us. But since you completed your mission early, you had to leave us prematurely, at the tender age of 20. Losing you broke all of us.

The case against the driver of the other car hasn't been finalised yet. We wait for justice to prevail. The other driver was a policeman who fled from the scene of the accident. Apparently he was drunk at the time of the incident. Later he claimed that the robots had been out of order, and that the accident wasn't his fault but the fault of the driver of the Polo.

However, the photos I took at the scene of the accident show all the robots in working order. We wait for the courts to arrive at a decision.

FINDING JESS



2010 Soccer World Cup – Kayleb & I at the braai as always



CHAPTER EIGHT
**God – The Quest For
a Higher Power**

Spirituality does not come from religion. It comes from our soul. We must stop confusing religion with spirituality. Religion is a set of rules, regulations and rituals created by humans, which are supposed to help people spiritually. Due to human imperfection religion has become corrupt, political, divisive and a tool for power struggle. Spirituality is not theology or ideology. It is simply a way of life, pure and original as given by the Most High. Spirituality is a network linking us to the Most High, the universe and each other.

Haile Selassie, *The Minds Journal*

In previous chapters you will have learned that from a young age my mother had a strong influence on me, teaching me what she understood about God. She instilled in me the urge to never stop believing on the divine presence and to always pray. I wouldn't have come as far as I have in my journey without the wisdom that she passed on to me.

I grew up in a Hindu family. My parents were married in a traditional Hindu ceremony. They had learned from their parents religious practices such as basic prayers, fasts and sacrifices. Mum had a spiritual gift: she had the ability to access the anointing of Lord Krishna trance. The trance was very calm and playful. At first, when I saw Mum entering a trance, I felt scared. Divia, on the other hand, would help Mum when she was in this altered state. The trance would start with Mum praying at the God lamp, her breathing deepened, and she swayed slightly from side to side. At this point Divia would take rose water and sprinkle it over Mum, which calmed her. Mum's whole demeanour then changed, she was no longer just our Mum. Her face glowed and she evoked a sense of calmness. Divia then handed her a brass tray with some vibuthi or ashes. Camphor burned on the side and there were cloves on the tray.

My Dad generally tried to avoid Mum when she went into a trance. He went into the lounge or to another room, to avoid being summoned. But as true as Bob, he would be the first person Mum called upon. After he had received all his blessings, his faults were then pointed out by Mum in her trance state. He usually just smiled when he heard the list of faults and agreed to try to do better in future. Someone who was summoned to receive a blessing had to kneel down at the feet of the blesser before they were given their blessing or prayer. They then received a vibuthi dot on their forehead, which was where the soul was believed to enter the body. If the person waited long enough, they would sense heat or healing coming from the hand placed on their head. When everyone had been blessed by Mum as swami (or anointed from God), she would turn towards the God lamp and pray as the trance left her body. She went back to being just Mum. Once the trance had ended Mum would be very, very tired, and she had no knowledge of what had just happened. She told us it was as if she had entered another realm. Once I became older, I began to understand more about Mum's trance state, and I was no longer afraid.

When I was a child, Hinduism was all I knew about. I watched both my grannies perform annual prayers which we attended, such as Porridge prayers, or offerings to all forms of the mother deity or mother earth. Another Hindu tradition was Purtassi, which was a month-long fast, for harvest, in order to welcome the rains. Then we celebrated Diwali, or the festival of lights, when we rejoiced in the return of Lord Raam, after his banishment into the forest. We also participated in the annual Kavady festival, which referred to chariots or a fierce trance.

I remember a particular ceremony that I attended with my parents when I was still a child. The person who was in the main Muruga trance said that I had the anointing of a trance buried inside me. With my parents' permission they offered to draw it out of me. Mum thought I

was too young for this, and therefore turned down the offer. She knew that entering a trance state came with huge responsibilities, which I wasn't ready for. Today I am glad she didn't allow it. I was fortunate enough to learn the basics of the various prayers and why they were necessary. We often went to satsangs or group prayer meetings, where we learnt to sing various hymns for different deities, and also learnt to play the thaalym or symbals.

As I grew up and gained more experience of the wider world, I began to focus on particular teachings, such as righteous living. I started to explore the Sai state of consciousness. I became a Sai devotee, which meant that on Thursdays I abstained from eating meat and attended a discourse at the Sai Centre in Temple Valley. This was something that I really enjoyed. I also learned about selflessness, discipline, patience and, above all, love. Sai was a religion that accepted other forms of belief, including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. There was never any condemnation of another faith.

I remember that in my matric year, when I stayed with Annalisa and Ashton, we experienced vivid manifestations of Sai Baba.

Every Friday afternoon Annalisa and I took turns to clean the God Lamp. We wiped all the framed images of the deities and their little statues, in order to start the new week with renewed faith in new miracles and blessings. Like most Sai devotees we had a huge A3 image of Sai Baba behind the God lamp. The picture showed his upper body in an orange kurta, his hair in the usual big black afro, and his open right palm lifted in the process of blessing someone. Anyone who searches the internet today for Sai Baba will find plenty of images of him.

One morning during the period that I lived with Annalisa and Ashton,

when Ashton and I came home in the afternoon, she told us of a strange experience she had had that day. After we had left that morning, she had a bath and changed. Then, as usual she went to the God lamp to do her morning prayers. To her amazement she found traces of vibuthi, or ashes, on the frame of the picture of Sai Baba. Certain parts of the frame had clumps of ash, and a sweet scent wafted through the house. The vibuthi on the frame was a darker grey and of a finer texture, with a certain richness. I saw this with my own eyes, and was in awe of the manifestation. Annalisa consulted her trusted landlady, who was also a big Sai devotee, and had experienced manifestations in her own home. Aunty Preshanthi confirmed that Sai Baba had touched our home and we would receive blessings. This experience is something that I will never forget and therefore won't speak ill of other people when they share similar experiences with me.

When I moved to Johannesburg in October 1998, I found it difficult to locate a local branch of the Sai movement. However, I continued to pray and fast on Thursdays. I didn't have a lamp of my own, and, therefore, prayed with the people I lived with until my parents moved up to Johannesburg.

At that time my Dad was unemployed, and so he spent many days with his brother-in-law, who taught him about Christ and his teachings and invited him to attend church. Before we knew it, Dad was involved in the church. Every Sunday he attended the He's Alive Church in Heuveloord. Afterwards he came home and shared the Word with Mum and with me, if I was around. He continued to attend church on his own for quite a long time, until one day Mum decided to join him. Both of them became enthused about their new faith. Mum stopped using the God lamp, and she tried to persuade me to join them. I wasn't uncomfortable with their new religious practices, since I remember that Mum had often told me, "It doesn't matter who you look to as God.

As long as you know there is a God, you will be safe and protected.” I was living my own life in terms of relationships and work, so I did not pay much attention to my parents’ religious beliefs. Then my life changed. I joined them at church. Services were conducted in a garage and we sat on white plastic chairs. However, the presence of God was eminent, and the experience I had, made you want to come back for more. It was a small congregation, which made me feel at home.

I enjoyed the services of Pastor Butch. I learned a lot about the Bible and about Christ’s teachings. I became a regular at church. Some members of the congregation remembered my name, and they often chatted to me. The church we attended was a small community church which emphasised the workings of the Holy Spirit.

I learned about Jeremiah 29:11 (the section in bold below is my emphasis):

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord,
plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.

On 25 December 2000 a mass church service was held at the local shopping centre. It provided an opportunity for our pastor to take the church out to the people, so that he could reach more souls, and bring more people to Christ. I remember that after praise and worship, which echoed in the centre, the pastor prayed and called upon people to come forward. I had goose-bumps on my arms and legs, and spontaneously decided to approach the podium too. As the pastor prayed for me, I remember giving myself to Christ. The red string I wore was cut and I acknowledged I was no longer bound to any other religion. I was a new person born into Christ, if I accepted the pastor’s call. Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I really felt like a new person.

A few months later, my Mum, my Dad and I were baptised together by

Pastor Butch. Since then, I haven't turned back. I've now been a devoted Christian for 21 years, and I firmly believe that I have found God.

Why did I convert to Christianity? Well, for the most part, when it came to religion, when Mum did something I usually followed her. Converting to Christianity is something I will never regret doing. Today I continue to steer my family to attend praise and worship sessions, as it is important to have God in your life. Much of our success is due to the grace of God. It doesn't matter how you pray, one thing for sure is that it is essential to pray. I believe that there is divine intervention out there. I am a Pentecostal Christian who believes in the "Father, Son and Holy Spirit".

Having one religious faith in the home makes life so much easier.

The Bible and being gay

Being gay is not a choice. It has been well documented that as the foetus grows in the womb, for the first three months as it bonds with the mother and assumes its own form, the emotions of the mother and the foetus are interconnected and shared. I know from conversations with my mother that she wished I was the son that they had always wanted. Back in the 1970s expectant parents only wanted the gender of the baby to be revealed at birth, and they didn't want it revealed before this moment. This created many uncertain emotions. Never for a single moment in my life have I ever felt as if I was a female.

You are probably now asking: doesn't the Bible condemn same-sex relationships? Am I taking bits and pieces of the Bible to justify my own lifestyle?

No, and so let's not judge!

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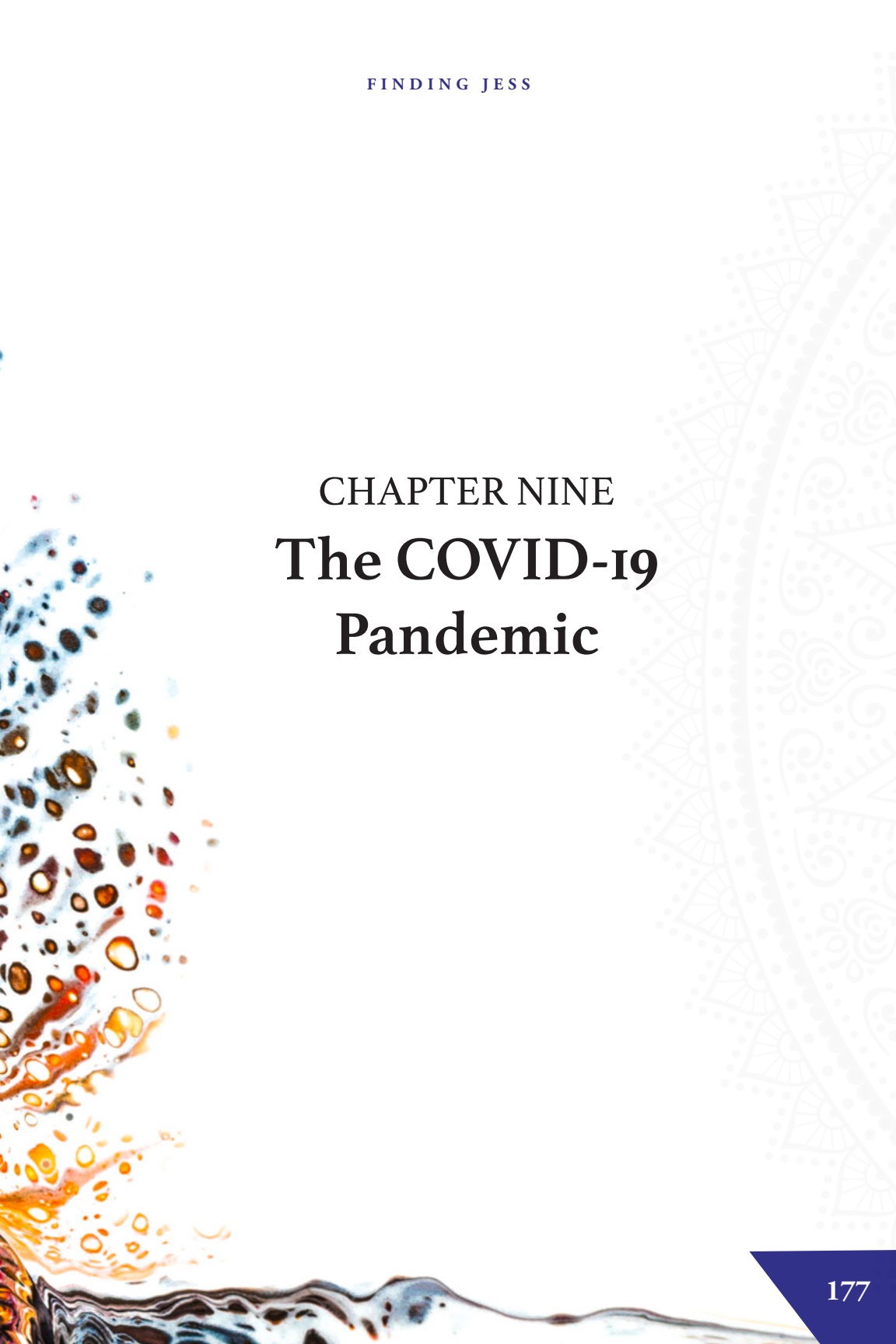
We are all sinners in some way or the other, this is what makes us human.

I believe I have a strong and direct connection with God. My beliefs extend to the way in which my life has been guided and moulded by the unknown and unseen God. The faith that I have helps me grow as a person. God has put us on this earth to connect and to love one another, forgive and embrace. All religions teach a similar message, bringing us to the knowledge that there is a single God, above all deities, above all saints, above all prophets, and above all saviours.





CHAPTER NINE
**The COVID-19
Pandemic**



A ccept you are different!

Use what you have.

Your destiny is in your hands.

Quitting is not an option.

Pray.

It doesn't matter how you start the race of life, but how you finish is what is important.

Now that I have your attention, I want to tell you about another interesting part of my journey, and how this chapter helped mould me into the person I am today.

We ushered in the year 2020 with close family members, not knowing what was to come. Although we felt free in our own skin, in our families, in our communities, in our countries and in the world, that year we faced lockdown, and the world was excluded.

In March 2020 we receive the devastating news of the passing of our

Uncle Tom, and we planned a quick trip to Durban for the funeral. Although other countries had already implemented severe lockdown regulations, South Africa was still assessing the situation.

The news was flooded with reports of the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and people dying from flu-like symptoms. South Africa's first reported COVID-19 case was on 26 March 2020 and the number of infected people rose steadily, and the first death was recorded. The South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced, "Our country is in a state of disaster, we seek the guidance of the World Health Organization, starting from midnight tonight we will join the rest of the world in a level 5 lockdown." All borders were closed, all air travel was halted, no movement of people was allowed without an official permit, offices were closed, and people were told to work from home. Nobody could be away from home between 8.00 pm and 5.00 am. Regulations stated that cloth masks had to be worn in public spaces, hands washed with soap and sanitised timeously, and a minimum social distance of 1.5 metres maintained between people in public places. Anyone who disregarded the regulations could be charged and imprisoned.

The beginning of 2020 was also the last occasion I saw my granny for a very long time. At 101 she still recognised me, because of the vitiligo, I think. She didn't recognise my wife or my daughter: we explained who they were, but she forgot. She said I was Vincy's son, and asked me when I would get married. It worried her that I lived in a big house, all on my own, she thought. Yet granny remembered visiting me at home!

We weren't allowed to visit other family members. My parents' residential complex was closed, so I had to meet my parents once a week outside their complex to check on their wellbeing. Mum and Dad rapidly went grey and their hair grew long, since hairdressing

salons were closed. Days, weeks and months passed, and we became COVID-fatigued.

We carried on working, albeit from home. We could see our neighbours sprucing up their houses; we too gave our home a fresh coat of paint, moved furniture around and started a vegetable garden. Trees continued to grow, and birds still chirped. Finally we heard once again the sounds of children playing outdoors. We were reminded of what really mattered – not just the pursuit of money, technology and power. There were more meaningful aspects to life; we had to open our eyes to see them.

People sent motivational messages to one another every morning, until they got tired of it. We saw the virus gradually robbing people of their humanity and other people getting closer. We heard of more and more deaths, including the deaths of people we knew. Attending an online funeral service was challenging and different.

I attended five online funerals, which were heartfelt, sad and yet so dignified. Mere statistics turned into the names of people we were familiar with.

By the beginning of 2021 South Africa had a second wave of infections and a new COVID variant, COVID Y501 V2, which spread faster and killed more vulnerable people. Beds in intensive care units in hospitals rapidly filled up, and hospitals could not admit additional patients as there were insufficient frontline nurses and doctors to care for patients. It was a challenge for the South African government to get access to vaccines. Governments lined up to save their own people. The wealthiest countries had better access to vaccines. As a developing country South Africa was able to access 1.5 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine by the end of January 2021. However, the vaccine

was ineffective against the new COVID variant. The South African population had no protection and the doses of the vaccine were due to expire in April 2021.

Then the tide turned, and our government managed to buy 800 000 doses of Johnson & Johnson vaccine. By 17 February our frontline health-care workers had received their first vaccine jabs.

While the country celebrated this victory, sadness knocked at our door. On 13 February 2021 Divia tested positive for COVID-19. The following day Annalisa's family and my family rushed around to get the essentials to take care of Divia and Crystal. Everyone had to be quarantined for ten days. Divia's school had to be sanitised and shut down, everything had to be cleaned. There was a frenzy. Everyone's adrenaline just kicked in – this virus was not going to have its way in our family. COVID wasn't going to take up residence in our homes. Divia did not have an easy experience of COVID as she had pre-existing health conditions. Usually her lung function was that of an 80-year-old and she had anaemia. Later on Sunday afternoon, while sitting in our private lounge, I began to worry about Divia. Would she survive? Doubt and fear took over, and I cried as if I had lost her. I thought how everyone always worried about my health, yet they themselves could be a walking time-bomb in terms of COVID infection.

Eventually I pulled myself together with help from Hirakanie and Veeno. We had already lost Ashton and Kayleb. Divia's fate was now in God's hands. So I sent out a message on our family group to schedule a prayer meeting for Divia. Veeno, Hirakanie and I undertook a dry fast on Tuesday morning. By the end of the prayer meeting, we were filled with the Holy Spirit and felt renewed. We also had faith and hope. By the following week Divia was sufficiently recovered to be up and about, and she was eager to return to her school. She struggled with fatigue,

but we knew this reflected the COVID long-haul recovery process. Divia's zest for life remained.

Working for Dino at the panel-beating workshop, it was clear that economic conditions would worsen. Our KwaZulu-Natal government contract for vehicle repairs came to an end. We then opened a workshop in Babanango, but overhead costs were too high. We looked for alternative business opportunities, and soon we found ourselves involved in dressing coffins.

I remember the day we dressed a coffin for a one-month-old baby. The little white coffin was so sad to look at. Working for Dino, I dressed more than 25 coffins for adults and teenagers, and a coffin for a baby. When I dressed a coffin, I didn't think about the deceased person who would fill it. Like a carpenter, I felt as if I was in the zone when I was working. Only after the coffin was closed did I feel my heart touched.

They say you shouldn't play around with a coffin. I remember, the one time as an employee and his wife were preparing for their move to Babanango, while the vehicle was being loaded with mainly work equipment, a bit of groceries and luggage, Sandesh decided to play a trick on our receptionist, Sally, and me. Sandesh was quite the funny guy in the workshop. He used to drag me into the kitchen to have a cup of tea and to chat to me about everything under the sun, from work, to family, to friends, to how he loved children and his wife not being able to conceive. He was excited about the move, and he had brought a puppy along with him.

Just before leaving, Sandesh lay down in one of the coffins. The office wasn't busy at the time as it was quite late in the afternoon. He called out to us as Sally and I walked to the back section of the office, where all the coffins were dressed. As we reached the doorway, Sandesh rose

up out of the open coffin. Both Sally and I freaked out and screamed in horror. It was terrifying and not at all funny. Sandesh just laughed and laughed at both of us.

After we had scolded him and calmed down, he put his arm around me and said he was sorry for scaring us, and that the coffin had not felt very comfortable. However, he said, I should take care of myself and not be afraid to laugh.

Bully, Dino's brother-in-law, agreed to take Sandesh and his wife to Bananango in his bakkie, and return to Verulam the following day. The drive from the workshop to Babanango took about three hours. Sandesh's wife sat in the passenger seat next to Bully, and Sandesh and a puppy sat on the back of the bakkie with all the equipment. About two hours into their drive the bakkie hit a pothole and the driver lost control of the vehicle, which flipped over several times. During the accident Sandesh and the puppy were seriously injured, and both died on the scene of the accident. We only heard about the accident the next morning when we returned to the office. It was a really sad day. I remember how we wept for Sandesh.



CHAPTER TEN
**My Body At War
With Itself**

My body was at war with itself, and I felt restless. I began to find out about people who had gone through gender re-assignment surgery. I was scared but a part of me perhaps wanted more. I started with seeking the advice of my GP, Dr Ahmed, may his soul rest in peace. Dr Ahmed was our go-to doctor. He never judged me and answered all my questions as honestly as he could.

In 2005 my GP referred me to a plastic surgeon, who had received his medical training in India. My doctor kindly wrote me a referral letter. The plastic surgeon was based in Arcadia, Pretoria, and Veeno accompanied me on my first visit to see him. When I walked into his consulting room, the doctor glanced at me and remarked, “I don’t know if I can help you, I cannot get rid of your vitiligo, it would mean me inking most of your body, and that would be a very long painful process. Do you really want to do this?” My response was: “No doctor, I am not here for that at all”. He apologised and then asked how he could assist me. I told him about my lifelong dissatisfaction with my female body, and I said I was now ready to take action to rectify this. I asked him if he would perform double mastectomy surgery on me, which would help give me a flatter and more masculine chest. I

enquired about the cost, the nature and duration of the surgery, and what I should expect in terms of the healing process.

For the first time in my life I felt brave enough to ask directly for what I wanted without feeling embarrassed, ashamed or scared. I reassured myself, “It’s okay, I’m probably never going to see this man again, so let me get my best shot at him now.” He responded by saying that he wanted to examine my upper body before he answered all my questions. Once he had done his examination, he quoted me R4 000 for the entire surgical process, including the surgery, anaesthetic, and a one-night stay in the hospital after surgery. We set a date for surgery – the second week of August. Recovery after the surgery was expected to take ten days. The surgical procedure went smoothly, with no complications. The pain I experienced after coming round from the operation wasn’t as bad as I had expected, and the scarring was minimal. I regarded it as a completely successful intervention, with no unpleasant side-effects. I was grateful to Dr Ahmed for having arranged the referral.

Sometime later, I chatted to Veenoo and explained the other changes I wanted to make to my body. I was satisfied with the results of the surgery, but I didn’t feel entirely happy. I did not feel free yet. Veenoo kept saying that she loved me just the way I was. For me this wasn’t enough.

So we headed back to Dr Ahmed, and he wrote a referral letter to see a specialist surgeon in Sandton.

We made the appointment and off we went. This time the consultation seemed quite brief. When we walked into the specialist’s consulting rooms, he looked at me and concluded that I was a man who wanted gender reassignment to become a woman. My physical appearance and the way in which I presented myself confused him. We just smiled at him, and I told him what I actually wanted.

The specialist explained that gender re-assignment was a long and complex process. First, I would need to consult and see a registered psychologist regularly, for at least three months, and the psychologist would assess my psychological readiness for the re-assignment process, and also determine whether I had any underlying mental health problems that might be reactivated by gender reassignment. The psychologist would also advise me about the accompanying social and emotional adjustment processes required, not only from me, but also from everyone in my environment. He cautioned that I needed to be fully informed about all the changes that my body would experience. To start with, I would have to start taking hormone replacement medication on a daily basis for the rest of my life, in order to rapidly raise the levels of testosterone in my body. The change in hormonal levels would trigger various other changes, similar to what a young boy goes through at puberty, such as growth of facial hair, my voice deepening, the distribution of body fat changing, and extra muscle developing in certain areas of the body, such as my arms and chest. The health professionals who helped me with gender reassignment had to be fully convinced that I would be able to cope with the long, complex process. He explained that the second round of surgery would be the final intervention. I had to be absolutely certain that it was something that I would be comfortable undergoing.

After a long and tiring day, during which I had had to take on board a lot of new information, I decided that I wasn't ready for this process. I didn't want to go any further.

I needed to accept my body the way that it was, and continue to love myself. I knew I wasn't going to always get what I wanted. I had been running away from the real person I am. I had to stop doing this, and embrace my wonderful life. I needed to change my focus.





CHAPTER ELEVEN
**Our Travels –
A Strange
Experience**

As a child I did not have any desire at all to leave the country. It was my parents' dream to travel. However, I was persuaded by my soul-mate to take my first trip abroad – this was a holiday in Mauritius in 2006. It turned out to be the most amazing trip I had ever experienced. Since then, I have been to ten countries over 13 years, between 2006 and 2019. Then COVID-19 happened and the country was in lockdown from March 2020 through to 2021. When lockdown regulations were relaxed, people were initially afraid to travel outside the borders of South Africa.

Our most recent trip was somewhat exciting, eventful and so funny that even today all three of us just crack up and laugh, with tears rolling down our cheeks, when we remember our experience in Turkey.

We arranged this trip in October 2018, just as Hirakanie was about to start with her final matric exams at Summerhill College. The trip was an incentive for her to do well and to get accepted into university to start her law studies. When her matric results came out, as usual she had done well. She had ticked all the boxes, and was ready for the real world.

A week later, on 14 January 2019, we departed for a two-week break in Turkey and Greece. The weather there was rather cold, but we were well equipped for it. People seemed lovely, very warm and accommodating of foreigners. During the first two days we did some sightseeing and shopping, and tasted various cuisines. I am not very adventurous when it comes to trying unfamiliar foods. I would rather stick to the basics I know well, such as a traditional burger, a pizza or pasta. In contrast, Veenoo and Hirakanie love to try new kinds of food. We knew that we had to stay away from local street food: although it looked delectable and smelled delicious, there was a high chance of food poisoning if we ate it. It's not that the locals wanted to poison us, just that the food wouldn't agree with our more sensitive stomachs.

On the third day of the trip, while in Istanbul, we decided to venture out and visit an upmarket shopping mall. So we hopped onto the metro train, similar to the Gautrain in South Africa. The station was extremely busy and along with the locals we had to move through the turnstiles very fast. We knew which stop to get out at, and that we had to get onto a different platform. Eventually we arrived at a beautiful mall, which reminded us of home. We prefer to shop at a clean upmarket mall, rather than a more popular but crowded market. We felt more comfortable, not having to worry about people bumping into us or getting conned into buying fake goods.

We spent the entire day shopping and eating at the mall. We also bought some Turkish rugs, since Turkey is renowned for its handwoven carpets and rugs. We found some great bargains that were heavy to carry. But the ride back to the hotel should be quick as it had not taken us very long to get to the mall.

We saw threatening rain clouds. We hopped back on the metro train. At stop after stop, we kept looking at one other, not recognising where

to get off. This carried on for some time until I suggested we jump off at the next stop. We got out and looked around. Nothing seemed familiar. We tried to talk to a security guard, but he didn't seem to understand. I took out our hotel card, but the guard still couldn't help us. We tried to read the sign-boards and hop back on the train to return to the mall. We got off the train, and walked out of the station and onto the street.

Everyone appeared to be anxious and irritated. It was raining and getting dark. Our shopping bags felt heavy, and we were lost. Then we spotted a police officer and a makeshift police station. The policeman's understanding of English was limited. He had no idea what we were saying, and just pointed us in the direction of a bus stop and said something about "taxis". We were disappointed with the Turkish policeman: he seemed to be intimidating and unhelpful. All we wanted to know was what metro stop to get out at on the way back to our hotel.

By the time we got to the bus stop we were soaked from the rain. Hirakanie then asked, "Are we ever going to go back home? Are we now lost in this country and are people going to kidnap us?" It sounds funny now, but not right then. I suggested to Veenno that we take a metered taxi to take us back to the hotel. We then flagged down a taxi. When it stopped, I opened the passenger door and showed the hotel card to the driver, asking the driver if he knew where this was. In the meantime Hirakanie jumped in the back of the taxi. He didn't know our hotel, so I close the passenger door and the taxi moved off. Veenno then grabbed Hirakanie's knapsack and pulled her out of the moving vehicle. Then we showed some people waiting at the bus stop the hotel name and address and asked whether they could give us directions – no luck. By this time, it was around 8 pm and we were still lost.

We then decided to walk back to the station, a distance of about two kilometres. When we reached the station, we found a callbox. Veeno called the hotel reception to get directions. We tried to read various sign-boards to get some idea of where we were. Veeno asked a man on the other side of the station at which stop we should get off the train to get to the hotel. The man said something like, “Immunise took a dura – excuse me – immunise took a dura”. We couldn’t find this on the map of metro stops. He kept repeating the same thing. The person at hotel reception gave us the same answer, “Immunise took a dura”. By this stage, the person on the phone was getting agitated - he told us reception was busy and he needed to end the call.

We had just about lost all hope of finding our way back to the hotel. However, we retraced our steps. Then Hirakanie remarked that we had changed platforms at the first metro stop, and we had sat on red seats. We looked at each other and realised that she was right. So we asked the security guard which platform we needed to stand on to return to Turkey University. He told us where to go, and we started our return journey. Now everything seemed familiar. We chuckled when we thought about how lost we had been a few minutes ago. It was close to 9.00 pm and the train was virtually empty. It seemed as if everyone else was safe and sound at home or in their hotels. Finally, we got to the right metro station, University Station. Our hotel was less than a kilometre away. Our faces lit up with joy when we reached the hotel. Hirakanie remarked, “I’m ready to kiss these floors right now, I am so glad this is all over”.

When we checked Google translate, the Turkish for University Station turned out to be “Immunise took a dura”!

This was our last family trip out of the country for a long time. Talk about being lost in dialect ...



CHAPTER TWELVE
Planting a Seed

It never crossed my mind that I could have my own biological children – this seemed too far-fetched. I loved children. When I was young, I took care of my younger cousins. Then we all grew up and I found I had nieces and nephews. They were my world. Yet I've always hoped that one day I would have my own family, including a child I could raise as my own – someone who would look up to me, someone who would rely on me.

That's as far as it went, until one day in August 2013. Things were crazy at the office, as our company had recently been taken over by new management.

Veeno, my dear one at home, was frantic. She had missed her usual menstrual cycle and was bleeding at different intervals. Was this because of menopause, a hormone imbalance or a cyst? Or was it the result of the stress of purchasing a new home? I didn't know. So I suggested she consult a doctor. Veeno called Aunty Sharifa. Aunty Sharifa advised Veeno to call Aunty Sharifa's sister, Dr Shakeera, and she sent Veeno Dr Shakeera's contact details. Veeno eventually got through to Dr Shakeera. Meanwhile I paced up and down the kitchen – three steps

long and one step wide – and listened to Veeno making these phone calls. After Veeno had hung up, I focused on staying calm, and asked, “What did she say?” Veeno looked worried. She said that the doctor wanted to see her the next day to run a series of tests. I told her I would arrange to leave the office early and take her to the doctor.

What could the doctor have said to scare Veeno? I kept myself busy, took the glass kettle and tried to clean it thoroughly ... using a scourer and soap and then rinsing it ... again and again. However, all sorts of worries plagued my mind. How would I cope without her? She was the light of my life, I could not raise a teenager on my own. We were on the brink of building our dream home. Would she still be around to enjoy this with me? I tried to hold back my tears. I knew my world would be turned upside down should anything serious happen to Veeno. I wondered whether the problem might be cervical cancer. I was afraid to bring this up in conversation, in case it upset Veeno. I just told God that she had to be OK.

That night both of us hardly slept.

The next day we sat together in the waiting room of Dr Shakeera’s surgery. The practice was quite busy, and all kinds of people surrounded us. We had quite a long wait. I noticed that nobody complained about having to wait so long – it seemed that everyone appreciated what a good doctor she was. Then the nurse called, “Miss Reddy, doctor will see you now”. Veeno turned to me and asked, “Do you want to come in?” I shook my head to indicate no, I didn’t want to. I was anxious, and kept wriggling in my seat, observing bored children pestering their parents, as most kids hate having to wait. I stood up and looked at the medical information on the walls, to distract myself from thinking about what was going on in the doctor’s room. A very interesting notice caught my attention – it was a tribute to the late Dr Ismail, Dr Shakeera’s father.

That day Dr Shakeera did a pap smear and an ultrasound examination of Veenoo's cervix and finally drew blood for testing. Thankfully, all the results came back negative. The doctor said she was very happy with the state of Veenoo's reproductive system. However, she prescribed medication to regulate Veenoo's monthly menstrual cycle. Dr Shakeera also enquired whether Veenoo was trying to fall pregnant, and whether she wanted to have a baby, because apparently she was quite fertile. Dr Shakeera invited me to join Veenoo in her consulting room. She stated that we could have a child if we wanted this, and she would assist us in the process. I was dumbfounded, as we had never discussed this possibility. Circumstances had changed so rapidly – less than 24 hours ago I had imagined having to live without Veenoo – yet now we were faced with the possibility of having another child. It felt overwhelming. I told the doctor that this was really good news, but we needed to discuss this further. She gave us the name of a website where we could find out more, and asked me to watch a movie called *The Back-up Plan* over the weekend.

We went home. I remember Veenoo grinned constantly, knowing that something as good as this was possible. I was relieved that Veenoo was fine and thanked God for protecting her. When we got home Hiranee was curious to know how the consultation had gone. We kept nothing from her. We sat her down and explained that her mother was fine but that we were thinking about having another baby. Hiranee's immediate reaction was one of elation. She really wanted to have a sibling or two.

I went to our local DVD hire store and found the DVD that Dr Shakeera had recommended. We watched it together and really enjoyed it. I also found the website Dr Shakeera had mentioned – one of the most interesting features was a listing of possible sperm donors. I was intrigued by all the available information. Having a baby seemed to involve just analysing the data and selecting the right sperm donor.

FINDING JESS

Later we made an appointment to visit the private sperm bank. We spoke a lot about this little person we could possibly bring into this world in less than a year. We loved the idea, imagining the whole thing from birth to raising him – oh yes, we could also choose the sex of the baby too, that's how advanced everything was.

On our visit to the sperm bank we were both excited to be taken through the process of having a baby. Entering into the reception and the consulting rooms, everything seemed fresh, clean, clinical and rather cold. There were no fancy vases with flowers, abstract art or even paintings that I can remember. It didn't feel like a hospital, to me it felt more like a scientific laboratory. It was a rather quiet environment, almost as if we needed to whisper to one other. We met the consultant and he explained the various processes that they offered, including in-vitro fertilisation and artificial insemination. It was a lot to take in, but we felt excited as we were taken on a tour of the clinic and its processes. We left feeling very content, knowing we ourselves needed to discuss this further.

We then returned to work and spoke more about this that evening. We selected some possible donors from the updated list received from the clinic, and spoke about possible names: if it were to be a boy, Josh would have been his name and if a girl, it would be Pepa. It was a really exciting time.

But somehow something changed.

By the end of that week, I found myself thinking differently. Maybe this is not such a good idea? Hirakanie is my gift from God, I wanted a ready-made family and I got one. Why now did I have to test fate and become God? We already had a perfectly healthy child. These clinics were an opportunity for couples that couldn't conceive in the usual

way and who were desperate for a family. Thinking all of this I didn't know how to talk to Veenoo and Hirakanie as I realised how excited both of them were. I remember that Veenoo told my mother that this is what we wanted to do: my egg fertilised with a selected sperm donor and inserted into her womb and Veenoo would carry this embryo until birth. I must say my mother was truly happy for us and excited about the process.

I needed to speak up, it was hard, so I went the financial route. I had to be logical, I had to be firm, and I had to be the head of the household and make the right decision.

So, I put some numbers together on the whole process. I had to ensure we had sufficient funds for the possible failure of the process. Each time we wanted to get IVF treatment done, we would need R10 000. Also, we had to consider the emotional trauma that Veenoo would go through. With all of this in mind, I explained to Veenoo and Hirakanie why this wasn't the right decision. After much discussion and disappointment, we accepted our family just as it was. We knew that we were a perfect fit for one another.





CHAPTER THIRTEEN
Meeting the In-laws

In December 1999 I had my first encounter with the Reddys. This happened during the Christmas holidays, when most companies were closed. Young people from Durban who worked in Johannesburg would return to Durban to spend time with their parents and their extended family. My parents already lived in Johannesburg, so Veeno invited me to stay at her parents' home in Mountview, Verulam, for the holidays.

At that time Veeno and I were close friends. Her family already knew about me but had not yet met me. Like my own parents they were modern, energetic and warm people. They embraced me and welcomed me into their home, treating me as if I was one of their children. At the time the house was abuzz with excitement, since Veeno was four months pregnant. I observed her father regularly going into the village to buy whatever Veeno wanted to eat, whether it was litchis, prunes, mealies, boiled nuts or anything else. Every day during my stay her mother cooked up a storm in the kitchen. I felt right at home, since my parents were very similar. After the weekend I drove home, and several of Veeno's college friends travelled back with me.

I remember Veenno disclosing to me that her brother was gay, and that he had come out to her parents a few years back.

When Veenno and I recently chatted to Aunty Bhargavi, Veenno's Mum, about that meeting, I realised how far we have come as a family. The stories she shared were a real eye-opener for Veenno and me.

She jumped right in, explaining how she and Veenno's father experienced disbelief upon hearing the news that Veenno's brother was gay.

“What sin did we commit to have a child like this?” was what Veenno's Dad said to Aunty Bhargavi after hearing the news that his son was gay. Aunty Bhargavi said that she cried for many days, trying to understand it all, from facing the extended family to accepting that her only son would not provide her with a grandchild. She consoled herself by thinking, “He is still my child and I can't just throw him out.”

Did Aunty Bhargavi understand what being gay meant? She went on to explain her first experience of gay people. As the youngest daughter in a large family, her brothers called boys who walked and talked as if they were girls, *moffies*. This was the full extent of her knowledge. The day after her son had come out to his parents, Aunty Bhargavi heard her work colleagues gossiping about a coloured woman in the factory who was attracted to another woman. This individual had been married and later divorced, and she had two children. She had apparently found love with another female colleague at the factory. The gossip was that some people didn't believe that this had happened, because they couldn't understand how a person in a heterosexual marriage could show affection for someone of the same sex.

I believe the universe prepares us for the challenges we will experience in the years to come.

Aunty Bhargavi told us that as a new bride she had lived in her in-laws' home in Redhill. One evening after dinner her father-in-law decided to take both his daughters-in-law out to see the district's Six Foot Dancing, which he admired so much. The group comprised male dancers called hijiras who dressed in women's clothing and performed a very artistic form of dance for the Indian Gods. Everyone enjoyed the performance, and Aunty Bhargavi said that the family often watched this form of entertainment subsequently. I believe that Veenoo's grandfather was preparing the family for what was to come, and that he wanted them to know that he accepted this type of sexuality.

Later on when Veenoo's parents heard that Veenoo's marriage was falling apart, and that she had filed for a divorce, they felt sad. They worried about how she would raise the child on her own. They had suspected for some time that the marriage was on the rocks, but had always stayed neutral; they were not involved in Veenoo's marriage. Later, when I was introduced as Veenoo's partner, the news wasn't a shock to them. They had developed greater understanding of alternative relationships, and were more educated about homosexuals, bisexuals and heterosexuals.

Aunty Bhargavi told us that all she and Veenoo's father wanted was for Veenoo to be happy. She understood that family members would continue to poke and probe, wanting to know more. She said with great vigour, as she straightened up in her arm-chair, "I am ready for them. If you haven't walked in my shoes, you have no right to judge me!"





CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**My Dad or
My Father?**

I have heard it said that there is a difference between being a dad and being a father. My experience has taught me the difference: a father may be stern, but a dad is able to hug and express affection to his children. My father started out as just a father, but eventually he was able to learn to be a dad once he had grandchildren.

My Dad was the eighth child and the youngest son in his family. The family was very poor. Yet somehow they managed to get by, day by day, month by month, and year by year. My Dad's father was a builder by trade, and he earned enough to afford a roof over the heads for his family members and put basic meals on the table. He was too busy earning a living to worry about the feelings of anyone at home.

Dad understood that his parents' expectations of him were quite simple. When he grew up he should marry a Telegu³ girl and have several children. He was expected to buy a house and provide for his family, and ensure the family home had a peaceful atmosphere. In the end Dad met all his parents' expectations.

3 An ethno-linguistic group in India whose members speak Telugu.

FINDING JESS

My Dad helped his father to construct outbuildings on the family property in Chatsworth. His father offered him accommodation there, so that he could live with the extended family. But my Dad wouldn't hear of it: he had different hopes for us as a family, and, therefore, he turned down my grandfather's offer.

My father's siblings regarded him as the brother who was the most strict. Yet later his nephews saw him as the coolest uncle. He grew up believing that a wife should stay at home and take care of the children and look after the household while the husband went out to work. Later he realised that this perspective was narrow and limiting if he wanted a better life for his family. Mum had to return to the working world to earn a living and help support the household.

My father worked for the biggest branded suit store in the heart of Durban. Before he left for Texas allegations of fraud in the firm circulated, and there were rumours that he was part and parcel of this racket. Suits had been taken from the store without being paid for. My father had already made travel arrangements to Texas. To the best of my knowledge the case took a long time to come to court, and the criminal investigations began just as he left the country.

When he returned from Texas, my Dad found that he had been suspended from work. He was accused of belonging to the group which had defrauded the company and stolen branded suits to the value of hundreds of thousands of rands. He was told that the company had evidence of his involvement in these transactions.

The day when my father had to appear in court on charges of fraud must have been nerve-wracking. If he was found guilty he could be sent to prison for a long period, which would have changed our lives forever.

All my life I looked up to him as being rather stiff, but I also knew that he was a very hard-working, proper and honest man, and I aspired to be like him.

I don't remember everything that happened in the family when I was young as my parents spoke about sensitive issues behind closed doors. However, I suspect that there was a great deal of tension in our home. On the day when my father appeared in court, he was called to the witness stand and asked to verify his name and address, and state his relationship with the company. He was then given a blank piece of paper and a pen, and asked to provide his signature. He was then shown company documents which were supposed to implicate him in the criminal acts. Interestingly all the documents bore the signature "Vincy Naidoo". The people who had implicated my father in the crimes were unaware that he never signed anything using that form of his name. My father was known to everyone as Vincy, despite the fact that the name he was given at birth was Dean Naidoo. His signature was a very ornate version of "D. Naidoo", which was difficult to replicate. Furthermore, human resource department records provided proof that my Dad was on leave for most of the days when the fraudulent transactions happened. So he was acquitted on all the charges and the company reinstated him.

Although the outcome of the court case vindicated my father's innocence and the perpetrators of the crime met the full force of the law, my father felt betrayed by the management of the company. Eventually he left and sought employment elsewhere.

Our sturdy family tree trunk grew new branches, branches that my Dad couldn't control, when my sisters and I began to grow up and become people in our own right. Life's challenges started to present themselves, one at a time.

One of the first challenges my Dad faced was when I developed vitiligo at a very young age. Soon after that his dreams of moving the family to the US to start a new life were shattered. After that Dad faced a substantial loss of income. Some years afterwards Annalisa eloped with a businessman's son; Dad reluctantly agreed that they could marry. Family life took another difficult turn when Divia disclosed that she was in love with her cousin and that she wanted to marry him.

My father said he felt life presented him with hurdle after hurdle after hurdle. As the head of the family he felt he just had to keep on going. He acknowledged that he turned to alcohol to cope with all of this. Dad drank excessively to numb the pain he experienced because of the family troubles.

I never sat my parents down and disclosed that I was gay – that I loved another woman. It was a difficult issue for me to bring up. I didn't want to talk about this aspect of myself because I knew bringing it out into the open might upset them and probably make them cry. However, the reality was that sooner or later other members of my family would notice this aspect of my identity. I still believe that some things are better left unsaid.

Dad told me that he was unaware of my relationships with girls and women. When I was growing up he realised that I was a tomboy. That didn't really bother him, as he thought of it as a silly phase I was going through. I suppose he didn't want to know more than that, and the issue was never discussed. However, he said that he always loved me as his youngest daughter. He was blinded by love because I always showed respect for him and my mother. He was never afraid about what society might think of us. He insisted, "I was never afraid of my family, they were too scared to ask me anything about you".

Sitting down now with Dad and talking to him about all of this has made me realise that his three children and their issues might have driven him to alcoholism. If there was something he couldn't handle or didn't have the courage to address, he would just drink himself into oblivion. He realised this put a strain on his marriage to Mum. My sisters and I have come to recognise our part in all of this and have apologised to our parents for the strain we put on them. Thankfully Dad has now been sober for many years. I am happy to say that we can now walk into my parents' home at any time, and expect a warm welcome and hear laughter.

My Dad told me recently that he recognises me for who I am, and it doesn't bother him in the least that I am not the same as other people. All he wants for me is that I should be happy and make a success of my life. He said that he often talks to other people about me and my family, and he tells them how proud he is of us.

Lesson learned: Being open was something my Dad couldn't easily achieve. He has come to realise that the younger generations are different, and that their goals and mindsets differ from his. As parents we need to allow our children to experience the world and to make their own mistakes, but ensure they know that there is always a loving home that they can return to.

I sometime see the changes that the grandchildren and the great-granddaughter have brought about in my Dad. He will carry the little great-granddaughter outside to see the birds and to play with the dog. When she wants to be indoors, he will feed her and watch TV programmes with her. Sometimes she demands of him that he must do all of this ... I wonder if he realises that he had an opportunity to do all of this two generations ago ... not only now with the generation his great-granddaughter represents.

Mum always cautioned me that my perspective on my father was unduly harsh. Today, I understand him a little better than I did earlier in life.

Dad's quietness

My father is not much of a talker, but he is a good listener. He has always seemed very serious and appeared composed. I heard stories from his nieces that they would tremble with fear or even pee in their pants if they suspected my Dad was around. He was the sort of uncle who didn't tolerate messy and unruly children. He wasn't the type to embrace children or to play with them.

When we moved to our first home in Riyadh, it definitely represented a step up and in the right direction. We were beginning to thrive in many ways.

You may ask whether I ever wished that circumstances had been different when I was growing up. Yes, of course I have, every single day of my life until now! Nobody wants to draw attention to themselves for the wrong reasons, I truly just wanted just to fit in for once.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN
**My Daughter -
Tough Questions**

As far back as I can remember, Hirakanie and I have had a special bond. She was born in May 2000, and had a tender motherly way about her. She has a very caring and cautious soul, and was seen as a soft-spoken gentle giant in the family. Adults watched as she continued to grow, very respectful in all aspects of her behaviour.

When she attended creche her classmates would recognise me from a distance, and they would shout to her, "Hirakanie, your Dad's here!" She would just smile and come running into my arms. I would get down on one knee, so I could pick her up and carry her to the car. Those moments seemed so brief, once she grew taller than the other children in her class. it was funny because I could no longer carry her for any length of time, but she would still throw her arms around me every time I fetched her from school. By the time she was ten she was almost as tall as me. Mind you, I am only 1.6 metres tall.

Growing up, Hirakanie loved the outdoors. Her best friends were the naughty boys. She was never afraid to break an arm or bruise her knees while playing, it was all part of the fun.

She always believed that we were a perfect family (i.e. a mum, a dad and a child). Generally we were a great family, since we worked well together, as if we were one unit. I would help Hirakanie with her homework, and tend to the garden, the cars and any repairs to the house. Veeno always ensured that there were cooked meals on the table and that the house was clean and tidy. Veeno and I never discussed anything out of the ordinary. But we often had constructive conversations around the dinner table at night, giving one another advice, and laughing about something until our stomachs hurt.

One day, when Hirakanie was about 15 years old, she came home from school with tears in her eyes, and asked her Mum about the relationship between Veeno and I. Someone in her group of friends had noticed that my voice wasn't as deep as they expected it should be.

Veeno had the daunting task of explaining our relationship to Hirakanie. Until that moment we had not realised just how naïve the child was. She knew a lot about gay and lesbian relationships, but she had not realised that we were in such a relationship. Once Veeno had explained it all to her and the fact that afterwards we hid nothing from her, meant that she gained a better understanding of us.

I wonder whether the fact that Hirakanie didn't feel comfortable raising the nature of our relationship earlier had left her feeling sad, since she might have assumed that we were keeping secrets from her. She couldn't comprehend how well I understood the changes her body was going through when she got to puberty. I told her in detail what to expect and when it was likely to happen. I sympathised with her when her skin flared up with pimples and when she had painful lower abdominal cramps. I made sure she had the right medication when her period pain felt unbearable.

Growing up as the only child of gay parents, Hirkanie said she waited for us to initiate a conversation about our relationship with her, i.e. to open up our circle to include her. When we asked her why she did not ask such questions earlier, she said that she did not want to offend either of us, or come across as an outspoken and tactless daughter. Hirkanie did confess that if she had had a sibling, things might have been different, since she and a sibling would have been able to talk to one another about us.

According to Hirkanie, the best time for us to have initiated a conversation with her around sexuality would have been when she was between 13 and 14 years of age. Her reasoning was that her body was going through the changes of puberty, and she was starting to understand sexual attraction, so that would have been an ideal opportunity.

Hirkanie said that for a very long time she believed that I was a conventional male parent. Then one day when she saw photos of me as a little child wearing dresses, and she felt confused. However, her friend Luke in primary school loved to wear her dresses and so she thought the photos of me were normal. Later she thought that I might have been born as a girl, but become transgender. Unfortunately all these ideas competed in her head, because she didn't want to come across as impolite by asking uncomfortable questions.

I shed a few tears when I heard this. If only I had known better! But Hirkanie comforted me by saying, "No tears now", telling me that she only ever looked at me with her heart and never just with her head or intellect, therefore our love and our bond was strong.

At 21 she calls me Daddy!

Veeno and I always celebrated Hirananie's milestones – her baptism, her confirmation, her birthdays, receiving awards at school, etc., so throwing a 21st birthday party for her was no different.

When Hirananie came of age in January 2021 we were still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. South Africa had entered a second year of COVID-19 restrictions. Veeno and I were working from home. We had to make serious adjustments at home to accommodate our working lives and Hirananie's studies. The first four months of 2020 was a tough period of change, as we experienced problems with internet access, and so very early mornings and late evenings on the computer meant longer working hours. Veeno and I sometimes shared the dining room table while Hirananie had to study in her bedroom, since she was in her second year of her university studies. Although we had a separate study in our house, it was pointless to work there since it had no internet connection, so none of us could access emails or shared folders from there. It was very frustrating.

The South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, graced our television screens virtually every fortnight, keeping us abreast of government restrictions, COVID statistics and COVID deaths. So the three of us expected that we would have to endure these restrictions for another year, or even for two more years. Changes were made. We upgraded our internet service, then tried to separate our home life from our working lives, while still being confined to our home. We sold some furniture and acquired additional desks and chairs, so that we could create new working spaces within the house. We all worked in different parts of the house, but met in the dining area for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The tension and sense of claustrophobia dissipated slowly, and we felt that we could breathe again.

In July 2020 Veenno insisted we get the house repainted. Soon afterwards we started a vegetable garden, initially with just a few seedlings, several bags of compost, wooden fencing and some paving. It took an entire weekend to set up the vegetable garden. Working from home every day afforded me the opportunity to water the garden daily at 10.00 am, so nothing wilted and died because of a lack of irrigation. Watering was a fun activity as it took me away from my desk for at least ten minutes a day. I saw how our little herb garden thrived. We planted 12 different types of vegetable, including yams, eggplant, potatoes, green chillies, curry leaf, baby spinach, spring onions, tomatoes, butter lettuce, beetroot, thyme and parsley. I discovered the real joy of plucking fresh produce from the garden when it was needed.

My granny, Veenno's Mum and my Mum were very impressed by our gardening and our bountiful harvests, which we shared with our families. I believe our mothers' gardening skills and love of plants inspired us to start this new project in our own garden.

Fast forward to January 2021, and our conversation turned to Hirakanie turning 21 in just five months, with her second year of university completed and six distinctions. There were plenty of reasons to celebrate the start of the next chapter in her life, and our little girl becoming a woman.

Given government restrictions on social gatherings, we could not have a big party. However, we found a party venue at a hotel with a maximum limit of 30 guests. So we invited only the members of our immediate family, taking into account their health and whether they were allowed to attend. Fortunately nobody got ill prior to, during and after the celebration.

FINDING JESS

We promised our daughter that she would be treated like a princess. Veenoo and I arranged for her to have a room at the hotel, so that she could be treated to a hairstylist and a make-up artist. A new rose, gold and black ballroom gown and a pair of elegant shoes for her to grace the evening were laid out on her bed.

I remember that evening clearly: Hiranakie walked gracefully into the party venue and down a red carpet. I felt goose-bumps on my arms and tears welled up in my eyes. By God's grace we had been able to make Hiranakie feel like a true princess. Later that evening she said that she felt so blessed, so mission accomplished! As the night progressed, the time arrived for us to hand Hiranakie "the keys" to her adult life. Nobody expected what came next. Would we give her a dummy 21st key, a spare set of keys for our house, so that she wouldn't have to abide by the curfew rules, or the keys for her own car? There were gasps and expressions of surprise from all the other guests and from Hiranakie herself, when Veenoo and I handed over the keys to her own apartment that we had purchased for her, a month before she turned 21. Hiranakie shed a few tears as she embraced and kissed us both. It was definitely a moment that we would cherish forever.

When Hiranakie had got the attention of all the family members present, she stood tall and spoke about her experience of being raised by Veenoo and I to become the person she was now. At this moment she acknowledged me as her "Dad". Nobody questioned her use of the term – everyone seemed to understand the love and the special bond between the three of us.

Months passed, and life returned to our normal daily routine. In one of our light-hearted conversations, I asked Hiranakie what had triggered her decision to refer to me as "Dad". She said that when she was growing up and at school she always spoke about me being her

father. At that time it was relatively easy for other kids to accept, since kids make sense of the world on the basis of appearances, and see this as reality. When I asked what had stopped her from calling me “Dad” at home, her response was: “I really wanted to [call you Dad] for the longest time but didn’t know if you were okay with it. So I just ended up calling you Jess because all my cousins called you that.”

I explained to Hirakanie that if I had I known how she felt about all of this earlier it would have been different. I told her that I accepted and was comfortable with whatever title people assigned to me, as long as they were genuine and felt comfortable in themselves.

Furthermore, I did not want to replace her biological father, and I knew that she called him “Dada”. It would have been too confusing for a little girl to have two fathers, therefore I believed that we needed to wait until she was mature enough to understand the situation.

Having said that, ever since her 21st birthday celebrations, Hirakanie refers to me constantly as “Dad”.

The fear of having to grieve again over a pet – as I grieved for Scamp in my early childhood – made me an unyielding parent when, as a young child, Hirakanie begged me for a puppy. She understood why I hadn’t acceded to her request when she became an adult and I told her about my childhood experience of our puppy, Scamp. However, in 2021 a six-month-old puppy called Romeo came into our lives. I agreed to have Romeo as a pet, because we had recently purchased an apartment for Hirakanie and I did not want her to live in it on her own. Romeo looked quite scared when I first laid eyes on him, yet all he really wanted was a safe home and constant love. I knew Hirakanie would be

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able to give him both of these. Ironically, at the time of writing, Romeo and Hirananie still haven't left our house, as she tells us that she wants to delay moving out until she starts working. So Romeo and I have bonded. He lives mostly indoors and sleeps in Hirananie's bedroom. He does not see me leave in the morning for work, but when I return home in the afternoon, he alerts everyone that I am back with loud barking, as if to say, "Pappa's home!" He then sniffs my lunch bag and my shoes to see where I've been. Romeo and I have become very fond of one another. In fact, I believe Romeo came into my life to help me heal from my childhood trauma with Scamp. Yes, it took 42 years for me to open up again to loving a pet. With Romeo it's just one day at a time.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN
My Warrior Family

The fearless one

Today I know that I was raised by a family of fierce warriors, who protected me from the world. Their mission was: Protect and nurture! The lioness Sarabi in the story of The Lion King went to the ends of the earth to protect her young, even into adulthood. Thus Simba was protected by his mother. Divia played a similar role in my life. She is outspoken, intelligent, a quick thinker and firm in her beliefs. Sometimes the world mistakes her attitude for rudeness and even arrogance. When in nurture mode she is the most gentle and caring of human beings. Her heart is huge, filled with kindness and generosity, yet it has also been broken.

Divia's earliest memory of me being rejected by the world goes back to 1980, when she wasn't more than seven years old. My vitiligo was visible to the outside world but not to us as a family. The occasion she remembers was the usual family get-together at Uncle Manny's house in Phoenix, Durban. Uncle Manny, may his soul rest in peace, was one of Mum's older brothers. He was the funniest uncle and he worked for a cold storage chain – a company that supplied the most delicious sausages, Vienna sausages, polony, Russian sausages, cheese and other sorts of goodies. Uncle Manny always cut up sausages and distributed them to us kids while we played outside.

Whenever we were in Phoenix, we played at the bottom of the driveway, as the house and yard were too confined a space for us all to play in. On this particular day there was a bakkie parked on the pavement and we were told to play in the bin of the bakkie to avoid the dangers of the road. Every now and then I would go into the house and check that Mum was still around. Once I was satisfied that she was still there I would go outside again and play with the other children. On this occasion Uncle Manny called me and gave me a plate of cut-up goodies to take outside for all the cousins and share with them. I happily ran down to them and started handing out the treats. Everyone was excited and rushed to get something from me, except for one individual: one cousin refused to take anything from me, saying that he wouldn't accept food from someone with a rash, for fear that he would get infected too. Hearing this, Divia stepped in, and without making a great fuss or drawing attention to herself, she suggested I give the goodies to her and ignore him. Later she went inside and reported this ugly behaviour to Mum. Mum was furious as hell.

I have somehow blocked out this memory, and, therefore, held no grudge towards anyone in the family. Today, the cousin in question has four children, and he lives in another country. Both his uncle and his closest cousin have vitiligo. He must have been seven going on eight at the time of that incident. I believe he is a bigger person now, he understands the world better than I do, and he knows how to treat people with consideration. It is important to teach our children to love and embrace all of humanity.

Divia's courage displayed true affection and protection of my feelings.

Mum's big reveal

As everyone in my home observed me develop from baby into toddler, from child into teenager, from teenager into adult and from adult into parent, I knew they all observed me out of the corner of their eyes, but could never speak about one particular issue, ask the questions, or even talk about the changes they saw in me. We were brought up quite conservatively, yet our hearts and minds were more adventurous. In a typical Indian home, you were not permitted to express your thoughts freely; it was important to always take into consideration other people's feelings. If you spoke up spontaneously, you were seen as a rude child who had not been brought up properly, and you were regarded as disrespectful of your parents. Indian mothers generally wouldn't hesitate to smack a child across their face if they were out of line. That in itself would be a warning never again to speak as freely.

Mum recently shared with me how she dealt with the burden of keeping a secret from her siblings. She knows that she isn't the only parent in her extended family who bore such a burden.

Sadly, some of my cousins are still not brave enough to come out and live their lives openly. I do hope that they find the support they need to accept their own truths, because it will enable them to breathe freely. Some hide themselves away in marriages with beautiful children, while others choose to live alone but far from the family, across oceans and in distant countries.

When I was younger I was admitted to hospital with a ruptured ulcer after taking an overdose of pills, because I could not live with society's refusal to acknowledge my relationship with Uveka. I wanted to end my life, since I felt I had nothing to live for if Uveka denied our

relationship and married someone of the opposite sex out of a sense of obligation. Yet Mum fought for me to live. She understood what was in my heart and knew about my relationships. She also cared for all the women I allowed into my life, and treated them with the same respect that they showed her.

Mum's older sister, who lives abroad, was on holiday in Durban when Mum got the call to return to Johannesburg because I was in hospital with a ruptured ulcer. Mum knew straight away that I was troubled, and that a serious issue had triggered my behaviour. She was in a state of panic, and didn't know what to do whilst arrangements were being made for me to come back home. My aunt talked to Mum and helped her calm down. Mum felt comfortable enough to disclose to my aunt that I was gay. My aunt said that she already knew this, and that everyone else in the family also knew about it but nobody dared to speak about me being gay. She explained to Mum that since a young age I had tried to live my true self, and that Mum couldn't change me. You need to accept this and be happy for your child, my aunt told her. I must say that such ready acceptance by my aunt came from her having lived abroad and having been exposed to other cultures. Mum knew that she could count on her sister not to gossip about a serious matter like this. Their relationship grew stronger and closer over the years. As easy as this sounded, Mum knew that this was just the start of her accepting me and confronting the challenges that were still to come.

Mum relates another anecdote about how defensive she was about my sexuality when confronted by her work colleagues. It was the mid-1980s and I was on a winter holiday break from school. Mum had promised to take me with her to work if I was on my best behaviour. This was a big incentive to me and I behaved myself impeccably that week. On the Friday morning I rose early, had a bucket bath and did everything Mum told me to do. Mum used to travel to work in central

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Durban by combi with other commuters from Tongaat. Every morning Mum would leave home around 5.00 am, and walk 1.5 kilometres to a point where other commuters also waited. It took more than an hour's travel for Mum to arrive at her destination. The daily commute routine was that passengers caught up on sleep, listened to the driver's selection of music, or chatted to one other. The combi was designed to carry 15 passengers, but there were generally only 10-12 people in the combi, so there was usually sufficient space for everyone, enabling a comfortable journey. At that time Mum's salary was R400 a month, out of which she paid the combi driver R40 for a month's travel. My trip with Mum in the combi was very exciting. I was the only child on board, so everyone asked me questions and I became the centre of attention. All I had to do was be polite and respectful, and only speak when I was spoken to. I loved looking at the scenery and at other vehicles as we travelled along the highway. Soon we were in central town outside the House of Delegates⁴.

Some of us disembarked here and bade farewell to the others, rushing to catch the first available lift. Mum worked on the 10th floor of the building, which accommodated the typing pool and the Indian education ministers. Mum's job wasn't glamorous, nor did she earn a substantial salary. But it did help to pay the bills. She got up every morning with pride, ready to face the new day and serve refreshments to her colleagues with enthusiasm and a friendly smile.

I waited in the kitchen while Mum did a morning tea round. She asked me to sit quietly and not wander around while she was away, and told me that when she returned we would go out into town. I was happy to sit on my own. Every now and then someone would pop in to drop

⁴ This was the legislative body for Indians in the tricameral Parliament, inaugurated in 1983, which gave limited political power to coloured and Indian people, but still deprived black South Africans of the right to vote.

off an empty cup or get something out of the fridge, and they usually wanted to find out who I was. Mum's close friend, known as Aunty Saras, was in the kitchen with me, and asked me numerous questions about school, home, friends, etc. Someone else saw us chatting and was curious to discover my identity. I was introduced as "Sandy's daughter", to which the enquirer responded, "She is gay".

When Mum returned from her tea round, we headed into town, and did quite a bit of walking various streets in central Durban, window-shopping and browsing. My legs ached as I wasn't used to so much walking, and I complained. As usual I was also hungry, so Mum bought us pies and we headed back to the office building. When we got back we had an hour's wait before the next tea round, so Mum made us cups of tea, and we sat and ate our pies. The pie was delicious as far as I can remember, although, since I was such a hungry child, it didn't seem nearly enough.

After Mum's 3.00 pm tea round she wrapped up for the afternoon before we got ready to dash downstairs to catch the combi. Mum's friend, Aunty Saras, showed up again, and brought me a packet of crisps. She told Mum what their colleague had said when she saw me for the first time earlier that day.

Mum just saw red, and spat out some very vulgar language about this person. I felt confused. I didn't understand the reason for her rage, and I didn't know what "gay" meant.

Looking back at the incident, I would say that Mum was in denial of my sexuality. She knew in her heart of hearts who I was, but it hurt her to have someone else point it out to her. The only way for her to get the anger out of her system was to respond with nasty words about that person. Fierce as you were, my warrior Mum, that wasn't cool!

Today Mum understands it all much better, and she can hold a conversation about gay and lesbian people. Strangely, whenever she uses the word “gay”, she speaks quite softly, almost whispering, but then reverts to her normal volume for the rest of the sentence.

My big sister

In true retrospective style Annalisa lived up to her title as my big sister. Born two months prematurely, she is the shortest person in our family. Which brings me to say that she was like dynamite that comes in a small package.

She firmly insists that I am her sister and that nothing will ever change that. When she sat down with me and reminisced about our lives as siblings, I notice her eyes were slightly teary as she started to unpack her memories.

Annalisa explained that the three of us were the only girls who played with the boys on the streets of Sandfields. We were still in primary school and played games with the boys such as Gullidanda, three tins and cricket in the barracks of Tongaat. We were encouraged to play by the boys of the district as they wanted more players, so they would come to our home in the afternoons and call us out to come out and play. The aunties of the district often remarked to my parents that we were playing outside like tomboys, but my parents never stopped us from being free and playing just as we wished.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Annalisa married Mr Ramlukhan’s oldest son, which made her the oldest daughter-in-law, at the tender age of 19 years. She assumed the role with great pride, which made her

the favourite among her in-laws and with Ashton's siblings. The boys would ask dating advice from her and the girls would often borrow her clothes as they loved her style of dress.

As naïve as all of us had been about various sexualities, I would say Anna was the cherry on the top. I say this because she told me that she didn't know I liked girls. She had no idea I was in a relationship with René or Uveka. Her reasoning is that she saw René as my best friend who just happened to also like me as a tomboy. She did learn what Divia had seen when she caught René and I together. With regards to Uveka and I, all she thought was that we had a very close bond. Her husband, Ashton, actually informed her about my sexuality and pointed out to her that I was in a relationship with his neighbour.

It seems hard to believe that few people knew about the LGBTQIA+ community at that time. But let's try and understand why. The period was the 1980s running into the early 1990s. At that time if one was in school one participated in school debates about issues such as drug abuse, alcoholism, euthanasia, abolishing school uniforms, gun laws, etc. There was no focus on more relevant topics such as bullying, apartheid, HIV/AIDS, or gays and lesbians, which we should have been informed about. The culture in the Indian schools we attended was too conservative to allow discussion of these topics. I say this with conviction because I attended nine different schools at various times. Despite Ashton explaining my sexuality to Annalisa, this didn't change how she saw me. She understood me with her heart, and not just based on what she saw with her eyes.

Turmoil erupted in Annalisa's home when Mum called Uveka and confronted her about her relationship with me and the fact that I was in hospital because of her. Things got really ugly; Mum could say hurtful things to other people when it came to defending me.

Annalisa explained further that Mr Siddartha had summoned Ashton to his home to find out what my mother was upset about. Ashton stood his ground and told Mr Siddartha about me having been in a relationship with Uveka for many years, but that Uveka had decided to marry someone else. When Uveka was confronted in the presence of her parents, she denied all of this, making Ashton appear to be a liar. Mr Siddartha consoled Uveka, and refuted what Ashton had shared with him. He banished his trusted friend, claiming he would not even attend his funeral, should Ashton die. This tragically came to pass, as Ashton died three years later in a car accident.

After the confrontation at the Ramlukhan house, Uveka suddenly became engaged. Annalisa describes attending the utterly pretentious engagement party. Nobody really spoke to her and Ashton, and they felt like outcasts, but they had been invited and attended out of a sense of obligation.

Before she knew it, Uveka's lavish wedding day arrived. Things happened so fast, almost at the speed of light, all to cover up the past and shift the focus to what society really approved of, i.e. Uveka marrying a man. As the oldest daughter-in-law in the family, Annalisa was called up to conduct a ritual at the wedding, because Uveka had no married siblings at that time.

A dot of sindoor (a red or orange coloured cosmetic powder) on the forehead of an Indian woman generally signifies that she is married. The final ritual in getting married involves the husband placing a dot on the forehead of the bride, and sprinkling sindoor along her hairline. The oldest sister-in-law has to repeat this action, hence confirming the marriage. This was a breaking point for Annalisa, as she felt that this was the ultimate betrayal of me, and tears streamed down her beautifully made-up face. How could Uveka go through with such

denial, knowing that she had stolen seven years of my life? At the time, only Uveka would have known what those tears meant.

Anna told me in a melancholy tone, “Because of me being a neighbour to that family, it was a constant reminder of the hurt and pain Uveka caused you”. She added that she frequently saw the pretence in the marriage, covered up by alcohol, the husband’s wandering eyes and a lavish lifestyle.

At this point in time I was very unhappy. I really wanted Uveka to do right in her marriage as this was the path that she had chosen: a life without me. I finally decided to create a life of my own for myself, and I am now really happy.

Life took a 360 degree turn for Anna, following the tragic loss of her husband and later the loss of her son. But I can say that her trauma was partly salvaged by her meeting, falling in love with, and marrying Lee, a man with a big heart and a gentle soul. Lee’s ex-wife unfortunately succumbed to COVID-19 and passed away. Lee’s sons, Neilen and Sammy, then moved in with Annalisa and Lee.

Lee’s youngest son, Sammy, was gay but he hadn’t spoken to his parents about his sexuality. So Annalisa inherited a gay stepson. Since she was better informed, after Sammy disclosed to her that he was gay, she talked to him about my experience, to help him come out and tell his father that he was gay.

The issue of acceptance will always be difficult for us. But the people whom we expect will have the worst response are often the ones who surprise us the most.

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*December 2012: my family of warriors.
From left to right: Divia, me, Mum, Dad, Annalisa.*





In Conclusion

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You are going to realise it one day – that happiness was never about your job or your degree, or being in a relationship. Happiness was never about following in the footsteps of all of those who came before you, it was never about being like the others.

One day, you are going to see it all – that happiness was always about discovery, the hope, the listening to your heart and following it wherever it chose to go. Happiness was always about being kinder to yourself, it was always about embracing the person you were becoming.

One day, you will understand that happiness was always about learning how to live with yourself, and that happiness was never in the hands of other people. It was always about you. It was always about you.

Unknown author

A special thanks to you, the reader, for making it thus far. You may be someone who has vitiligo, or you may know someone with it. Or you might be struggling to come to terms with your sexual orientation or with a gender identity that is different from the people around you. Be that as it may, I want you to know that whatever your struggle involves, you are not alone. If you face difficult challenges or you are in pain, I am on your side. I understand your strong desire to sometimes just get through one day at a time.

I was fortunate enough to have a beautiful family who embraced me with love. People whom I met on my journey through life were able to see me for who I was, recognise my love for life, and allow me into their worlds.

We need to let people see more of ourselves, and allow them to fall in love with our souls and not just with our outer beings.

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The three mantras that continue to help me are:

- **Love** – Give love, to receive love
- **Acceptance** – Accept yourself as you are, for others to accept you
- **Forgiveness** – Have a forgiving spirit, as tough as it is. Don't hate the uninformed, rather embrace and teach.

I wish you well on your own journey ...

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Jess, Hirakanie and Veenno at Jess and Veenno's wedding

Appendix 1: A note to my better half (A tribute from Veenoo)

They say it is about the time and the place. This is how it all started!

Two work colleagues who longed to be loved unconditionally without any reservations – this is how a strong friendship and bond culminated in a beautiful strong relationship that graduated into a marriage. I can attest to having a friend who taught me spirituality, love, long chats on the phone, loving without reservations and most importantly, getting to know my soul.

Thank you for bringing out the best in me. For challenging my inner soul to allow me to search far and beyond. Thank you for our beautiful family and the wonderful memories we have created. Thank you for helping me through my enervated times – without this bond and unconditional love, I would have not got through these years. Your strength and resilience have made me who I am today.

Our travel to many countries, getting lost, almost getting mugged and the different cuisines we tried, impart that we have only started to explore what we have yet to enjoy in our future years.

To LGBTQIA+ acquaintances, friends and couples out there, enjoy your journey, since we too can attest to having been closeted and afraid

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of society. But we realised that we were just souls clothed with inner beauty on this beautiful earth, and we found ourselves attracted to our twin flames – no gender, no qualms, but just a pure surreal connection that is unimaginable beyond words.

Our flames are not meant to be extinguished but to be shared and passed on.

May the flame within you never fade, and your spirit always shine bright.

You cannot hold a torch to light another's path without brightening your own flame.

Find the fire within you and fan the flames until they become an inferno.

All my love,
Your twin flame

Appendix 2: A father's love (A message from Hirakanie)

A father is often described as a protector. This word has many different meanings. A father is a shield for his child. He will take the hits and turn them into reassurance. A father is a sword for his child as he strikes those who say hurtful words and speaks words of tenderness in return. A father is a pillar of strength for his child when the world seems too heavy to bear and the only solace that can be found is in his arms. To my Dad, even when the world is falling apart, I will seek you as you are my protection, strength, solace and love.

The word father holds so much more value to me, and this might sound like a cliché as we all have this notion in our minds that our father is the 'best dad in the whole wide world'. For me personally, I believe this to be true. As I grew up, I learned that my mother and biological father had divorced when I was just seven months old. Each time I relay this story to friends I feel a sense of peace as I did not grow up wondering what it would be like to have someone to call Dad or wonder what it was like to have someone to comfort me when I scrapped my knee, tell me not to be afraid of the dark because I would be safe in their presence or wonder how to fix things around the house.

My Dad has been present in my life from the moment my Mum found out she was pregnant. He chose me long before I was born and has

not missed a milestone since. It is somewhat confusing to others when I talk about my Dad as they sometimes think I am referring to my biological father and then I go on to explain that I am talking about my stepdad and I prefer to call him Dad, as he has shaped me into the woman I am today and no one should take away from this significant figure in life. He is my father, he always has been and he always will be. At the age of 15, I was brave enough to ask Mum burning questions I had about Dad but this did not mean that younger me was not curious about little things I noticed about Dad that were different. The questions that crossed my mind were, 'Why isn't Dad's voice as deep as other Dad's?' and 'Why haven't I seen Dad without a shirt on before?' In my mind children seeing their fathers without shirts was something that was normal from time to time and it made me wonder why my Dad wasn't like this.

These questions, however didn't change how I viewed my Dad. I just thought he was extra-special and there were differences in him that other dads weren't lucky enough to have. At 15, finding out from Mum that Dad was as I suspected biologically a female, did not shock me, as deep down I knew that to be true. I was more hurt at that age as to why I wasn't told about this sooner, as I felt as though my parents did not trust me and I wondered if they ever would have told me had I not built up the courage to ask that day. Nevertheless, after some tears and explaining I came to realise that it was not my Mum's story to tell but rather my Dad's, and if there were questions I had, I should ask him directly.

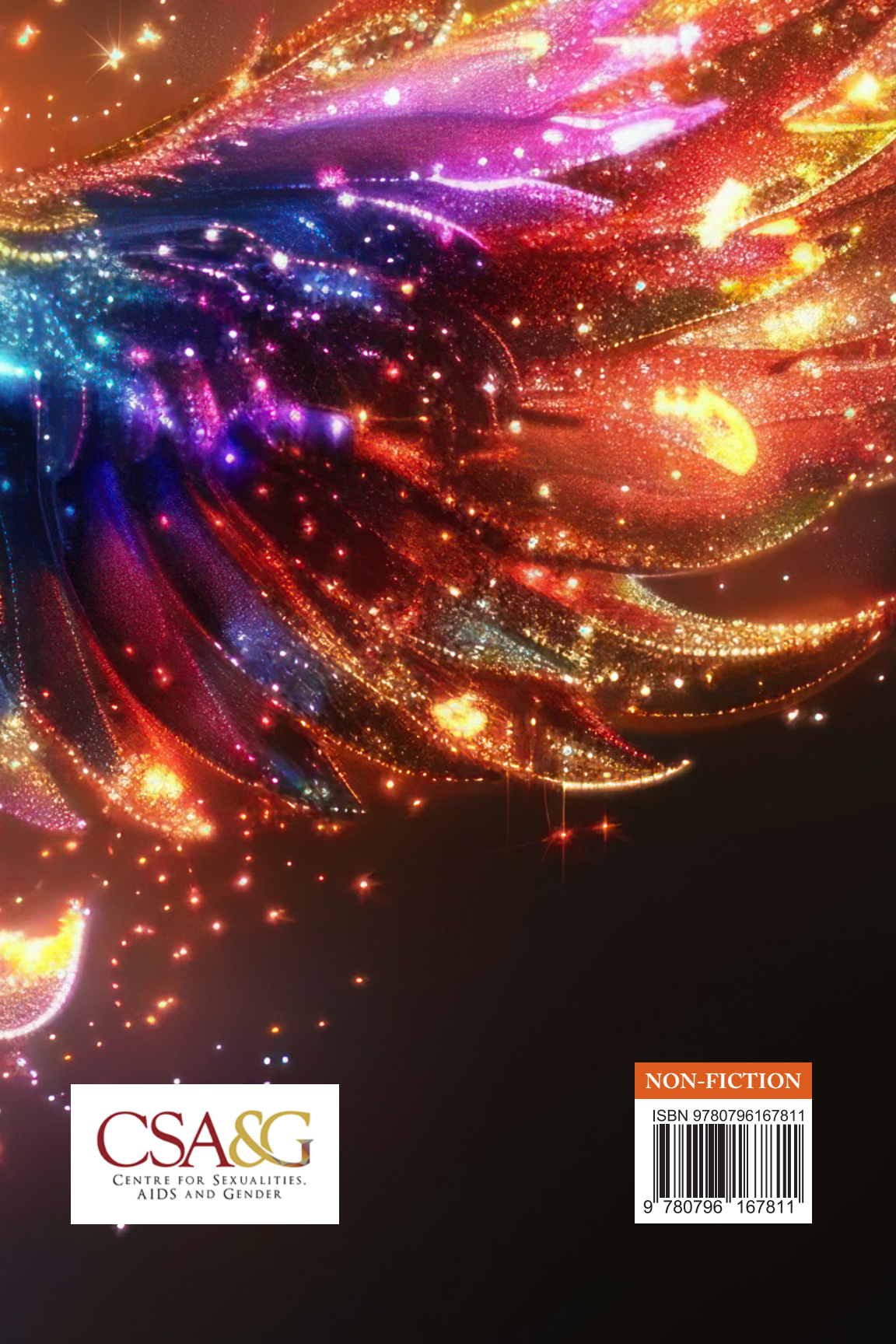
It was then that I understood how lucky I was to grow up in a home where I never had to question what love is, as love is found in abundance in my home. Society may label us an unconventional family but I have a Mum and Dad who would go to the ends of the earth for me. A father's love which is ever present and everlasting, it may have taken

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me 21 years before I felt courageous enough to call him Dad out loud but every day since I have felt a sense of peace that should be treasured. I truly know how blessed I am to have my one-of-a-kind Dad, as my Mum and I were the last puzzle piece in Finding Jess.



Romeo, our Pomeranian, is now part of the family



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