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Opening Extract from...

Shifting Colours

Written by Fiona Sussman

Published by Allison & Busby Ltd

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SHIFTING COLOURS

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First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2014.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

Hardback ISBN: 978-0-7490-1641-8
Export Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-0-7490-1612-8

Typeset in 11/17.2 pt Sabon by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

PROLOGUE

She stands in front of the stove, her black frame erect and proud, wooden spoon poised over a battered preserving pan. She is completely still, seemingly mesmerised by the rise and fall of the sugary sea. It is a hot African morning and the air is thick with the sweet smell of fig jam.

Just when I think she'll never move again, she scoops up a spoonful of the scalding liquid and drops it onto a saucer, then tilting and rotating the blob of gold, she checks for fine creases in the sample.

I cross my fingers, hopeful for one more saucer to lick before the golden sweetness is locked away in squat glass jars with shiny brass lids – treasure that will belong to someone else.

This is the first memory I have of *Mme*, my dearest mother, the first sweet memory. But it remains tangled with the other events of that dreadful day; I've never been able to tease the two apart.

Many years have passed and still this picture slides into my mind uninvited, the edges polished, the lines clearly defined. I can almost smell her – a comforting cocktail of Sunlight Soap

and woodsmoke – and touch the beads of perspiration hiding in the creases behind her knees. Sometimes her laughter bursts into my head or I hear her call me – my name full and round in her mouth. Frustratingly though, as with all the memories I have of *Mme*, her face always blurs under the pressure of my focus.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

1959

Miriam

Mme teetered on tiptoes under the low ceiling beams, placing the last jars of fig jam on the shelf beside the other preserves – a fantastic collection of peaches, pinkstone plums, deep purple mulberries, tightly packed apricots, mango chutneys and lemon achar. I counted one, two, three, four . . . nine fat jars of jam transformed by the fingers of morning sunlight into pots of amber.

As she balanced there on the three-legged stool, I inspected the soles of her big black feet. They were white on the underside and black on top. I examined mine. They were pale on the bottom too, but not rutted with the same gullies and canyons of hard, dry skin. *Mme* said one day, when my journey had been longer, my feet would look more like hers.

She jumped down off the stool and landed with a thud, her bottom wobbling under the taut fabric of her maid's uniform.

I jumped up and down trying to make mine jiggle too, but I couldn't see far enough over my shoulder to know if it did. Gideon, the garden boy from next door, said *Mme* had the biggest, most beautiful bottom in the whole of Johannesburg. He would peer over the garden wall whenever she passed and shake his head in admiration. I hoped my bottom would grow round and wobbly like *Mme*'s.

A cool breeze swept over the open stable-type door and into the kitchen, diluting the morning heat. *Mme* shifted her gaze to the kitchen clock, its faded hands edging around the small white face. '*Hau*, Miriam! Ten o'clock. Still so much to do.'

She scooped me up and pressed me to her. I loved all her big bits – her bosom, her bottom, her shiny black calves. She had no angles or peaks, just gentle hills and gradual valleys. 'Today is a special day, child. The Madam, she will come home with a new baby. We must make everything good.' *Mme* was excited, so I was too.

Sitting me down at the kitchen table, she secured a tea towel around my neck, picked a plump mango from the fruit bowl and with a small paring knife, began to strip away the thick orange skin. She did this with maddening skill, leaving scarcely a trace of sweet flesh on the peels for me to gnaw at while I waited.

The fragrance of the ripe fruit blended with the smell of caramelised sugar still hanging in the air. I breathed in a hungry breath. Mangoes were even better than jam. Then I was chasing the slippery orange ball around my plate, wrestling with it and shrieking each time I lost hold. Finally, *Mme* secured it for me with the stab of a fork, and at last I was able to sink my fingers into the flesh of my favourite fruit.

It wasn't long before all that was left of my treat was a pale, hairy pip, which *Mme* rinsed under the tap so I could add another member to my Mamelodi mango family.

'This is Baby Mamelodi,' I said, teasing the long, stringy fibres into a frizz.

Mme frowned as she wiped clean my sticky moustache. 'Babies do not have big hair when they are born. You will see the Madam's baby. Maybe it will have no hair.'

No hair? My skin prickled. I didn't like the thought of that. It sounded like a snail without its shell.

'My baby *will* have hair,' I said defiantly, putting Baby Mamelodi out on the back step to dry.

Mme shrugged.

Later I would draw on eyes, a nose and a wide-open mouth; *Mme* said babies could cry a lot. But the hair-thing kept bothering me like an annoying fly, and later, when no one was watching, I chopped off Baby Mamelodi's hair.

As *Mme* moved through the rest of her chores, I drove a cotton reel between her busy feet, watched as a tribe of ants swarmed over a blob of jam, and arranged a circle of pebbles around the giant pine tree in the garden. *Mme* said it had once been a small *piccanin* of a Christmas tree the Madam had tossed out. Now it stretched to the sky, its roots lifting the slate paving into crooked ripples.

By the time the sun was high in the sky, a honeyed smell of furniture wax filled the huge home. Bathroom basins boasted gleaming white bowls, wooden floors shone and the brass reflected all the funny faces I pulled. The house was ready.

'Everything done,' *Mme* said, sinking onto the kitchen stool

with a mug of hot tea. I leant in against her. Her skin was shiny and her uniform damp and strong-smelling.

She poured some tea into an egg cup for me, added a drop of milk and two cubes of sugar, then stirred. Now we could drink tea together like grown-ups.

I stirred again – *clink, clink, clink*. Then the room was quiet, except for the refrigerator humming in the corner like a hive of bees. I was just about to take my first sip of tea when the neighbour's dogs began to bark, then the doorbell screamed, cracking open the afternoon stillness.

I shot under *Mme*'s skirt.

'The Madam is here,' she whispered, her words steady and reassuring.

Taking my hand, *Mme* started towards the front door. 'Remember, we must not upset the new baby.'

'Celi-a!' The Madam's voice forced its way through the open louvres into the entrance hall. 'Celia!'

'Coming, Madam.'

As *Mme* turned the key, the dark panels of wood lunged towards us. I ran and hid behind the umbrella stand, a hollowed-out elephant's leg. It smelt of sour milk and damp clay. I wished I hadn't hidden there. I didn't like the leg. Somewhere in the *veld* was an elephant hobbling around on three legs.

Peering out from behind it, I saw the Madam standing in the doorway, her wide shape silhouetted by the afternoon sun.

Rita Steiner wasn't pretty like *Mme*. She had a curiously flat face, with black button eyes and purplish-coloured lips, and her big body was draped in loose skin like an elephant's slack hide. She had long brown hair, which she kept twisted in a knot at the

nape of her neck. *Mme* said it fell right to her bottom when it was let out. I wished the Madam would let it out. Every night I pulled at my frizzy black curls till tears of pain squeezed out of my eyes, but still I couldn't get my hair to reach below my ears.

The Madam rested her hand on the shiny brass knob – a smooth white hand, which didn't belong to the rest of her lumpy body.

She moved out of the bright light into the cool darkness of the house. Behind her, hidden until now, was the Master – Michael Steiner. I liked him. He was long and thin like a stick insect, with a nest of brown hair confusing his straight lines, and kind grey eyes, which smiled when he spoke. Today his eyes were red and his shoulders curled inwards, like a piece of wet paper, which had dried awkwardly.

Mme looked down. She said it was rude to look a white person in the eyes, but my eyes were very disobedient and kept creeping up.

Sunlight forced its way into the entrance hall. An African afternoon clamoured to be let in – the smell of frangipanis, the cricking of crickets, a furious blue sky. My mind began to wander to acorn houses, pet lions and painted warriors.

The wooden door banged shut. The Steiners were standing in the hallway, their arms empty. I peered out through the louvre slats. The car was empty.

No one said anything. No one moved. An awful gloom coiled itself around the room like a snake squeezing out all the air and light.

I smiled at the Master. *Mme* frowned at me.

'Bring us tea in the sun room, then get the bags out of the

car.' The Madam's voice cut a hole in the afternoon.

'Yes, Madam.'

I wondered why the Madam was walking in such a funny way. She looked as if she was balancing a ball between her legs. Once I made it all the way to the bottom of the garden with a tennis ball gripped between my knees. I didn't drop it once.

'Hello, Miriam.' Michael Steiner stepped out of the shadows and rested a warm hand on my head. I wasn't sure whether to smile or not, so I did a quick up-and-down one.

The Madam disappeared into the sun room and the Master quickly followed.

'Come, child,' *Mme* whispered, ushering me back to the sunlight and sweetness of the kitchen, and we left the entrance hall to the dark tambuti table which lived there and the wrinkly old elephant leg balancing in the corner.

For the next few days the Madam stayed upstairs in her bedroom with the blinds lowered and the thick drapes drawn. *Mme* took her meals up on a tray, and later collected them, barely touched. Once, when I followed *Mme*, the Madam complained that just seeing me sent pains through her swollen bosom and tugged at her collapsed belly. From then on I was confined to the kitchen as *Mme* moved through her jobs on tiptoe and voices were kept to a whisper.

The days which followed were slow and tedious, unless the Steiners were fighting. Then their angry words would burst open the long silences and I'd yearn for the boredom of before.

'No Michael, we won't try again. That's it! You hear me. Enough!'

'Reet, I know how you feel. I—'

'You have no idea! I can't go through it again. Not again! Two miscarriages, and now . . . now my daughter stillborn!'

So the Madam's baby had missed two carriages and was still waiting to be born.

The Madam's voice rattled and shook as if she were about to laugh, then she started to cry. 'I can't do it any more, Michael.'

I covered my ears, but still her voice found its way into my head.

'And besides, I don't really want a child. This has been about you all along. What *you* want.'

'That's unfair, Rita. You know it is. You've longed for a child as much as I have. You're hurting – I understand that. Just don't let it come between us. We can—'

'Leave me alone! Get out!'

Master Michael asked *Mme* to make up a bed for him in the spare room, and after that he and the Madam slept in separate beds. It must have been lonely. I would have hated to sleep in a big bed all on my own. What if the *tokoloshe* came?

The long hours turned into long days, and then long weeks. Darkness skulked in every corner and lived under every floorboard. It hid beneath the roof tiles and pushed down on all of us, making our minds heavy and our bodies sluggish. It was a relief to escape into the sunshine.

Then one morning, as the leaves on the trees began to fall, no longer able to hold on to autumn's gold, the Madam came downstairs, had breakfast and left for work. Life in the big house returned to the way it had once been, and no mention was ever made of the day the baby didn't come home.

CHAPTER TWO

1959

Celia

It was easy to forget what lay beyond, living in Saxonwold – the leafy, white-man's suburb, where the engines of large cars sung deep-voiced hymns, the lawns were grasshopper-green and the *thwop* of tennis balls being hit back and forth infected us all with a lazy calm.

The street where I worked was lined with jacarandas, and in spring the road was covered with a carpet of purple petals, which softened the sound of tyres on the tarmac and filled the air with the scent of summer.

I was one of the lucky ones. I had a pass permitting me to live on my employers' premises, far from the townships and compounds where smoke and corrugated iron traced a different landscape. I could walk down the quiet, shady streets, even when a police van prowling for illegal overstayers appeared from nowhere, sending other black people scattering like pigeons. I

didn't have to wake at four in the morning, wash with cold water from a communal tap, then dress by the shy light of a candle. Nor did I have to catch a train into the city, followed by several buses into the suburbs, sharing the journey with *skelms* and *tsotsis* – township thugs who harassed, robbed and raped. For eight years I had managed to escape this reality.

The best part of my day was lunchtime, that precious half-hour when I could sit on the grassy verge with the other maids and houseboys in the street, talking, laughing and sharing – a salve for the pain of far-away families and demanding madams.

One of us usually had a baby strapped to our back. Rarely it was our own; more often it was one of our white charges. Regardless, the child always seemed content, wrapped close to a mother's flesh and rocked by constant movement and chatter.

My Miriam started life in just such a way – on my back – her warm, pudgy body pressed hard up against mine. Fearful of losing my job, I had worked until just before the pains came, and returned from the hospital up north only hours after pushing my daughter into the world. I was back at work before the stream of blood sapping my strength ceased to flow.

When Miriam grew too big to be carried, she would potter about nearby, foraging for insects and treasures, and at night snuggle up close, her small body moulding itself to mine. Miriam – my big little shadow.

For a time I managed to ignore the day looming like a storm cloud on the horizon – the day I would have to send my only daughter back to the homelands. She couldn't stay in the white suburbs. The law decreed that like her brothers before her, she must return to her place of birth just outside of Louis Trichardt,

a small farming community in the Northern Transvaal. And once again I would have to suffer a separation that would leave me with a deep *donga* in my heart and an emptiness in my soul. What rhino deserts her calf? What elephant leaves her young? Can a mother turn away from her child simply because she is told to do so? So I clung to my Miriam for as long as I dared.

With time this became harder to do – juggling my job, the law of the land and the needs of my cheeky little sprite. Miriam was conspicuous; she had energy. No longer content to simply follow me round on my daily chores, she wanted to play and yearned for the company of others. Sometimes, out of frustration and panic, I would find myself chiding her for just being a child who ran and wriggled and laughed and breathed. In the end I realised I could not contain her and therefore could not keep her.

Like a beautiful song that eventually draws to a close, so the last handful of weeks passed, and a full orange moon hung once again in the sky. I lay awake wrestling with what was to come; the next day I would have book a taxi to transport my lastborn away and out of my life.

'Sorry, Madam.' I hovered behind her as she sat eating her breakfast.

Rita Steiner looked up from the newspaper she was reading.

'*Hau*, Madam. I must be for one week off work.'

She straightened, put down her paper and swallowed her mouthful of toast.

'For a week!'

My chest tightened.

'What is it anyway? Another funeral?' she said, irritation lining her words.

'Oh no, Madam. I must take Miriam to her granny in the north. She cannot stay in Joburg no more. She must go back to the homeland like my other children, or police will make trouble for me.'

The Madam shook her head. 'No Celia. I'm sorry, but *no*.' The skin on her neck had risen into fat red blotches and her bosom was heaving up and down.

I did not understand. The Madam never showed strong emotion. Her white way was always so clipped and tidy, her face careful and controlled. Only once had I spied something different, something raw and unchecked – the day her baby died.

'I can't let you go. It's a bad time. I'm just too busy at work.'

My head felt light. I swayed unsteadily as I tried to understand what this answer would mean. I should have been pleased; I could keep Miriam for longer. Yet my happiness was a clumsy bird, unable to take off. I understood there could be no happy ending for a black person who turned their eyes from the law.

Maybe the Madam saw me dig my fingers into the back of my hand; perhaps she spotted the panic of a trapped animal in my eyes, because suddenly, as if a tight belt has been loosened, her expression changed and she pulled a smile across her face. 'Later in the year, hey? You leave it with me. I'll try and make some enquiries about getting a special dispensation or something. I mean honestly, we can't send such a bright young button to a farm school, can we?'

She paused, waiting for me to answer, as if we were engaged in a real conversation. But what could I say?

'Now today I want you to polish the brass,' she said, picking up her newspaper again. 'I've bought a new tin of Brasso. And remember to cover the table with a thick layer of newspaper. See

how you've scratched the surface with one of those heavy pots?'

I nodded and turned to go.

'Oh, another thing, Celia.'

'Yes Madam.'

'I'm having guests on Saturday night so I'll need you to work late. Ask one of your friends to help if you like. Maybe Mrs Brink's maid, Sarah.' She picked up her half-eaten piece of toast. Fig jam dripped onto the plate. 'She must be here by six, and I'll need her until at least midnight.'

So life continued, with Miriam shadowing me as I scrubbed toilets, peeled vegetables, polished floors, hung washing and cleaned windows, her presence and cheerful chatter lending a welcome lightness to my day. Sometimes I sang to her as I worked, and when I was not too busy, told her the stories my mother had once told me. These were the days we both loved best. She would listen wide-eyed as I explained how the leopard got his spots, why the giraffe's long neck once became knotted, and how people in the villages went blind if the smoke from burning tambuti wood got in their eyes. These tales carried us both beyond the concrete confines of Johannesburg to the red earth and simple life of my childhood – to a magical place where we trembled when the lion roared, laughed as the monkeys fooled, and basked in the glow of the sun as it set behind the old thorn tree.

At the end of each day, around five o'clock, Miriam would listen out for the sound of a car horn announcing the Madam's arrival, then she would race outside, beating me to the gate. There she would stand, out of breath and to attention, ready to help carry in parcels and bags from the car.

Sometimes the Madam arrived home with a special surprise for Miriam – a currant bun or packet of Marie biscuits – which she would be invited to share with the Madam in the sun room.

Gradually Miriam grew less wary of my employer, and although she held on to the reserve every black child was brought up to have in the presence of a white person, I saw how much she looked forward to the Madam's homecoming – a welcome relief from the monotony of her days with only me for company.

One afternoon, as I dusted bookshelves and Miriam gulped down a long glass of lychee juice, the Madam reached into her big maroon bag and pulled out a book with bright orange letters scattered across the cover.

'Miriam, would you like to learn to read?'

I turned. My child was nodding excitedly. Fire and frost swept through me. I could not read. It would be good for her to learn . . . but I would not be the one to teach her. Up until that moment all Miriam's discoveries had been through my eyes; she had held my hand and I had led. Now that privilege was being prised from me.

'Ooh yes please, Madam, thank you!' she cried, her hungry excitement washing over the room.

And it wasn't long before her world, and so mine, burst its banks to embrace castles and crowns, Wonderland and Toad Hall.