The Black Flamingo

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DEAN ATTA

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for George

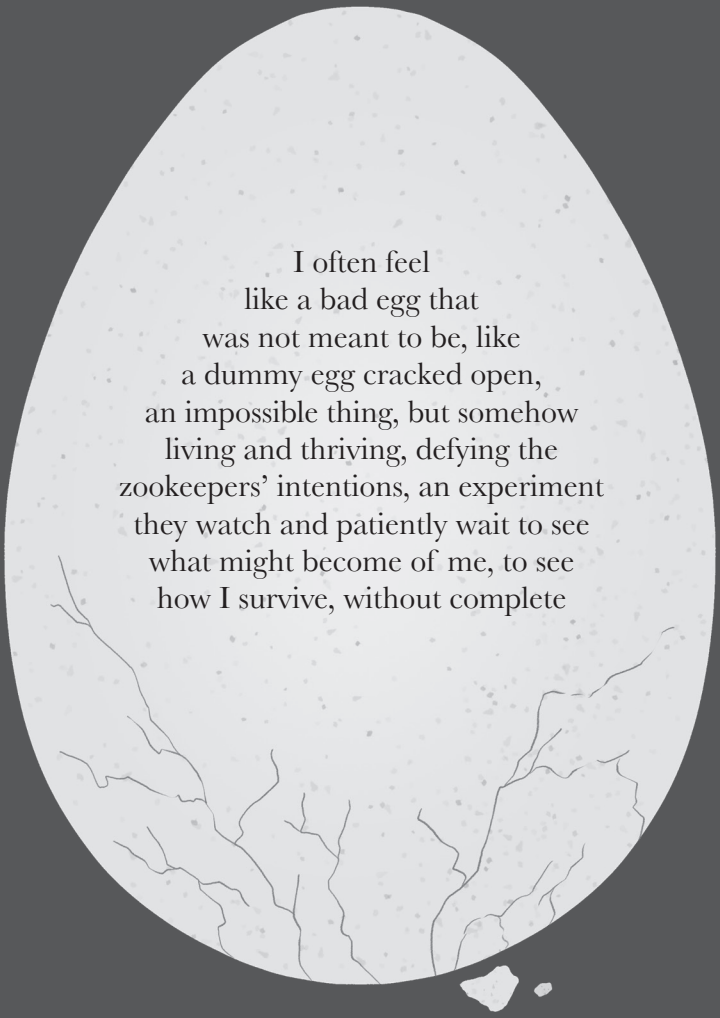
PROLOGUE

I am the black flamingo.
The black flamingo is me
trying to find myself.
This book is a fairy tale
in which I am the prince
and the princess. I am
the king and the queen.
I am my own wicked
witch and fairy godmother.

This book is a fairy tale
in which I'm cursed
and blessed by others.

But, finally, I am the fairy
finding my own magic.

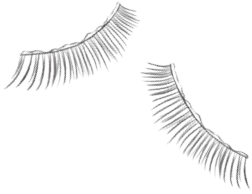
When female
flamingos lay eggs in
the zoo, the eggs are taken
from them and put into incubators.
The zoo keepers give dummy eggs
to flamingo couples to nest with, while
the zookeepers watch their behaviour
to figure out who will make the best
flamingo parents. When the incubated
eggs are almost ready to hatch they
decide which couple will be given
normal eggs and which will be
left with those that never
contained precious life.


I often feel
like a bad egg that
was not meant to be, like
a dummy egg cracked open,
an impossible thing, but somehow
living and thriving, defying the
zookeepers' intentions, an experiment
they watch and patiently wait to see
what might become of me, to see
how I survive, without complete

love.

I was born in London,
two months before the end of the world,
on 31st October 1999.

Mummy tells me,
'When we got closer to the millennium,
people thought planes would fall from the sky
and clocks in computers would go back
one hundred years. But time cannot go back.
We can only move forward.'



I am a baby, just hatched.
My only feathers are my tiny eyelashes.

Over my gurgling, I don't hear my father
telling Mummy, 'I'm too young to be a dad.'

Mummy tells me all this, when I'm old enough.

How six days before the millennium,
she burnt their Christmas dinner
and he shouted, 'You're useless!'
before throwing his plate down, turkey
stuck to the kitchen floor, and I cried,
startled by early indoor fireworks.

That was the end for them. The beginning
for Mummy and me.

BARBIES AND BELONGING

Today is my sixth birthday
and I'm hiding in my room.

Last year, for my birthday,
Uncle B bought me this
Casio watch. *Look* – it lights up
and is water-resistant. That means
I can wear it in the bath.

Last night, when Mummy was
making dinner, I snuck into
her bedroom and looked inside
her wardrobe, parting clothes
to see the back where she
always hides my presents.

I picked up the parcel, feeling
the shape of the long, thin box,
inside the silver wrapping paper.

It was definitely the right shape
to be

a Barbie!

I carefully peeled
the Sellotape at one end
and peeked underneath
the wrapping paper
at the top of the box,
to see a green logo:

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

I told Mummy two months ago,
'If you only get me one present
this year, *please* can it be

a Barbie?'

‘Michael Brown,’
calls Mummy, ‘where are you?
Come down and open your birthday present.
Your friends will be arriving soon!’

I stand at the top of our stairs
and shout down,
‘Is it a Barbie?’

Mummy comes to the bottom step,
smiling gently.
‘No, Michael, I didn’t think you were
serious. But I got you something
that I know you’ll love.’

I watch a tear
land on the wooden floor
between my Turtles slippers –

a gift from Aunty B last Christmas.

Mummy comes upstairs, embracing me
in a soft, warm, Mum-smelling hug.
‘Oh, darling, I can get you a Barbie
for Christmas, if you still want one.’

Christmas is ages away.

I’m about to cry again when the doorbell rings.

Emily, Amber, Laura, Toby and Jamal
have all come round for birthday tea
with their mums.

Callum is the last one to arrive.
His dad brings him but doesn't stay
like the mums do.

Callum and Emily don't like each other.

Callum lives in a flat with his dad.
They play video games together
and eat takeaways for dinner
and sometimes Callum gets to stay up
and watch TV all night, if his dad is out;
it must be so much fun.

Callum is mixed the same
way as me, a black dad and white mummy,
but he doesn't live with his mummy
and I don't live with my dad.

Mummy has made stuffed vine leaves,
stuffed peppers and Greek salad.
There's olives, carrot sticks, pitta bread
and hummus, which I love, and taramasalata,
which I think tastes yucky but I love the word.

I teach my friends how to pronounce it:
Ta-ra-ma-sa-la-ta. Tarama-salata.

'What is it?' asks Callum. 'And why is it pink?'

'It's fish eggs,' I say, proudly, 'and my mummy
told me it's dyed pink. I think it looks pretty.'

'But it tastes disgusting!' Callum says,
spitting it back out onto his plate. 'I *hate* pink.'
He scowls, looking straight at Emily.

Later, I blow out six candles
on my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles birthday
cake and make
my wish
for

a Barbie.

Emily's playroom is a bubble-gum-
pink mess. She has 42 Barbies;
I know because I counted. She also has
four ponies and six Jeeps for them.
Goddess of Beauty looks brand new.

When Emily shows her to me
she says, 'She's meant to be
the Greek goddess, Aphrodite,
but she looks like your mummy.'

Emily has lots of toys but this doll
captivates me, her flowing white
and blue gown and her gold headband.

I pick up some of her other Barbies
with their missing arms, legs, heads.
'Why don't they have full bodies?'

'Their heads came off when I was brushing
their hair,' Emily says, but I've never seen
Emily use a Barbie hairbrush. The one
for Goddess is still in its packet. I take it out
and gently brush her hair.

'I'm going to ask my mummy to get me
this one for Christmas,' I tell Emily, proudly.

Christmas morning,
I race downstairs to find
a present under the tree.

No wrapping paper, just
a pink bow on the box.
Mummy has bought me

a Barbie!

But she got it wrong.
It's not the Goddess
but I hug her anyway.
'Thank you, Mummy.'

This Barbie doesn't have long, dark, curly hair
or dark eyes like Mummy's,
like the Goddess.

I decide to name my doll Phoebe.

Phoebe looks like Emily.

I don't cut Phoebe's long, blonde hair
or pull off her head or any of her limbs
like Emily would.

Phoebe is not
the Barbie I wanted
but she's the Barbie I've got,
and I decide to take care of her.

Uncle B arrives in his black BMW
to pick me up to take me to Granny B's
for Christmas dinner with my dad
and the rest of the Brown family.

As I leave, Mummy grabs my shoulders
and turns me around, smiles
and puts out her hand. 'Michael, please
can you leave Phoebe here?
I need her to help me clean up.'

It's only a ten-minute drive in Uncle's BMW
but it feels alien.
I wish Mummy was coming with us.

I'm happy when we arrive, because the family
cheer and I think it must be for me.
Aunty B yells, 'Finally, we can eat!'

'First, we muss pray,' says Granny B.
Everyone bows their head.
'Faada God, we tank you dat Mikey
can be wid us dis special day, we pray
dat he is neva a stranger to you or to
dis family. In Jesus's name, amen.'

Everyone at the table repeats, 'Amen.'

My dad comes down from his bedroom.

There is a spare seat and place laid out for him
next to me. He silently piles his food up and
takes his plate back upstairs.

'Hey, Mikey – that's great!' Uncle B says,
looking around the table at everyone else.
'That's two Christmas crackers we can pull
together!'

Boxing Day.
Emily and I are playing
in my room.

She's brought Goddess Barbie with her,
who has a shaved head now.

Emily sees Phoebe and asks,
'Couldn't your mummy afford
the one you wanted?'

I feel myself getting hot.
I reach under my bed for my
black Action Man toy from Uncle B,
kept in his box, which he says is vintage.

On the front is Action Man's name,
'TOM STONE', and in his picture,
holding a big gun, he wears a green hat
and camouflage outfit.

I proudly say, 'Look what my uncle got me.
Shall we get him out?'
Emily closes her eyes to make him disappear
and says, 'He looks scary.'

A few days later, we're in Emily's playroom. Emily pulls out a brand new Barbie from her fairy backpack.
Versace Barbie.

'Versace is a fashion designer,' Emily says. 'Mummy has two dresses by Versace. Daddy bought them for her.' She pauses. 'Michael, do you have a daddy, too?'

'No, my mummy buys her *own* dresses.'

For my seventh birthday, instead of
another Barbie, I tell Mummy I want to change
my last name. I tell her I want to match her.
I want to change my surname from
his Brown to her Angeli.

Mum once told me, 'Angeli means "angel"
or "messenger".'

She kneels down and puts her hands
on my shoulders, asks, 'Are you sure?
You're very young to make these kinds
of decisions. What about Granny Brown
and Aunty Brown and Uncle Brown?
They all do such nice things for you.'

I reply, 'They do, but you do the most
nice things.'

She smiles and hugs me tightly.

I hug her back; I count ten seconds
in my head and then drop my arms
to my side but Mummy doesn't let go for
another nine seconds. Nineteen seconds
is the longest hug I have ever had.

On my seventh birthday, after my presents,
Mummy hands me a piece of paper:
'Change of Name Deed, Michael Angeli'.

But I read: 'Name Dead'
and it makes sense.

I don't want *his* name
dragging behind me like a dead dog on a lead,

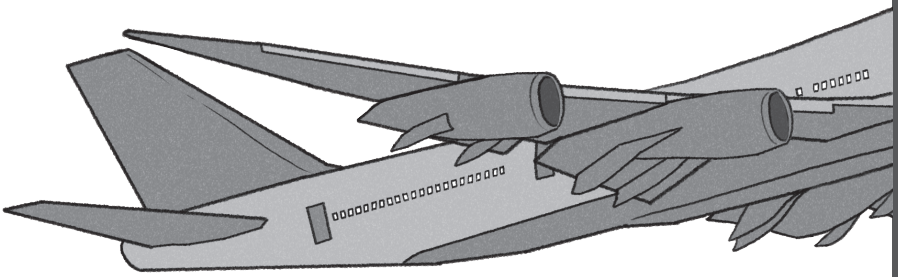
like toilet roll on the sole
of my new Kickers boots,

like a shedded snakeskin,

like a second shadow,

like the thick vapour trails
of the Red Arrows,
diesel mixed with coloured dye,

making a mark in the sky.
I don't need a plane because
with my new name I can really fly.



That night
I have a dream
in which Mummy is killed
when a British Airways Boeing 747
crashes into our house.
The left wing cuts through her
bedroom window but I survive.

Would I live with my Uncle B,
Aunty B or Granny B?
Or would I become an orphan?

Mum's gone out and her new boyfriend,
Trevor, lets me watch a horror movie
called *Nightmare on Elm Street.*

I am fascinated by the man
in the red and green striped jumper
who visits people in their dreams
and kills them. At school I describe
what he does and the glove he wears.
Knives for fingers. I swipe at the air
and children run away screaming,
except Callum, who just laughs and then
says, 'Go on, then, rip my guts out!'
Smiling and holding open his navy blue blazer.

The next day, the head teacher calls
Mum after complaints from the other parents.

'Children are having nightmares,'
she tells me when she sends me to bed
early, but I sit at the top of the stairs.

'What were you thinking?' Mum shouts
at Trevor. 'He's only seven years old.'

Trevor speaks quietly and I can't make out his reply.

‘You really don’t think you’ve done
anything wrong, do you?’ Mum laughs.
‘He’s not your son. It’s not for you
to decide what he’s old enough for.’

‘So why did you leave him with me?’ Trevor shouts.

‘Because you said you wanted to
bond with him. I didn’t think you meant
by showing him Freddy-effing-Krueger.’

I hate hearing her shout.
It makes my tummy feel funny.
But mostly I feel bad
for getting Trevor into trouble.

I am eight
when my sister,
Anna,
is placed
into the nest of her
white-wicker Moses basket,
newly hatched,
a chick
for me to help
Mum
raise
for the whole of the summer holiday.

Crying
for her thumb to suck
when I tuck her hands
under her
tiny torso.

Anna is a living doll.
A brown-skinned Barbie.
Mum lets me pick out
her outfit each morning.

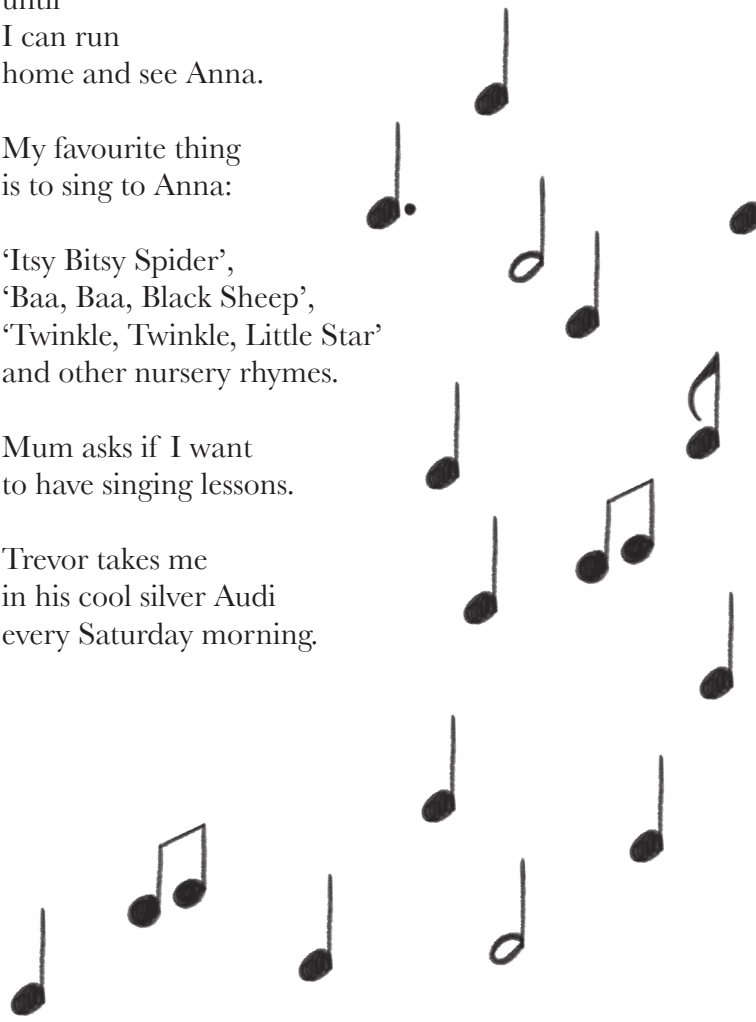
When
school starts again,
I count down the hours
until
I can run
home and see Anna.

My favourite thing
is to sing to Anna:

'Itsy Bitsy Spider',
'Baa, Baa, Black Sheep',
'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star'
and other nursery rhymes.

Mum asks if I want
to have singing lessons.

Trevor takes me
in his cool silver Audi
every Saturday morning.



Anna has a different dad
but we have the same surname.

Mum decided
and Trevor didn't argue.

In the dining hall at school,
I explain to Callum: 'Trevor is Anna's dad
but not mine.'

Callum asks, 'If you have different dads,
isn't she your *half*-sister?'

When I get home,
I ask, 'Mummy, are we only half?'

‘Don’t let anyone tell you
that you are half anything.
You and Anna are
simply brother and sister.

Don’t let anyone tell you
that she’s your half-sister.

Don’t let anyone tell you
that you are half-black
and half-white. Half-Cypriot
and half-Jamaican.

You are a full human
being. It’s never as simple
as being half and half.

You are born in Britain.
You need to make space
for what British means.

What it means to you
to be British, Cypriot
and Jamaican, too; but
it’s only for you to decide.’