

# Other Names, Other Places

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dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

*For all the menagerie.*

# Reunion

April 2005

My reunion with you made my legs shake. As I sat by your bed, I clamped one knee hard on top of the other. You called me ‘Nessie’, the name you’d given me all those years ago. I didn’t call you anything. Not ‘Genevieve’, not ‘Jenny’, not ‘Mrs Brown’. Old habits die hard.

You talked about the old days, harmless stuff. *Ayam zaman*, as they say in the Arabic songs.

‘It was a funny old time. A busy time. A lot of *living*, if that makes sense... Especially for you and your sister. Sherine. Everything so new, as it is to children.’

‘Mmm,’ I said. The sound came out tight and strangulated. A cat crying in my throat. When you spoke again, your voice was so low I could hardly hear you.

‘Sorry?’ I said, just as I digested your words, and our voices collided in mid-air as you continued.

‘Tell me how you remember it all. I want a record of those days.’

A strange resonance in your voice on the word ‘record’, as if we’d shifted into a place where sound travels differently: a cavernous hall, not a small, sunny room containing a wardrobe, a chair, a bedside table and a bed.

‘Memories don’t last forever,’ you said. ‘You’d be surprised what fades away.’

Then you closed your eyes as if to shield yourself from the reply that burst from my lips: harsh, jangling laughter. A bubble of saliva sprayed in a fine mist onto your pale blue blanket.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean to spit all over you.’

A grimace passed over your face.

‘Sorry,’ I repeated, my face turning hot. ‘I’ve still got your letter,’ I offered tentatively in the pause that followed, expecting you to ask which letter, but you just nodded slowly, keeping your eyes shut.

When I thought back to those days, it was the image of the fish, of all things, that niggled away at me. A big silver fish lying on a chopping board. Mama screaming and screaming. A doctor dragging her along by her hair... Me and Sherine aged four and eight (or were we five and nine?) crouched by the door. Sherine fumbling to cover my eyes and ears, saying ‘Shhh, shhh,’ like it was me making that racket. You huddled in the living room with our father, whispering, ‘Don’t worry, don’t worry.’

I wanted to ask you what really happened that day, but I didn’t. It was only a riddle, not the main catastrophe. Certainly not life and death.

We talked about other things. Your children’s children: the neat symmetry of your daughter’s two boys and your son’s two girls. Sherine’s job; my lack of one. Your time in America and my time in Japan. We kept our discussion of my parents limited to the ungarnished facts.

‘When did your mother go back to Tunisia?’

‘Eleven years ago – it was eleven years in March.’

‘And you said he’s semi-retired...?’

We talked wars, wildfires, earthquakes and climate change, not the things that had ripped you out of our lives sixteen years ago. My *I forgive yous* crumbled in my mouth. Who did I think I was to forgive you? I was a bystander, not the victim. And anyway,

you didn't look like someone who was waiting to be forgiven. Your eyes were calm, steady, observant. Something unknowable in them. Had it always been there or had time and distance introduced it? You were different from how I'd remembered (or imagined) you.

Relieved of this burden of forgiveness, I felt my diaphragm unclench, and I said, 'So where should I begin this record, then?'

'Start wherever you want,' you said with a little laugh. 'It's your record. What about the day you arrived in London – do you remember that?'

Almost before the words were out of your mouth I replied, 'I remember the kitchen but not the aeroplane...'

# Part I: Exile

1979–1989

# Arrival

I remember the kitchen but not the aeroplane. As if Mama teleported us from Tunis to Finsbury Park. We materialised in a kitchen on the top floor of a dark house, where a strange man greeted us. He had a moustache. He looked like a magician. He said, in a voice that made the air vibrate, ‘Welcome, my darlings.’

‘Who’s that man?’ I whispered to Mama, trying to hide behind her. Laughing, she said, ‘It’s Baba, of course – don’t be so silly, say hello to him properly.’

Whether or not because of the strangeness of this meeting, we never learned to call him ‘Baba’ or anything else. To us he was always just ‘That Man’ or ‘him’.

‘I’ve missed you, I’ve missed you!’ he said, gathering me and Sherine into his arms, pressing his face into our hair. He smelt of perfume – Aramis 900, I learned later – and orange peel. The orange smell was familiar: it meant illness, a cough or a cold, anxious voices saying, ‘Eat, *ya Susu*, eat,’ fingers forcing squirry fruit through clenched teeth. The Aramis 900 was a foreign language I didn’t speak yet.

I’m told it was February 1979. Sherine was seven, I was three. Sherine and Nesrine; our parents called her Nunu and me Susu back then. Waiting for something to happen, we sat at the kitchen table, me nodding off, hypnotised by the chessboard pattern on the red and blue lino floor, Sherine upright and patient. ‘What an



incredibly poised little girl,' someone said about her once. 'What does "poised" mean?' I asked you, then went running off to Mama in a huff: 'It's not fair – why does everyone think Sherine's so great? It's only because she's older than me.'

Under the dingy light, Mama and the orange man stood by the cooker raising their voices, pointing at a frying pan.

Years later, Sherine told me Mama had tried to fry frozen beef burgers in vanilla ice cream, thinking it was butter.

'So typical of him,' I said. 'Lazy fucker. Why was she the one making dinner that night? Couldn't he be arsed to do it just that one time?'

'I know, I know,' she said. 'And he wonders why she left him.'

Pretending even then, both of us. Old enough to cover my own eyes and ears by then.

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Is this when it began?

Our first Christmas in London. A party at Mrs Kowalski's – she was our landlady who lived downstairs. Carols on the cassette player; German, someone said. She was German, married to a Polish man. The smell of her baking wafting through the house. Cinnamon and marzipan and something else, hot and spicy. Dark red liquid like a jewel. I saw it boiling on the stove before Mrs Kowalski shooed me out of the kitchen: 'Nesrine, go to the living room or I'll trip over you! So small!'

Someone held out a Christmas cracker, and I toppled backwards off Mrs Kowalski's sofa trying to pull it. As if I was drunk. 'We used to give you and Sherine sips of our drinks when you were little,' Mama told me once. 'It was funny watching you get giddy and silly.' That was back when they drank. Before That Man went on his trip to Mecca.

‘Ah, she’s so sweet!’ exclaimed a man as he picked me off the floor and averted my tears with a nothing-to-cry-about voice. ‘Look at those curls. Like a little dog.’

‘He called me a dog!’ I whispered to Sherine, hurt and embarrassed.

‘No, Susu, he said “doll”. He’s being nice to you.’

She wasn’t there any more when I needed the toilet and went upstairs, wanting to go on familiar territory. Not sure yet what kind of toilet I needed. Looking for someone to take me in case it wasn’t the kind I could manage on my own.

‘Your mother’s gone to the corner shop to buy lemonade,’ said Marjorie, the old Jamaican woman from next door, stroking my neck when I passed her by the stairs and tugged at her dress saying, ‘Mama?’

Upstairs was quiet and lonely, like a stranger’s house. On the edge of scary. Shadows that seemed to have teeth. Footsteps that didn’t seem mine. Dark except for one light, in our living room, which doubled up as a bedroom. Soft, warm, orange light. Voices talking in English. One talking, one laughing: a low, throbbing laugh that made my heart shake, like music pumping out of a passing car.

‘This is how we do it in England,’ the talking voice said. ‘This is called...’ Something. A word beginning with M. A word I didn’t know.

I peeped around the door and saw two people sitting on one of the yellow-blanket beds. A hand holding a bunch of green leaves tied in a red ribbon. Two faces leaning in towards each other, their necks doing something strange – a sinuous, wrapping motion as if they’d joined together, become a snake with two heads, while the hand with the green bunch pressed itself against the wall.

I went back downstairs and wet myself on Mrs Kowalski’s sofa.

‘Why didn’t you get someone to take you to the toilet?’ said Mama when she reappeared and found me sitting there, sodden and

stinking. ‘Why did you just lift your leg and go on yourself like a dog in the street? What kind of people will they think we are?’

‘I saw a snake upstairs, Mama,’ I said, trying to impress upon her the extenuating circumstances.

‘Snake? What snake? Don’t be so silly – they don’t have snakes in England!’

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And then came the fish, weeks or months later. Don’t ask me when – I was too young for ‘when’. It’s the screaming I remember, and the way the fish lay mangled on the red wooden chopping board, which they kept for years afterwards. The stench of it filled my nostrils; a trail of blood led across the floor to Mama, who was hunched with one hand cradling the other, screaming. A swivelled fish eye glared out from the mess of scales and bones, as if it had witnessed an unspeakable crime. Sherine and I were crouched in the hallway, her hands fluttering over my head, breath hot and hoarse on my face: ‘Shhh, Susu, shhh.’

It was dark when it happened. The lights went on, then off, then on again, as if Mama’s screams had activated them. You were in the living room with That Man – our father. Hamdi. I think you were standing by the row of windows, whispering. His face was grey. It looked like one of his shirts before Mama ironed them. You were comforting him: ‘Don’t worry, Hamdi, don’t worry... be fine, be fine...’

No one was comforting Mama. She was alone with the doctor who came with a black leather bag and tangled his tongue around her name: ‘No, Bouthaina! You have to stop this now, Bouthaina!’

There was a kind of spittiness in his voice. I didn’t know the word ‘contempt’ at that age, but I could hear it. Mama had

been naughty. She'd misbehaved. She'd done something wrong, with the fish, and now she had to be punished. That's why the doctor dragged her along the corridor by her hair, which was very long back then. Almost down to her waist. Like Rapunzel's but black. Puffy, when she forgot to smooth it down with black seed oil. She cut it all off soon after the fish.