

Chapter One

John

Say... au revoir but not goodbye; let me whisper I love you. With joy we'll meet again, hopefully not in sorrow. So good night my love, the heavenly birds have also promised to meet us with all the joy in the world tomorrow. [But] it was so heavenly to hold you again in my arms under that silvery moon beneath the palms in Campground Road, Rondebosch, which turned into handsome pines.

16 March 1992 John Singh

I never expected to meet someone quite like Bibi, a gentle soul with clear hazel eyes in a face that spoke many stories. It was around the time the queen of England visited and celebrated her 15th birthday with a "black tie invitation only" event in the City Hall in Cape Town and Milan, Bibi's brother, also my friend, was invited. Through him I got totally ensconced with Bibi's sister Tia's wedding, and got to learn everything about the Muslim culture. My heart did a cartwheel the first time we met and I stared after her as the sweet smell of her hair escaped when she swung around. We were not allowed in each other's company without her brother Milan present. Bibi dutifully lowered her gaze every time but it was too late, the deed was done. My heart knew it belonged to her from that day on and a myriad of songs have since found its meaning for me as her name resided over them all.

She was educated, well-bred with, like me, an immigrant Indian father but she was Muslim and I was Sikh. Ours was a love that could not

be but my heart sang Bibi's songbook with every move that I made. Milan unsuspectingly became the go-between and friend, whilst a heart-to-heart connection developed between us through hungry eyes, and the dialogue of lyric in song. I stood out amongst the Salt River community even minus the turban having gained a reputation as a 'bit of a Casanova' it seemed. I found this totally bizarre but useful as it kept suspicion off Bibi.

Strangely, despite the obvious, nobody ventured to question directly my culture or religion which made me fear the magnitude of the taboo in a union between Muslim and Sikh/Hindu, as it commonly gets coupled for some inexplicable reason. I was dying for the opportunity to say to them that Sikh simply means 'seeker of knowledge' and is universal in its belief that all humans are equal before God who created the universe and all faiths; wanting desperately to quell their fear of the unknown and unfounded. I wanted a future for people like Bibi and myself and others to come.

We met in Salt River towards the end of the war. It was all red dust and industrial, boasting a railway junction the size of The Company Gardens but it also had the vibrant throb of a mixed community of predominantly Muslim Coloured and Indian living in rows of semi-detached cottages with a shop on almost every corner.

On one such corner stood the imposing structure of Mirza Singh's Ginger Beer factory, our family business of beverage manufacturing.

I loved it as much as I loved music and my Baby Brownie camera I got for my 18th birthday.

So, on a typical day when the sun fell on the two massive brown wood and steel doors to the factory, the boilers started with a hum at first before kicking into action, the vats were filled, the distillery and lab counter were opened and the long fluorescent tubes of light would pop to life one by one. The first delivery truck would be ready to drive out with a full load even before the work siren had started for the labourers lazily emerging from their cottages at the rear of the building. On the top landing of the mezzanine stood my eldest sister Maggie, short for Margaret, erect in her starched white coat with silver implements in the breast pocket, overseeing the operation whilst I would be immersed in the task of manufacturing.

We were all on the balcony of Pope Street the day Bibi's father's funeral procession passed on its way to the burial grounds. Respectfully, all ladies dropped their embroidery and teacups, rose, and moved to the edge where they gazed down upon the white shroud of Indaad Husain. In the distance, we caught sight of Bibi in white Salwar Kameez bidding her last salaam to him. My heart went out to her as Maggie said, "That poor girl's life is over now that her Bhappaji is gone. The mother is blind and the sisters fight like feral cats amongst themselves, I heard. They had no respect for the man, tut tut, treated him like a stranger in his own home".

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Heathfield was dry, dusty and sandy and hot most days, where I was born and lived, before the ginger beer factory existed. I was the only son of Mr Pye as he was fondly known, and as Sikhs we subscribed to an Ayurvedic way of life and belief. We turned it into a business when we realised that people here lacked the knowledge of natural healing through herbs.

The Maidstone Road shop had a little chalk- board outside on two legs that read 'Natural remedies mixed inside for every complaint while you wait'. Inside the shop were my sisters. People would come in, be diagnosed and a herb potion was mixed and dispensed. Outside the shop a mass of Morning Glories on a virile creeper covered the little outside toilet building and trailed over the sandy dry kerbside, and across the street was the barbed wire fence to the railway line. Through the night and early morning, the puff of engines and long toots of the trains could be heard as they swished by like lightning, screeching steel wheels on silvery smooth steel track. Further along on Roscommon Road stood the main family house, produce store and stables.

I was just a young boy of twelve when already I was the wagon boy. My job was to tend to the horses, their feed and fodder and work the vegetable and herb fields. This I am reminded of daily, when I look at my flattened earlobe and broken jaw. I was on a delivery to a nearby farm with a cart too heavily loaded on a rocky road. It was getting late and I pushed the horses too hard. I came off the seat as the cart overturned,

driving the steel wheel over my head. Mr Pye said, "Can you hear me all right?" I nodded my head and life carried on from there.

Ma was keen for me to do more at school but Mr Pye maintained he needed me in the business, so I could only go as far as standard one or two, but I was not pressured to wear the turban. Sikhs are better known as the 'warriors of India'. Whether this has to do with their fierce tempers or that most of them enlisted in the British Army, I cannot say, except that we were strong on tradition and values.

My childhood still was the happiest most carefree time of my life. The best times were the days when, at a whim and just a whisper of a trip to the beach would round up the entire neighbourhood's children with their buckets and spades and beach balls on the back of my Bedford truck. It was a habit started that I would not trade for the world. I was happiest behind the wheel singing, or swimming far out into the ocean until I was fatigued enough to float back to beach for photos with my Baby Brownie.

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The glamour and romance of the forties is something you have to have experienced to know what it was like. The magic of film and fashion influenced every aspect of our lives.

I saw Bibi again after a short period of mourning following the death of her father and wow, was I surprised. Up Coleridge Road trotted this elegantly dressed lady in woollen costume with handbag, hat and court shoes. *Bibi has just grown up* I thought, confident and more beautiful than ever.

Mrs Phoenix the neighbour suddenly appeared on her stoep from nowhere, put a cupped palm to her face, screwed up her eyes against the scorching sun, and craned her neck to see what would unfold from the scene ahead of the coasting convertible car with the Sikh at the wheel and Mr Husain's Bibi coming up the street without Milan, her chaperone. Bibi motioned for me to stop, said "Hello" aloud and whispered quickly *tomorrow at Die Slaweboom same time* and walked on up with a cheery "Afternoon, Mrs Phoenix. Have you seen Milan perhaps? John is here looking for him".

There was a brilliant moon out the night I waited for her under the milk wood tree, from long before the appointed time in the afternoon when there was still a scorching sun, but there was no sign of Bibi on that particular night; only a fortnight later when we both entered a mosque in Wynberg and took a solemn oath of love and loyalty. It felt natural and brought a sense of peace and resignation.

All hell broke loose when the sun had set over Salt River and Bibi never arrived home for frikadel, yellow rice and gem squash and John Singh was also missing at the supper table for moong and tomato.

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The headlights of my Bedford truck fell weak and yellow on the dark of night on the rocky dirt road to Doringhoogte. "I hope you are right about this, Bibi. What if she turns us away?" I said. We drove up the long path to the homestead where the door was always open and the water on the boil, just in case. Ouma was the district 'Vroedvrou' (midwife).

The damp fragrant air of mint and lavender told us we had put enough distance between them and us. Ouma's face showed no surprise at all when Bibi said, "Ouma this is Quadir". Just concern, as she asked, "Have you had something to eat?"

It was a long and contemplative night of mixed emotions, in a separate room in Ouma's house for me, with an underlying feeling of pride and glee that Bibi was finally mine. Yet, an impending dread settled like sediment in the pit of my stomach. This was what Bibi wanted, it was all her idea, but together we will see it through. *Ce Se Ra Se Ra* What will be will be, I resolved, and took to the helm of my ship. The odds were many, but we vowed to see it through to the end.

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I looked across the room to where Bibi sat, thinking. I could tell her that there was good reason for all that's happened and that we were not all the same, but the truth is, she never took the trouble to know and understand me that way; instead I was persecuted for being different. But I loved her still and now it is too late, for I was dying. The divide between us was impossible to cross when so much has been left unsaid for so many years.