Chapter Three

The Child

Sometimes we are forced into the situations in which we find ourselves and our lives are shaped around the consequences of our actions in how we deal with what we are presented. Some of them are good, and others not so good but then, 'we are just the players in a passing variety show called life'. This was John Singh's philosophy on life without which I doubt he would have been able to live out the latter part of his life the way he did.

I recall a line I read somewhere that says, 'a letter is proof that the life had indeed existed'. When I found and read a letter of farewell from my father to us all, months after his passing, it unsettled me and sparked a curious need to uncover the real significance behind a man so wise yet gravely unfortunate.

They say the audience at your funeral is a sure indication of how well or badly the life was lived. All I could think of when a remark was passed among the crowd at his funeral was how solitary an existence he was banished to for so many years. He never showed a sign of bitterness, malice or anger toward anyone, regardless of the disregard or disgust at his utterings or writing. I have even seen him violently brushed aside at times. But then I also remember at the same time how gleefully he could feed the birds in the morning, salute the sun, heat the meals of

vagrants in the microwave when Mama wasn't watching, or chuckle with rosy cheeks and twinkly eyes at something humorous in the newspaper he would entertain himself with. He was no saint, but he was the 'Captain of the unsinkable ship called 'The Singh Family' he would say.

I was there when he died, when he held my gaze and seemed to say, 'You do know I must now be gone but there is still so much I want to say,' but we were not alone. The funny thing about funerals, I have noticed, is that people feel more inclined to speak the things they would otherwise not say, and inevitably whatever it is would best have remained unsaid. Just as I thought I knew everything about John and Bibi, after having witnessed a heated argument once like no other before it; when John blurted out a secret to me in retaliation to Bibi, whom he complained had become 'mean and antagonistic at a time when he was on his last and defenceless'.

A penny dropped with all ten of us when news broke after Bibi's funeral, that they had eloped. We stared at one another's expressions of not total surprise but realisation as to why there were never any wedding photos, or why they never celebrated a wedding anniversary, why we never knew of an anniversary or wedding date. And of course, the answer to why, whenever we asked, we were vehemently dismissed and reminded to know our place and show respect. It was no big deal to any of us then as it

was after all 2002 and neither did it affect the high regard, love and respect we had for our parents. I daresay I can fully understand their reasoning during 1942, given the circumstances and the fuss over religion and class and the furore it must have caused. Not the same can be said for the other secret that unfortunately, I was bound to carry for as long as they were alive, a secret I shared with my siblings, months only after they had both departed, so that the responsibility was no longer mine alone.

I could write another book on my life as a child on that block where we lived but, looking back over those times I could say the real wealth was not in that which made up the physical person "John Singh", but rather the cargo on board the 'unsinkable' ship.

Bibi's frustration grew as the babies kept coming, year after year, but together they weathered and navigated all storms, taking the best possible course.

John's mother died around that period also, after a long illness. We used to visit her briefly some Sunday afternoons before her death. These visits held no fascination for any eight-year-old amongst only adults speaking in a language other than English. And so, I invented a game for Amber and myself to play whilst everyone gathered around large cooking pots dragged on the smooth heavy steel platform of a coal burning stove, positioned in the centre of a kitchen with blue/green walls, and hardly enough windows for ventilation. Clouds of dense smoke used to

balloon around a corner and outside the back door, the minute cook lifted the lids on these steaming pots. Taking Amber (short for Ambreen) by the hand I would slip around that corner into the backyard around the outside lavatory with the cascading morning glories and down to the street, where we crossed to the barbed wire fence on the opposite kerbside along the railway line. There, in gathered taffeta Sunday dresses, puffed sleeves and crocheted lace ankle socks in black patent buttoned up shoes, we would lie flat on our tummies with ears to the ground waiting for the sound of the approaching train. Once it came we would jump up excitedly to shout and wave at everyone hanging out the windows. They waved back, and smiled at us for as long as the train remained in sight, before snaking around a bend. Other than that, we set to making daisy chains to pass the time until we were summoned for tea.

We drove to the funeral with Papa in his truck. Mamma made sure we had our cushions and bonnets with us but she did not come along. We passed the scrapyard on the right before the unending dark heavy cement wall of the cemetery came into sight, stretching for miles with iron pedestrian gates at intervals. He parked the truck across from one of these gates, two wheels up on the kerbside in front of a fish and chips shop, and took us across through the gate into the expanse of a large open area.

I had never seen anything like it. Loads of tree trunks or logs were stacked and piled high in a square like a game of pick up sticks, called a funeral pyre. Right at the very top was the white -clad body of Ma. The sombre mood of all gathered around started playing on my mind. I was frightened and clung to the edge of Papa's coat sleeve as I watched someone in a white turban go up and light this pyre at the corners with a flaming torch whilst my stomach somersaulted. The stench of burning flesh and singed hair later set me to tears and I started feeling faint. Papa led both of us back out to the truck, laid me down on my cushion and covered me with his coat between my vomiting through the open door of the truck on to the red dry earth. Someone came with some water but he stayed, rubbing my back so I could fall asleep. He was singing my lullaby *So ja, so ja, raj kumari So ja*, meaning, 'Go to sleep, princess, go to sleep my precious one, in your sleep sweet dreams will come'. Yes, he never left but little did we know at the time the serious effect that witnessing a real cremation had on my well-being as a little girl.

Through the writing process I discovered the reason and when exactly my sleepwalking started. It lasted more than a couple years, I remember. Papa claimed to have cured me, but Mama said, "Rubbish, she just outgrew it". I quietly disagreed. It was he who would wake up to check my whereabouts at round 3.0 a.m. in the dark of morning, carry me back, feed me a strong dose of

Ovaltine and sing my lullaby to me until I slipped back into peaceful slumber. That was just her attitude or opinion on anything he said or did anyway and he would not argue. She sets the rule and we toe the line. All Papa would say always is 'Peace Bibi, let's keep the peace.'

Peace was short-lived once General Smuts, the man Papa hailed as a great statesman because of an environmental health issue, I think, had served his term and the Nationalist Government came into power with an apartheid policy of ruling the majority in South Africa. I was sixteen, at high school, keen on dance and music and gallivanting with Papa to the farm, bunking Muslim School, driving over Chapman's Peak to Hout Bay in his truck, singing at the top of our voices.

Apartheid affected me not at all until the introduction of the Population Register and the Group Areas Act, and changed my Sundays, but that was only the start. Sundays were the days when Papa's best friend, Mr Ruckewitz and his daughter Barbara visited in the morning, bringing Kitke Loaves, Raisin Bread, Mosbollekies and cake for afternoon tea. Theirs was a friendship from childhood in Heathfield. Mr Ruckewitz was also the owner of the Lakeside Bakery and Barbara and we looked forward to our playing on a Sunday morning. All that had to come to a halt as well our times with Mr Van der Westhuizen, the mechanic, and his wife and children. Who knew the worst was still to come?

Writing *The Goodbye Letter* has left me with a feeling of betrayal that I cannot shake off, at the discovery of truth, but it has also left me a feeling of immense satisfaction. I had underestimated the challenges I would face in the writing of this long research essay. The process took me in another direction than planned. What started out as being about episodes in the life of my father John, turned out to be their story: the relationship of John and Bibi.

The easiest was conceptualising it from the seed that was already there with the letter and other materials at hand, and going on from there to creating the abstract, and writing the proposal. The difficulty arose firstly with the interviews I had with elders in a family where it takes little to rekindle the underlying tensions of old feuds on both sides of the family. Another was the time it needed between writing the parts where I found I needed space before going on with the next, due to the personal nature of the text.

They say memory itself is subjective and an unreliable doorway into the truth, but the memory and character of John Singh will live on in *The Goodbye Letter* even as we say Au Revoir but not goodbye.