

Zp DALA

Extract from *What About Meera* (2015)

Chapter Eight: Ashes and Shit.

Into the pregnant heat, the fat flies feasted. A spreading swirl of sludge wound its way down a grassy embankment, threatening to slip and slide into a rainbow coloured marquee. Grey-green-brown, the relentless slide defeated stones and boulders, continuing its lava spreading action in the best way that gravity would allow. It whispered naughtily into the curtain-air all its secrets, the sickly sweet gossiping of human excreta. It carried its message into hawking lungs and turning stomachs. It said hissing, "This wedding smells of shit."

It was a day of angry heat. The start of a Durban December, the time of year for haters. Not a wedding season. A sweating season where noon times found fat ladies lying on cane loungers, or lying on floors covered with the cool redness of cow dung. Again, again and again the whispers sat on the back of flies.

This wedding smells of shit.

Meera and the Good Doctor. It was their wedding day. A happy Sunday morning of ritual. A moist, sweaty morning of fragrant fires, followed by the spiciest of noon day lunches. The cess-pit had chosen today to overflow.

Perhaps overworked by all the shittings of a hive of guests, who had arrived in crowded buses from farms, cities and across the oceans. Eating their way into the pre-wedding rituals, watching and waiting like buzzards for a moment of extraordinary. They had seen it all before.

In the ancient Vedic ritual, watch the coy bride rubbed down with a thick paste of turmeric, sandalwood and mustard oil, to make her skin fair, before which she was frog-marched to the place where two roads collided. She kneels on the dusty Earth, her mother covers her eyes with a pattern of sari fabric, and she digs her bride hands into a hole in the ground. A hole recently dug by a cousin with a hoe, and then a hole rapidly filled with water from a brass cup.

And into the hole three things are thrown. A coin, a betel nut, a gold ring. And the blindfolded bride swishes her hands around the mud in the hole, the thick chocolate sauce, surrounded by a protective battalion of aunts and grannies all keening songs into the virgin air. Will she find the coin first, or will it be the betel nut?

The anticipation grew. The drumming of the *dhol*, an oval shaped percussion instrument with tapered ends and a sound that echoed over hills, called out with expectancy. It grew wilder and faster in its drumming as the bride grew hotter or colder. It took on a life of its own, its faithful drummer, a crazy woman in a dark green sari, twisting and turning and swinging her wild, open air as she banged out songs that made no sense.

Everyone knew, and every woman accepted. You always found the gold ring last. All this guess work must be done before the sun set and night times were ushered in. Otherwise, there would be Bad Times Ahead.

The significance of this all on the altar of acceptability is that if a bride found the coin first, her husband would surround her with riches, if she found the womb-like betel nut first, then she would bear many fair children, and if she found the elusive ring first, of course – then she would be loved. You always find the gold ring last. Or never at all. That's just the way things are.

Meera's knees teased her six year old child scabs as they found their connection with the Mother that is Earth. Kneeling she listened to the moaning voices of the wall of women, who stood like soldiers to block out the evil eye, and she tried to make sense of their songs. In a dialect that was neither Hindi, neither English nor Zulu, but a twang cooked-up-into-a mixture of all three, the woman sang stories of the length of the bridegroom's turban cloth.

They swung their hair, and danced to drums. Women gone wild. Before the sun sets. They munched on raw chick peas, and sipped on local milky brews. In a collective swoon, they broke their bonds. Just this once. Just this crazy opportunity to let it all hang out. No men, no priests, no beady-eyed mother-in-laws. Happiness ran their cups over, and allowed their madness to slip out of sari blouses, to jiggle their fatty rolls, to let their tightly wound metres of cloth fall softly to the ground.

The sun had set. Meera had fished around in the mud. With sweaty armpits that drained downwards into the tightly knotted piece of string around her waist that kept her turmeric coloured sari in its rightful place, she grew and grew into an anxious bundle. Suddenly the dancing and the gyrating wild women had stopped, and silence descended on the air that smelt of late blooms of jasmine flowers.

Bougainvilleas in the bushes preened their showy colours and their million ear buds swivelled in the direction of a bride who found nothing but mud.

"But I swear I put them in there," a high pitched cousin pleaded with the flashing mynah eyes of the banshee women. They tightened their circle. An ill omen, a bad luck. The sun had set, and the bride had found nothing in the thick soup of mud. They shook their heads, they tutted and muttered. Nothing at all.

Meera's red-nailed fingers, thick with the glove of sugar-cane growing mud appeared out of the hole like a claw held out for all to see. Nothing. Nothing grasped in its muddy contents. Not even the betel nut, an obvious sphere, a fertile little nut-job.

Meera's mother wrung her hands, and looked around like a frightened toddler, waiting for the old ladies to stop munching on betel leaves, and to profess their remedy with red stained mouths. Surely, there must be a remedy for this bad luck. There existed remedies for everything. Old, fat women twisted red stained mouths and shifted their bulk away from bad luck brides.

They twisted their ratty grey plaits around their fingers, they spat at the hole in the ground. No remedy indeed. Let her take her chances. Maybe the Gods will favour her tomorrow at her wedding. Maybe if she bowed lower into the mud, she would be saved the ill omens, the bad luck and the premonitions of disaster. We shall see.

Afterwards, after she had failed the ritual test, this night before she was to be wed, came alive with a cacophony of wild banshees, clapping their hands in glee. Shaking their hair do's. Not a typical wedding. A wedding begun with ill omens. And a wedding that would unfold with even uglier, even smellier, iller omens. They keened their desire to watch drama unfold. And drama did.

The septic tank on the farm had overflowed. And no one could do anything about it. The thick fetid sludge had done a slow waltz towards the marquee decorated with marigolds. A million marigolds. So thick, so pungent the smells of shit and marigolds, that Meera would never again smell marigolds without thinking of shit. Nor would she smell shit without thinking of marigolds.

And she would always carry the basket of marigolds and shit in her memories of the day she became someone's wife.

In a cream Mercedes Benz, decorated with.... marigolds, the Good Doctor arrived. A procession of Mercedes Benz's, an army of haughty well-dressed entourage, hooting feebly their arrival. Reluctant hooting, as if they would rather not be there after all. The bridegroom sat crunched up in the backseat, for too many people wanted to squeeze into the bridal car. Too many people wanted importance.

He unfolded his folded knees and creaked from a frog squat and tried to leap from the car door into an agile stand. He failed. He slipped underfoot and landed flat on his ass on the hard concrete driveway, surrounded by the guests who had assembled for the ceremony that would welcome him. He blinked and he blinked up into the laughing sun, and adjusted his glasses that had slid off a sweaty nose, and felt around like a blind man for the red turban that had slipped off his head and landed in a pile of rotting banana peels.

His not too long turban fabric unwound itself, and his anxious uncles grabbed at the fabric from all directions. Hands and hands and hands pulling his ungainly body back into standing, re-doing the red turban into a semblance of decency, dusting his white suit, blackened already by the dust and the dirt.

He feigned nonchalance and puffed out his chest, standing like a stuffed pigeon as the women from the bride's family turned brass platters filled with flowers and lit lamps around his pointy head. Welcome, our Prince. We give you this warm hello. Take our daughter away.

They blessed him with their songs. They blessed him with their camphor smelling adorations. They prayed for his long life and virility. The sludge from the septic tank decided to gate-crash the ritual, and in the middle of all the blessings a thick stain of sewage leaked menacingly, looking for a hole in which to drown.

The gaudily dressed women interrupted their throaty welcoming songs, and began a hopping dance, lifting brightly coloured silk saris and revealing thick unshaven calves. Bedroom slippers gave up their ghosts, hastily worn underneath the all forgiving saris, to prevent bunions, and anyway no one could see down there. The newly arrived importance of the bridegroom's party came undone by the bisection of a line of sewage. Important rich people who lived on Millionaires Row and who drove only Mercedes Benz's ducked and dived away from its path. Meera's father stood, drowning in a too large navy blue suit and gave up attempts at apologising to the wedding guests. He leaned against a marquee pole with a nauseous stomach watching people jump and fly all over the place.

The welcoming ritual forgotten, the bridegroom and his special-rich family placed crumpled hankies near their mouths and entered the wedding marquee.

Again assaulted by a thick web of smells, of the sweat of humanity in a boiling December, of cheap aftershave and Bryll Hair Pomade, of babies who had vomited, of smelly socks, of bad breath, of mothball scented old sari's that only got taken out of wooden chests once every five years, of disgust and hunger and keen gossiping – all rolled into a fat, thick orb that sat in the wedding marquee like a planet.

The bridegroom shifted from foot to foot and waited in the thick of things for the loud music of the Indian horn, the wedding instrument, the *shennai* to begin its high pitched announcement of his handsome arrival.

He thrived in the attention of many envious eyes, and perhaps in the two whiskies he had hastily drunk before he got there, and walked like a Moghul prince down the make-shift aisle, with his

brother on his left hand and his sister on his right. They held him upright. They knew their brother well.

Once safely stowed upon a rickety stage, decorated by banana leaves poached from neighbouring farms, the bridegroom soon forgot how he fell on his ass, and he felt important and special as the eyes of all the people looked appreciatively in his general direction. So handsome. So tall. So fair. Doctor.

His mother, Anjali lurked in circles. In the white sari of the widow, she made her circuitous movements around the bridal altar, looking beady-eyed at the drooping banana leaves, the sacred fire, the rice and the sweets and the bright Christmas tinsel that dressed the altar into nuptial welcomes.

She sniffed the air. She smelled the shit. She smelled the low caste farm people that were tying their unwashed bodies to her son, and she fainted away into a white bony heap.

Women of all shapes and sizes surrounded her supine form, raising her legs immodestly till her fuzzy legs were on show for all to see. Smelling salts, perfumed hankies, water in greasy glasses, and her doctor children all kept their distance. They didn't flutter at her with stethoscopes and vials, miraculously materialised out of invisible black doctor bags. They left her.

In her swoon. They left her. Revived finally by pinches, she gasped yet another shitty breath, and found herself stuffed into a waiting plastic chair, from where she sat with curses in her eyes, watching the marriage evolve. So many ill omens in one hot, humid wedding. So many.

As the Good Doctor bridegroom sat on the stage and the rituals began, the rituals that cleanse the man before the bride is allowed near him, Meera sat alone in an tortoise looking red 1972 VW Beetle, waiting to be summoned. Parked at the outermost end of the wedding marquee, nobody would have guessed that cushioned in the shell of the tortoise car sat a bride who knew nothing of fainting and fallings and shit.

Hidden from all eyes, away from the evil eye, she shifted uncomfortably in her seat, the scratchy tinsel and garish gold ornaments tormenting her skin, already prickling in the boiling heat. With her, nine year old girl, a gangly little dreamer with an old woman's bun, sat on the floor near the car, as was customary. The bride needed a guardian. And the guardian would be a waiflike prospect for men to keep an eye on.

In a pink starchy dress, the girl picked at her teeth, dug her nose and drew circles in the sand, bored and too eager to take on her show. It seemed they were well forgotten. The little girl, the little bride,

in a little car that was not a Mercedes Benz. They must wait their turn. To be called into the not so fragrant marquee.

Across the lawns, avoiding the sludge, a figure in shiny black came maniacally striding. Pushing its way through shocked men who stood smoking cheap cigarettes, and tut-tutting women snaking their hairdo's in all directions, the black soldier charged with a purpose and a jutting chin.

"Look at that! How could she? Come here to our sacred (shit smelling) ground. How dare she?"

But the girl in black had shoved aside men, kicked little dirty nosed children out of her path, and fixed her beady black eyes on the red VW Beetle. She arrived at its door, and shook her black-scarved head at its core.

"Ya Allah! Meera. You look like a Christmas Tree."

"Ashes! What are you doing here? You are not allowed."

"Meera, you stupid. I am allowed anywhere and everywhere. What is this nonsense? Do you even love this ugly doctor?"

"Excuse me," squealed the nine year old pink crinolined girl, "Get out before I tell."

"Ha! Go tell. Go tell all the old goats that Aisha Vawda is here, wearing her black bin bag, here to see her friend not get married. Stupid witch child. Go tell."

Meera stared up into the fair round face wrapped firmly in a black head scarf, and wanted deeply to dive out of the car, to shed her scratchy trousseau and fly like a happy swallow wrapped up in the rose scented folds of black, black fabric.

With genuine fear in her heavily made-up eyes, she gasped, "Ashes, you have to leave. You know what India Swami says about Muslims. You can't come near our prayers and our weddings."

"Shut up you Meera, you. I'm nowhere near that praying place and all that fire and all that. And I don't care about that long haired donkey, that pervert. I'm here talking to you. What you getting married for? What a waste of time."

"I... have to.... Ashes. I have to. And anyway, you Vawda's are none the better. You all marry your cousins when you all not even sixteen."

"Not me, Meera. I told Papa. I told Dada, I even told that stupid Zuleikha Aapa. I'm never getting married. Ever.

What? Must I live my life waiting on a disgusting filthy man, what? And it's too disgusting anyway when they want to... put their things inside you and all. Never. Never. Just run from here Meera, don't marry that doctor. Come!"

"Leave it Ashes. Leave it now. You better go away before India Swami sees you."

"Stupid girl, huh? Stupid girl. Meera, you remember in school we read this Afrikaans book about these four sisters? All studying, all playing tennis on the lawns, eating apricot jam sandwiches. Nobody forced them to get married.

See, Meera, White girls. They don't take shit!"

"That was just a book Ashes. And anyway, we're not White girls. We're Indian girls."

Suddenly Aisha's head jerked rapidly backwards and her throat made a muffled gag. Behind her stood old Aunty Sita, dressed in wild purple and brassy red, with a garish painted on mouth, and a trunk full of fake gold jewellery roped around her neck. She had grasped Aisha's ponytail through the soft black head scarf, and yanked her strong bulky body backwards. Aisha braced her thick thighs, hidden beneath a flowing black cloak, and stared squarely into Aunty Sita's black face.

"What you want here, you you... Muslim!" Aunty Sita spat out at Aisha.

Meera tried to dive out of the back seat of the Beetle, but the shackles of cheap jewellery and an ornately embroidered sari kept her firmly rooted to the spot.

"Leave her, leave her Sita Chachi. She's just my school friend. Came to wish me well."

"She's a Muslim! And a meat-beef eater. Polluting this pure wedding with her beef eating mouth. Get out, you fat thing. Get from here or I'm going to slap you."

“Slap then. Go ahead. Slap,” Aisha threatened.

Aisha bunched up her fists, and took the stance of a boxer. She glared into the down sloping eyes of the aunty bat. And just when Meera thought she was going to punch the old woman in the nose, punch her like she had done to almost all the boys back in school, the fighter Aisha backed away.

She had pursed her mouth angrily at Meera, and whispered close into her heavily made up bridal face, “White girls don’t take shit. And us.... we live in shit. Can’t you smell it?”

Ashes. Don’t go. Ashes. You were right.

White Girls Don’t Take Shit.
