



# POINT OF LIBERATION

WORDS ZAHIRA ASMAL

People often say we are products of our parents. Zahira wonders if it's perhaps more true to say that we are a departure.

**A**s I consider my departure point, I reminisce about my grandfather. The father of my father – known to the family as Mota (elder), and to me as Popsicle – was the image of Humphrey Bogart with his bold features, tailored suits and grace. His charm, the way he smoked a cigarette, and his musky Arabian scent will remain etched in my mind forever.

My grandfather was the eldest of eight, born and raised in tropical KwaZulu-Natal. We lived in a beautiful house surrounded by mango, banana, mulberry, orange, lemon, litchi and custard-apple trees. Popsicle also had a love for palm trees and cacti. The garden was home to myna birds, vervet monkeys, iguanas, green mambas and, on occasion, crickets and easels.

It was a simple, yet grand, white house with a spacious interior, designed by Popsicle himself. Arabic calligraphy adorned the walls alongside landscape paintings of an even slower time. Sounds of Ravi Shankar and Umm Kulthum wafted through the house. We were so blessed to have a space for each activity and we took pleasure in them.

The sun rose every day over my room. It was hot and humid. And I would make my sleepy way to Popsicle's room for our Morning Prayer, yoga practice and speech exercises. He taught me a new word each day, corrected my posture, recited poetry in English, and sometimes in Urdu, and we enjoyed every meal together.

In our colourful, textured home, we spoke English, isiZulu and Gujarati, and recited verses of the Quran in Arabic. My sister and I spoke in our Indian-school-taught-Afrikaans when the conversations were private. No one else in my family understood Afrikaans, so I was frequently asked to translate the news for Popsicle, which was a painstaking experience, and I often got the information wrong.

Popsicle loved to entertain and we always had strangers at our table at mealtimes, which were so noisy that our neighbours often called enquiring if we were fighting. He would immediately invite them over to join in the debates and delicious treats. Food was always to be shared, he would say. Treat an enemy like your best friend when they enter your home, he would say. We are all the same, just with varying degrees of good fortune, and that nothing mattered but your sense of place and hard work.

It was only after he died that I learnt about the adversity he had lived with for much of his life. He, like so many, lived a life of awkward indignity and very little opportunity in the tough and unfair times of apartheid. He loved life and people so much that

he never told us about how humiliating apartheid was for him, the family, and all the people he cared about. It was only when reading Uncle Kader's book *Politics in My Blood* that I learnt that the home he created for us was a great departure from the slight room he and his siblings had shared in his own early life.

I recall not being permitted on certain beaches or parks or restaurants or even whole sections of the country during apartheid. Space for me became an important matter. All this space in South Africa, yet so many of us were not permitted to access it. The complexities of our heritage and culture lost in these restrictive designs. Living in a country in Africa but not really engaging with all people as friends and as equals, I didn't know what it was to have a South African identity when we were harshly excluded from participating in it. Sure, the home my grandfather created was different. But it was not the case outside. What was in our home was so expansive, what was outside so diminishing.

Popsicle only spoke of poverty as though it were something to overcome rather than something to endure. The beauty of love and generosity my grandfather conveyed to us in that big house on the hill in small-town KwaZulu-Natal is still a dream I dream. This African Dream of our liberation is not something I take lightly, especially since the passing of my grandfather, and as life's truths unfold.

His tales were not of the bitter realities that he and our family experienced all those years ago, but of a beautiful life... perhaps of African Dreams he always had... And that, in telling them to me, over those glorious meals, he lived. Or, perhaps, as a point of departure. **V**

## DID YOU KNOW?

1. Zahira was born in Durban in 1978.
2. Durban is a significant repository of Art Deco architecture.
3. Zahira has been fascinated with architecture since she was two years old, when her sister pushed her into a pool of concrete.
4. A contributor to David Adjaye's book *African Metropolitan Architecture* as well as his exhibition *Urban Africa*, Zahira's own book, *Reflections & Opportunities: Design, Cities and the World Cup*, is published in English and Brazilian Portuguese.
5. An estimated 46.4% of the world's population watched the FIFA World Cup held in South Africa in 2010.
6. The 20th FIFA World Cup in 2014 is being hosted by Brazil, which has won five times – more than any other nation.
7. Zahira founded Designing\_SouthAfrica (@DESIGNING\_ZA) and is managing director of The City agency.
8. She has three phones and tweets as @ZahiraAsmal.