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‘*Shadow Sisters* is a powerful memoir of place: a young woman coming of age in a divided nation on the verge of great upheaval. For a time they are one story, held together by the vast South African landscape. Perceptive, tender, beautifully told.’

**Inga Simpson, author of *Understory***

‘*Shadow Sisters* takes us on a beautiful, heartrending, unflinching voyage to a South Africa we have seldom, if ever, seen in contemporary literature. Viewed through the lens of Davidow’s liberal white family both pre- and post-Apartheid, this South Africa is a beautiful and terrible place, haunted by ghosts of its past, tangled in a web of connections and disconnections that may never be unwound. Davidow sifts through memories like a mystery detective, seeking truth and, if possible, reconciliation, as she searches also for her place in the world. This is a lyrical, thought-provoking memoir, breathtaking in its honesty, one of the bravest, truest you will ever find.’

**Molly Gloss, author of *The Hearts of Horses***

‘In this brilliant memoir of a youth spent in South Africa during the terrifying years of Apartheid, Shelley Davidow distils the tragedies of a nation down to the relationships within her very home. It’s been a life indelibly marked by the violence of the era, yet lifted by the beauty of the vast continent and the enduring human spirit. This book left me stunned and somehow transformed.’

**Elizabeth McKenzie, author of *The Portable Veblen***

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Shelley Davidow is the award-winning author of over 40 books. She writes across genres, for adults, teenagers and children. Her recent non-fiction titles include *Whisperings in the Blood*, *Playing with Words*, and *Fail Brilliantly*. She is a lecturer in the School of Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia, and lives near the beach with her family.

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SHELLEY DAVIDOW

# Shadow Sisters

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Disclaimer: In this memoir certain names and characteristics of people have been changed to protect their identities, and sometimes timelines have been condensed. Writing a memoir is always a re-imagining, a re-creating, but the author has aimed, nonetheless, for emotional truth.

*To my family*



## A House by the River

The night Leena arrived, rain blanketed Johannesburg. The river, just a hundred metres from our house, roared in flood.

I closed all my bedroom windows, even the two small ones. Thieves and murderers loved storms. A loud crash of thunder could mask breaking glass. Distant rumbles could hide the sound of a crowbar forcing open a security gate at the properties of those rich enough to have one. Besides, open windows at night were simply an invitation for someone less fortunate than you to stick a long pole with a sharp end through the gap and hook things out of your room: your blanket, your pillow, your new watch (a present for your eleventh birthday from your dad). You had to think of these things.

A short while later, my brother Larry and I sat at the dining table with our mother and stepfather, our two younger half-brothers already asleep.

The knock at the door made us jump. Larry looked at me. I looked at our stepfather. Who would be outside at this time of night, in this weather?

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I moved closer to Larry. Our parents had separated just after I turned four. Larry was a baby. Perhaps that's when fear took hold. Or maybe it started the night the heater caught fire next to Larry's cot and I woke to the smell of burning asbestos and ran screaming into my mother and stepfather's room. Or maybe fear just lived in the country's air, inscribed into the molecules we inhaled every single day. I slid to the floor behind the table.

My stepfather stood against the front door. 'Who is it?'

Images of robbers with *panga* knives, of men with guns and cold hearts coming to kill us, tumbled through my mind. Though we had nothing, any stuff was worth taking to those who had less than nothing.

'It's me, Leena. Can you open the door?'

I came out from hiding. A gust of rain-sodden wind blew through the house and she stood in the entrance hall, wearing a black plastic bag with holes cut into it for a raincoat. Puddles of water collected around her on the parquet flooring.

'Thank you.' Leena wiped her face with a puffy hand. Her eyes shimmered as she glanced from me to my mother.

'Shelley, go get a towel, please,' my mother said. 'Lee, you must be freezing. Come and sit down. What's going on? Are you okay?'

'No, madam.'

'Lee, please. Use our first names. What's happened?'

I ran to the bathroom and ripped a big blue towel off the rack. When I came back into the dining room, Leena was sitting at the table between my mother and stepfather. I placed the towel around her shoulders, but she took no notice.

'I promised the old mister and missus,' she said, looking at my stepfather, 'that I would always look after your family. I'm here to look after you.'

My mother glanced at my stepfather. Silence.

Decades ago, Leena worked as the domestic servant for my stepdad's parents. As nanny, she took care of my stepdad and his brothers. She cooked and cleaned and made the boys sandwiches for school. She gave them kindness and comfort and they loved her, especially my stepdad. She lived out the back of the family home in a narrow garret with a high window. No plaster on the walls, just raw brick. A bare concrete floor. Her bed legs on bricks to keep her safe from the *Tokoloshe* – the evil spirit who crept into beds and wreaked havoc on lives.

Leena had been working for the family since she was nineteen or twenty. Later, when she had her babies, she went home to Hamanskraal, a hundred kilometres from Johannesburg – the middle of nowhere. Solomon and Brenda, Leena's two children, grew up in the echo of their mother always going. She left their upbringing to her mother, and got to see them twice a year. Each time she went home, she stayed for three weeks. She made sure that the children went to school, that they had medicines for when they got sick. That was what the money was for. Life as a domestic servant in the all-white suburbs of Johannesburg under Apartheid allowed Leena's children and her mother to eat and have a roof over their heads.

Leena pulled off her plastic-bag raincoat. She came to look after us, she said, only we weren't the ones who needed looking after.

'I have left my job as domestic servant for the Pienaar family. I have to go up and down the stairs and work hard six days a week. My blood pressure is dangerous. Sometimes I think I will die. I must work Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and every Sunday. Get up at six and sometimes don't leave the job until ten at night. Where can I go? You see? Where can I go?'

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I breathed in the smells of starched servant uniform and sweat and rain.

‘You can stay with us until you get better,’ my mother said. ‘Just rest here, recover your strength.’

‘Of course,’ said my stepfather. ‘Lee, you always have a home with us.’

We occupied every room, though – our growing family.

‘Lee, you can stay in my room,’ I said.

She dried her eyes with the wet apron that matched the rest of her yellow uniform. South African maids all wore uniforms: a matronly, collared dress; a *doek* (a scarf tied like a napkin around the head) and an apron.

‘Thanks, *Thandiwe*,’ Leena said. My name from that moment on, meaning ‘loving one’. ‘You are a kind little girl.’

And so in 1981, Leena came to us, homeless, without a cent to her name, an illegal resident in the land of her birth.

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We lived on the outskirts of the white suburb of Rivonia, in an old clubhouse on a former estate called Glenwilliam. Once white-washed and stately, the building’s brown painted doors now flaked around the edges, revealing rotting wood; the rusty windows squeaked when they opened; the high ceiling turned mouldy where it met the wall. Our living room, dining room, workspace and play area each occupied a section in a giant ballroom that once belonged to a community of rich white folks of a bygone era who’d danced and listened to concerts here. At the front, the wide veranda with slate floors gave us a giant undercover run-around area when summer thunderstorms rolled in from the south.

My bedroom had once been the clubhouse toilets: eight small windows and a strange wall in the middle of the room made the space unique, relics from a time when toilet stalls stood open side by side. My stepfather made a cover for the piping that stuck out of the wall so that I had a seat. He painted my room pink. He built a high bunk bed and put a mosquito net over it, and I climbed the stairs into my own personal paradise away from my younger brothers.

Sharing a bunk bed – Leena on the bottom – in my room offered benefits: the fear that held my stomach in knots at night disappeared. But I found drawbacks too: her snores ricocheted around the room and kept me awake for hours. I stared at the mosquito net and the ceiling and listened to her snoring and muttering in her dreams, until she turned over, or I succumbed through sheer exhaustion to a restless sleep, suffocating under the two pillows on top of my head.

‘I can’t go back to the Pienaars, madam,’ I heard Leena say to my mother one morning.

‘No, of course not. And Lee, please call us by our first names. We can’t be called ‘madam’ and ‘master’. You can just stay with us as long as you need, eat what we eat, have a roof over your head. We are your family.’

‘I can cook and clean for you,’ Leena said. ‘I can do ironing. I can help you.’

So Leena took on the guise of domestic servant; she played at being the maid. She did everything millions of other domestic workers did in South Africa – she cooked, she did the laundry, she cleaned – but she didn’t go home to a township at night. She did not wait in exhausting queues for a taxi at the end of a hard day to take her away from leafy half-acre gardens and houses with electricity and

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running water to the dust-bowl townships of Soweto or Alexandra, where sewage ran down pot-holed streets and thousands of shacks hunched back to back, housing whole families.

Instead, she slept in my room, which was against the law. No Group Areas Act being adhered to in this house! The Act stipulated that black people could only live in white areas as domestic workers, maids and gardeners as long as they ate and slept in the servants' quarters. But we didn't have servants' quarters. In our house, Leena didn't take a tin plate of leftover white man's food to eat out the back, like millions of other domestic workers did; she ate at our table, from a normal plate, with us.

And my parents wouldn't let us be lazy. We helped set the table as usual. And wash the dishes. We cleaned our own rooms. And even if Leena did the laundry, no chucking of dirty underwear into the laundry basket. Not ever. You wash your own, girls and boys.

*Gogo* was what Zulu children called their grandmothers, and Leena became *Gogo* to us, at her request. Despite my sleep-deprived nights, I loved having *Gogo* in my room. I wanted her to be happy and I couldn't understand why she wasn't. I knew we lived under Apartheid (correct South African pronunciation: *apart-hate*), though I didn't comprehend so much of what that meant. Still, in the way a radio picks up signals from far away, my young self detected dissonance. The tension of my country's distress wrote itself into a glance, a black person's hollow stare from across a road, Leena's sweat-drenched forehead as she ironed our clothes. It lodged itself beneath my heart though I had no way of understanding the heaviness there, or the legislation that affected every breath taken by a black person in South Africa in the early 1980s.

Leena knew all the Acts. She'd lived under the Group Areas

Act since it first came into effect in 1950, defining where she could live and work; she lived under the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act, which came into effect in 1953 and dictated where she could go to the toilet or wait for a bus, or which office to go to for the documents she needed; the Population Registration Act of 1950 classified her as black and defined her movements across the country. She grew up with the Immorality Act (introduced in 1927 and then revised in 1957), which made any sexual relationship between a non-white person and a white person a punishable crime. The Bantu Education Act, which separated her from white, coloured (mixed race) and Indian children, ensured that when she went to school her curriculum prepared her and all other black children for a life in service to the ruling white race.

~

One afternoon, Mr Coetzee the landlord showed up unannounced. He walked from the veranda into the dining room and the kitchen as if he owned the place. Which he did.

‘*Goeie dag mense*, hello people. What do we have here?’

‘Hello, Mr Coetzee,’ my mother said. Leena bustled out of the kitchen and vanished into the living room.

‘Hey, girl ...’ Coetzee called after Leena in his thick Afrikaans accent. He sat down on a wooden chair and stroked his thin grey moustache. ‘Girl, where do you live?’

Leena came back into the kitchen and straightened her *doek* in a subservient manner. ‘In the townships, master.’

‘You telling me, you people, that you short of rent and now you got a maid to do your work for you? Lies, you people, all lies. Hey, girl, so you live in the townships?’

‘She’s a grandmother. Don’t call her “girl”,’ my mother said.

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‘Eeeey,’ Coetzee said, his eyes glinting like a cat’s. ‘Eeey, you people are *kaffir* lovers. I have no time for you. Get rid of your *kaffir* friend and pay the rent tomorrow or I will have all your *kak* thrown out of the house and you will be removed from the premises. You hear?’

He stood up, satisfied with his day’s work.

I saw the ice in Mr Coetzee’s eyes and felt a gust blow across my skin. I stared at him from the dining room, my teeth chattering as if I were freezing cold.

‘One day, when you are in a similar situation,’ my mother said, ‘I hope that you will remember this moment. Remember this family, and your lack of compassion.’

He laughed. ‘That day will never come. Never. I will never be in your situation. Ever.’

And he turned and walked out of the house.

~

In the 1960s, just down the road from us, South African government agents arrested Nelson Mandela and threw him into prison for plotting to overthrow the government, or so people said. Or maybe Mandela just wanted black people to have voting rights in their own country. At school we heard rumours that the government would throw you in prison if you even said the name ‘Mandela’ or ‘ANC’. My parents told me not to believe it, but my friends and I took care never to say his name in public, just in case. ‘Mandela’ – the word – seared itself into my brain as something sacred, threatening, terrifying. In 1981, Nelson Mandela still sat in jail for daring to protest the plight of his people in South Africa.

I grew up a white minority child in a paradoxical multicultural

reality: on weekends we went to the Oriental Plaza, where Indian shop owners taught me how to bargain and sold me spicy samosas and bunny chow (curry stuffed into a hollowed-out loaf of bread), and where I bought cheap jeans and aromatic Indian cotton shirts imported straight from Calcutta; I learned about Gandhi and his time in South Africa. I felt that India and South Africa were like one place. In fact, South Africa had the highest concentration of Indian residents outside of India, and parts of Durban and the South Coast, where we sometimes went on holiday, felt like they must be India itself.

But we lived cordoned-off lives: Indians in one area, coloureds in another, blacks in another, whites in another. We rushed past each other in Johannesburg, a busy city with TV towers and blue-glass buildings, increasing areas of decay and litter, and growing numbers of homeless people in Joubert Park.

Johannesburg was founded on gold. *Egoli* – City of Gold. The miners on whose backs this economy grew lived in all-male hostels in Alexandra township. They worked brutal shifts and many died daily, sometimes of diseases, sometimes in conflicts, sometimes when the earth shuddered and swallowed them, while we slept in soft beds in the suburbs. But there were always thousands waiting to fill their positions, an endless supply of workers willing to risk their lives.

If a black man and a white man walked towards each other on the pavement, it was always the black man's obligation to get out of the way. Every day I saw truckloads of black workers being taken somewhere by white drivers to do some kind of hard labour for little pay. Roadworks meant crowds of black labourers hacking away at tarmac and earth with picks and shovels. At the end of the workday, Putco buses, designated for non-whites only, collected black people and spat them back out in the townships, where

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thousands lived in shacks made of cardboard and corrugated iron.

In the evenings, the residents of Alexandra (established 1912, probably named after the daughter of the owner of that land at that time), and Soweto (a shortening of the words South West Township, established 1930s) huddled under a haze of smoky pollution as people made fires for cooking and warmth during the cold months.

Soweto and Alexandra bordered white suburbs, where jacaranda-lined streets ran between sections of smart half-acre plots carpeted with Kikuyu grass and edged with sweet peas and jasmine bushes. Visitors to South Africa often remarked on those suburbs and how inviting they looked from the air flying into Johannesburg – all the hundreds of blue and green and turquoise swimming pools glittering like jewels in the sun.

Those visitors would sometimes come with us to the Lion Park, a forty-minute drive from Johannesburg. There, lions slept in the long grass; zebras and giraffes and elephants strolled between the trees and waited for afternoon thunderstorms. On our way out, we could stop and cuddle lion cubs in a special enclosure. None of us knew the truth, learned decades later: most of the cubs we held, once grown to adulthood, were released into caged areas, where rich hunters from Europe and America paid megabucks to shoot the young lions dead at close range.

If you drove two hours' north of Johannesburg, you would be in big game country, and there you might sleep in a hut in a nature reserve; hear free, wild lions roaring at night; find a leopard in the trees; and watch hippos in the rivers. But you wouldn't just go there and walk around without a gun for protection, or a guide, or both. Every year tourists got eaten by lions, trampled by elephants, gored by rhinos, or had their bodies and canoes bitten in half by angry hippos. The reports usually made page four in the

newspapers, somewhere near the bottom. I thought they deserved it, the tourists who met sticky ends, because they didn't understand or respect the wildness of the land.

A country of apex predators.

I loved and didn't fear this reality.

I feared other things. Like saying 'ANC', or driving behind police vans stuffed with black people who mouthed the words *please help* through the caged windows.

My parents weren't afraid of saying 'ANC'. My mother almost joined the banned organisation once, she said, until they turned violent. She wanted black people to be treated with dignity, because she had grown up loved and cared for by a black man called Johannes. When she was a baby, Johannes moved into her family's property and became their 'houseboy'. A houseboy did everything from domestic work and cooking to gardening and overall maintenance of their grounds.

'He was like a giant to me,' my mother told us. 'Johannes could do anything in my eyes. He was strong and caring. My dad lost his temper at me, but Johannes was completely loving towards me all the time.' Johannes treated her like his own child. He'd let her sit in his room with him and eat the *mielie pap* (cornmeal porridge) he'd made. 'He became my father,' my mother said. 'And the more I loved Johannes, the more my dad attacked him with his words. He'd say to him, "Johannes, you're just a *kaffir*. What do you know, *kaffir* boy?" And Johannes would just laugh that off.'

Long after Johannes died, my mother said she still felt him with her. When, as an adult, she wanted to join the African National Congress, it was because of what Johannes had shown her: his love and humanity.

~

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At the bottom of our several-acre property, the sludgy brown waters of a tributary of the Jukskei River wound their way through hanging willow reeds and slime-covered rocks. Loren and I ran through the bushveld, down to the big willow tree on the banks of the river. Boulders coached the river into whirlpools and waterfalls. Elsewhere the water moved slowly, and stagnant pools nurtured bilharzia parasites, which caused acute or chronic disease in anyone either unfortunate or stupid enough to go into such water. Not too long ago Jackson had passed out in class and been rushed to hospital. A bilharzia parasite had wormed its way into his brain. When he came back to school, all his curly black hair had been shaved off and he had a scar where the doctors had sawed into his skull. We were neither unfortunate nor stupid – but we were twelve and we didn't care.

On Saturday, we sat on sand rich with quartz that glistened in the sharp sunlight, backs against a hot rock, our favourite spot, warming like lizards. Loren told me she loved my place better than hers, including being around my hippie parents.

'You think my parents are hippies?' I knew enough to understand that no one would ever call her parents hippies – which probably meant mine were.

'Yep. I love it. They're so cool.'

We told boys-we-like secrets to the sound of a tumbling river. We practised kissing and trialled love. We took off our clothes and lay skin to skin and giggled and imagined 'What if such-and-such did this to you, or this!' We squealed with the terror and excitement of the imagining, but also the doing, and we swore never to tell.

And then, with the sound of thudding footsteps, grunting and hard breathing from upriver, we were shocked out of our world.

By the time we saw him, he was close enough that we could see his bloodshot eyes, smell his alcohol-stinking breath, see his broken shoes with gnarled toes sticking out.

We scrambled to get clothes on, to dust sand off.

‘Run for your life! Run!’

I dashed up behind the rock. Lor followed. I couldn’t breathe. Long grass whipped our legs as we fought our way back from the smell of rotten water. I glanced back, wasting a second. Lor was behind me, and he was right behind her. Until that moment we weren’t sure we were being chased, but now we knew without a doubt. ‘*Wozza lapa,*’ he growled under his breath. *Come here.*

Fear propelled us. We bashed our way out of the dense bush and then, suddenly, the house appeared. My dog Singane (Zulu for ‘dear friend’) bounded up to us, wagging her tail against me, smiling. The sounds of the household – Leena beating a rug with a broom hanging over the veranda railing; my brother Larry playing a wooden recorder – stopped us. Our pursuer halted, panting, devil eyes still on us. Then he turned around, rapidly for someone so drunk, and disappeared into the bush.

It was some time before we went back to the river.

~

My mother and stepfather did not do the things that normal white adults did. They didn’t wear fancy clothes or drink wine with their dinner or talk patronisingly and disparagingly about black people. They rebelled against their white suburban upbringings and pursued a life of art and craft with which they hoped to make a living. In one corner of the big ballroom, their workshop table held an array of lead bits and copper foil and glass cutters and dazzling pieces of coloured glass. Against the

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wall stood a series of stained-glass windows they had made. The first, a set for a church: *The Parable of the Sower* panel stood a metre and a half high. I'd watched my mother etch the face of the sower onto flesh-coloured glass. After that, a series of small windows – spades, hearts, clubs and diamonds representing a deck of cards – for a pub, and then they crafted a large abstract beauty for a millionaire's home.

On endless afternoons I learned how to score glass and break it, to wrap the edges in copper foil and put the pieces together. I placed chips of glass on top of the designs and when we fired them in the small kiln on the veranda, the pieces melted into round blobs. I hung the glass decorations where they caught the light in my bedroom. My stepfather and mother made me an intricate stained-glass window featuring a butterfly, so that shards of light and colour lay scattered across my room and through my days.

Beyond the glass butterfly, I looked out over tall bushveld that stretched all around the back of the house. Across the dirt driveway, three thatched rondavels stood next to each other. A family with three older boys lived in the round houses, and the youngest one, Mark, good-looking and fourteen, accepted my offer to play games on a summer afternoon.

We made giant hopscotch bunnies in the sand, drawing the tail, body, head and ears of a rabbit instead of ordinary squares, and numbering the bunny parts one to nine. Then we jumped from tail to head and ears and back again for hours. On the days that followed, we played Sardines in the house when other friends came over. Mark hid first, and I found him in my parent's cupboard. He grabbed me and pulled me inside, grinning in the quick light of the open door. 'Shh,' he said and put his finger on my mouth.

I huddled against him and we shook with laughter for ten whole minutes while the others tried to find us.

After that, all I wanted to do was sit in a cupboard with him, against his warm shoulder, while other people tried to discover our hiding place.

For a month, Mark played Sardines with us every afternoon after school. The hiding places that he chose grew more and more sophisticated, but I always found him first. In those dark spaces, we inhaled each other's breath and listened to our hearts and held each other close in increasingly cramped conditions, relishing being alive.

And then his family moved away.

I didn't know what to do with the emptiness he left behind.

~

The rondavels stood empty. No one lived in them now. So Leena moved out of my room and into one of them – after months, her own space.

Soon after, Mr Coetzee came prowling. He parked his white Toyota truck under the trees. He didn't speak to us. He snooped around the property, took photographs of the house, the forest, the bushveld. Then he got into his car, revved the engine and vanished in plumes of dust and petrol fumes.