

Blindsided
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Declaration Page

Declaration of Authorship

I, Antonia Mary Willes Chitty, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

Antonia Chitty

Date: 12.11.2020

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Abstract

This paper examines sight loss, identity, uncertain borders and power, using postcolonial theory.

The novel explored in this paper, *Blindsided*, follows a British-Egyptian ophthalmologist to Mali and back to the UK. She experiences sight loss, and a consequent shift from doctor to patient, from subject to object, which forces her to explore her identity issues. She becomes no longer the observer but the examined.

This novel sits in an underexplored intersection between postcolonial theory, literature, disability theory and medical humanities. It offers a perspective on the shifts in power that occur within sight loss, within relationships; it offers this paradigm in order to examine how we may unlearn privilege, and explore becoming other.

The critical paper continues this exploration, providing a unique analysis of how people with sight loss have written about the subject in academia, literature and creative non-fiction. It delves into the porous boundaries between these different types of writing, and demonstrates that writing about sight loss is a way that people who experience it can seize back the power that society takes from them, gain authority, and take control of their own narrative.

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Blindsided

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London, September 2011

Prologue

She hated this part of her job. It should have been a simple operation. She hadn't carried out the initial assessment, couldn't say that she would have seen it through the dense cataract if she had.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Bates. The operation was straightforward, but we found damage to the back of the eye when we removed the cataract."

The woman's irises were faded brown, her face folds pallid grey, her lips a colourless beige. Nour glanced at the clock on the wall.

"What do you mean?" the woman asked, rubbing one hand over the other.

"There is some improvement in your sight, but I'm afraid there is permanent damage to your central vision. We only discovered it once the cataract was removed. Now, is there anything you want to ask me?" Nour glanced over at the nurse, who nodded as she picked up some leaflets.

"Permanent damage?" the woman repeated, her hands moving against her shabby black trousers.

"It's something called dry macular degeneration. It means that the cells at the back of the eye are wearing out."

"But you just operated."

Nour had seen this before, it was understandable, of course. No one could take in bad news immediately, and she still had people waiting.

"I took out the cataract. That's when the lens at the front of the eye became cloudy. So your vision will be less cloudy, but we can't repair the cells at the back of the eye."

"Why not? I thought this would fix it. I mean, my husband has dementia, I do everything for us both. I need to be able to see."

“Like I said, sometimes cells wear out. I’m afraid this isn’t something that surgery can fix yet. Now, the people in Low Vision are very helpful. I’m sure they will sort you out with a magnifier, and maybe some help in the home. If you haven’t got any more questions, I’ll leave you with the nurse.”

She met Julie’s gaze, then checked the clock again. She was behind, this clinic was always behind. Mrs Bates seemed to get the message that there was nothing more to do. She fumbled as she picked up her bag, kept her head down, until Julie passed her some tissues.

“The Low Vision Service will be in touch,” Nour reassured her as she shuffled her papers together and worked out how long it would take to see the remaining three patients, how long it would take to get to the pool.

She gripped her phone tightly and pressed it to her ear as she hurried away from the hospital. Michael, like the annoying older brother he was, had known exactly the moment to catch her.

“I don’t want to,” she said. “You could take him.”

“You know that’s not true. I can’t leave Samia and the boys, especially not with the baby due, and take off to Egypt for a holiday. And there’s work.”

“And I can’t either. I’ve got the Mali project coming up. Do you know how many people have had to leave their homes because of the insurgents in the North? There’s no healthcare for them, and it’s not like the country has enough eye clinics anyway. It makes me so angry that people are driven from their homes because one group wants to impose their religion on another.”

“I know,” Michael said, and Nour felt her face flush, her words too close to home for both of them. She pressed on: “So you understand, I can’t fit in a trip to Egypt before then, however much Baba would like to go. And I can’t put the Mali project off. People are depending on me.”

“What about when you get back? He’s not getting any younger. I took him home the last two years. You don’t have any commitments here. And you’d like to see the family too.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Fine, tell him I’ll book something when I’m back.”

She finished the call and dived down into the underground. There were crowds around the ticket barrier and somewhere overhead an announcer mentioned delays.

She had been in the water for twenty minutes when a movement on the pool edge caught her attention. She didn't let up, didn't let on that she had seen Adam, all her focus on reaching a hundred lengths.

He didn't seem to be in a hurry, anyway.

She turned her face, inhaled, head down again, right to the end, turn and back and he was still there, sitting on the poolside, watching her.

Her hair had escaped its clip, it would slow her down, but stopping would slow her more, and she would have to talk. She was in the rhythm now. It had been a full list that morning, waiting times were creeping up again and everyone was feeling the pressure to push people through. Her shoulders were aching by the time she had finished and now she relished the stretch as she flung each arm over in turn. She wanted to concentrate on the stroke, the speed, her breath, but he was still there, watching.

She wished that she hadn't agreed to meet him here.

This was her place. Not his. Her earliest memories were of going in the sea, shrieking as Michael splashed her, her father teaching her to swim. It was warmer there, of course, and occasionally on London mornings, when winter seemed to have lasted forever, she wanted to be back in Egypt so intensely it was a physical pain. "You can't remember," Michael always said. "You were only six when we left." But he was only ten and she did remember, remembered the feel of the sea bed on her feet, the taste of the seawater in her mouth, the sun on her shoulders, and afterwards, the tangles in her hair and her mother's grumbles as she brushed them out. "You're getting too big," she would say, and maybe if they had stayed she would have stopped Nour swimming in the sea where she could be seen by anyone, but they went on the plane, and there was no sea, just the cold, echoey public pool, and no-one had enough time to take her, because it wasn't easy starting over in a new country, and her father worked late every evening and early every morning, and her mother told her she should be studying anyway. It paid off, though, because two years later she got a place at a school with a pool. The pool wasn't why they picked it, it was an academic all-girls school, but she could swim again, every week at first, then every morning once she was on the team. And all the way through uni, she always had a towel and costume in her backpack. In the midst of exams, she could clear her mind in the pool, scent of chlorine lingering as she faced her first practical. And now, she could wash away the day's patients.

She turned again, half glanced at Adam's long pale legs dangling in the pool, put her face back in the water, out, breath, in, breath, out, breath, in. She wanted to beat a hundred lengths

today and tomorrow and the next day, because she had been eating too much since they got back. It was easy to be greedy when everything was readily available. In Malawi she would have killed for a Cadbury's Dairy Milk, but in the hospital café she always chose Green and Black's to get her through a long afternoon. Malawi was three months on mainly rice and beans. This time it was going to be six.

Forty-six, roll, length forty-seven, she couldn't let up. Sandra had left a message on her phone about the project again. She would have known that Nour would have been in surgery. Nour needed to call her back, needed to check about next week's locum days too. She couldn't locum for ever, but it kept the money coming in between projects. Maybe next year she could get back on a consultant track. She sometimes wondered if she should give up going on projects, should be trying to get ahead in the UK, but she got experience that she couldn't get here. Sandra said she and Adam were only in it for the adventure, but Nour thought that, with all of Sandra's time taken up by running the charity, it had been too long since she had been out on a project and she must have forgotten that working overseas was harder than any tourist trip.

Maybe she could stop at fifty, talk to him.

She would, but she could have carried on to sixty or a hundred, carried on until all she wanted to do was eat and sleep and then tomorrow would be work again. The worst thing about locuming was cataract after cataract. It was all the same, and she knew that it needed to be done, but she wanted to do more than that. In Malawi she dealt with whatever came in, and she missed the unpredictability.

Forty-eight, and she could see Adam stand, stretch, run his hands through his short brown hair. He had been doing the same as her, at some hospital in South London. It took a toll on the shoulders. As she breathed she glimpsed him raise his arms into the air, stretch one way then the next. She upped her speed, just a little. She was warmed up, was going to have an advantage, and she needed it because he had eight or nine inches on her. Despite that, she could beat him nine out of ten times. He would laugh at her, tell her she was too competitive, but why do something if you're not the best, she thought.

She entered the fiftieth length, ploughed back up the pool, stopped and gripped the edge, her blood pounding in her ears.

"You're early. Are you ready?" she asked, wanting to kick off again.

The skin around his hazel eyes crinkled as he grinned. "I'm ready," he said, and he slipped into the pool beside her.

Part 1 West Africa

Chapter 1

It wasn't the worst place she had worked.

They were on the outskirts of a small town. There were a few buildings giving them shade to operate in and somewhere to sleep. There was a guard with a gun, but only one, a quiet man who smiled all the time, never giving an impression there was any threat.

The queues of people waiting stretched way beyond the shadow of the building even though it was still early.

She took a drink from her water bottle, and washed her hands again as an old man left and another walked in. This far south they were well away from any risk of terrorists, but that also meant there were both local residents and those who had made a long journey to flee from the fighting. She spared a moment for anger at those who wanted to impose Sharia law, to force people to change their beliefs. She took a breath.

"Sit down and I'll have a look."

She was assessing people this morning, looking at the cases where Mariam was unclear what the problem was. Adam was in surgery dealing with straightforward cataracts, and this afternoon they would both operate.

"Can I shine this into your eyes?"

She was grateful for her schoolgirl Arabic, augmented with some eye vocabulary, because it meant she didn't always need Mariam to translate. Although she had learnt a few phrases in Bambara already, she didn't understand answers that extended much beyond yes or no, and Songhai and Fulani were beyond her.

"That's fine, thank you. It's a cataract. We can operate this afternoon, if you want to wait outside over there."

The next woman shuffled in, led by a child. No sight at all, from what she could tell as she examined the white-scarred corneas. The woman didn't speak Arabic or French or Bambara, there were ten or more languages there, and it cut that she had to rely on the child to deliver the news. "I can't help you," was hard to say in any language.

She washed her hands again, and anger burnt inside her because it was wrong that the woman had been blind for years, wrong that politics meant that diseases that could be eradicated still ran rife in some places. She couldn't offer a corneal transplant. She could do nothing.

Mariam explained what Nour had said and ushered the grandmother and child from the screened area that she was working in, and by the time they had gone, there was a man in the chair and she was onto the next examination. *I can't help you* still prickled in her mind, along with a twinge of resentment that Adam was working with those who could be helped while she was sifting out those they couldn't.

It was late afternoon and they had both been operating without pause on anyone who could be treated under local anaesthetic. The queue was still growing. She finished her last patient, used the back of her arm to wipe her forehead. There was sweat in her eyes, sweat running down her back. Her feet were tight in her Vans.

She washed, again, soap and lukewarm water, then glanced over at Adam. He was about to start on the final patient.

"I'm done. Would you like me to assist?"

He looked up, his face pink. He grinned at her, then said, "Go on, then. No back seat driving."

She could feel her face flush warm, he knew she would rather be in charge, but she held out a hand and said, "What do you need me to do?"

He made the incision into the conjunctiva and sclera. She didn't need to help, not really, but the light was fading and there was no point in her starting anything else.

"Has anyone told the people in queue that we're done for today?" he asked.

"I expect so." She glanced out of the doorway. "They're settling in for the night." It was always like this, because if you had travelled hundreds of miles, you would have brought your bedroll, what food you could carry, and you were prepared to wait. She adjusted her stance, her hips and back already tiring under the pressure to operate every moment they could, every moment that there was light.

"I think we can run straight through with both of us operating tomorrow," he said.

"The anaesthetist is due in tonight which should help."

“Lens please,” he said, and she handed him the tiny sliver of plastic that would transform the vision of the old woman lying still on the table.

Adam waited to reassure the woman, and she smiled as she heard the care in his voice as he talked to her daughter, telling her to make sure she kept her eye covered tonight. She heard Mariam showing her how to use the drops, the words fading in the rush of water as she turned on the tap to fill the bucket.

She went out and around the back to another screened area. She pulled off her scrubs top and tipped the few inches of water over her head. Even with her eyes closed, she could tell she was in Mali, no chill to the water, no breeze on her skin. Still, a shiver ran through her.

Back in the hut they were sharing, Adam was washing in half a bowl of lukewarm water.

She walked in and reached for a towel. “I wish there was somewhere to go for a swim.”

“I’d like a fabulous, luxurious hotel shower,” he said as he stood there, his skin pale against the dark blue shorts he had pulled on. “Or a run and then a shower.”

“We could go for a run,” she said.

“It’s almost dark. It’s not safe to take off into the unknown.”

She thought back to the evenings when they would run alongside the Thames together after work, and that weekend when they took the train to Lewes and walked on the South Downs, hand-in-hand. It must have been a year ago, and she tried to conjure up the verdant freshness of the damp English countryside in October, so different to the air she was breathing now.

“We could fly over to the Gambia, have a weekend in a tourist hotel some time,” he said.

“Later on. When we’ve made more progress.”

“How long d’you think?”

“They’ve got enough people waiting that we could keep going seven days a week for the rest of the month. At least.”

“We can’t work seven days a week, it’s not realistic. You know that. How about I book flights for when we reach three months. We’ll need a break by then.”

She rubbed her hair dry and tied it up. “Have you had enough already?” she asked him.

“I could do with something to look forward to,” he said.

Her eyes felt full of grit and dust, or maybe it was still jet lag, and she rubbed her face with the towel.

“Look, come here.” He pulled her close. “It’ll be fine tomorrow. I need to forget where we are for a bit.” He pushed his body against her, his lips to hers, bitter taste of DEET, and they stopped talking, stopped thinking, for a moment.

Later still, bugs fluttering against the only candle, he lay against her, hot skin to hot skin. Dance music came from the tiny tinny speaker. She rolled over, sprawled, stretched, and he ran a hand over her breast.

“Marky texted,” he said.

“Mm?” She was warm, sated, but the bed was too small, too unsteady to totally relax.

“He’s found someone else to take my room, and he’s booked a trip to the Maldives.”

“That’s nice.”

“We could be anywhere. In a club in New York, surfing off Manly Beach...”

“Anywhere but here?”

He ran a finger down her stomach. She twitched, but he was already pulling away to turn the music up.

“I wanna dance with you.” He seized her hand, pulled her upright.

The floor was cool under her soles, the flickering light flared up the walls in patterns that danced with them. She closed her eyes, Avicii taking her a million miles from Mali, back to the club they went to before they left, his body against hers, red flames swirling inside her eyelids. From somewhere outside, a child’s cry rose over the music, dragging her back. The people waiting might have their ears pressed up against the walls to hear what these strange western doctors were doing. They would know that they had sex, no privacy. Next door to them the sardonic German anaesthetist who had arrived that day might be asleep. And tomorrow they would be back in the theatre, slice and seal, slice and seal.

Chapter 2

“That’s got to be better,” Nour said from under the table.

“You need to scrub, Nour.” Stefan, the anaesthetist, was scowling at her as she straightened up. “It must not slip.”

She had scrounged some blocks of wood to raise one of the operating tables, because Adam had been grumbling about his back aching. She was annoyed that she hadn’t thought of it before, annoyed that he needed her to solve it. She picked up the soap, dipped it into the water and started to wash between her fingers. The crease was red and cracked, whatever soap they were using was harsh, and she felt the burn, together with frustration at all the things she couldn’t fix.

Adam was scrubbing up too. “You look exhausted,” he said.

She had scragged her hair back in a lank and greasy bun, there was never enough hot water to get it properly clean and given a decent pair of non-surgical scissors she would have cut it off.

“That’s not the way to make me feel better,” she said. She had been struggling with diarrhoea these last few days, wondering when it would get to Adam. He grinned at her, then pulled on a mask. She tried to smile back.

He was taking all the cataracts that morning and she was with Stefan, working on people who needed something more complex. Stefan was good at his job, but she wondered what motivated him. He spoke perfect English, refused to attempt French or Bambara. He snapped at her when he did speak, and barely acknowledged the patients. He preferred them anaesthetised, she thought as she checked her instruments.

“Why are you out here?” she had asked him one day when they had been face to face over patients for six hours already.

“Why not?” is all he said. He was better with Adam, she thought, actually spoke when he was working with him, but when Nour asked Adam what they talked about all he said was, “The patient we’re operating on, usually.”

Stefan hated Mali, for sure, perpetual grumbles under his breath about the surroundings, the journey, the food that the cook served up. His grumbling made it harder for all of them, made Adam complain more, for sure.

“You can’t expect five-star service, it’s not a hotel,” she had said.

“Wish we were in a bloody hotel,” Adam had snapped back.

It was early, but the temperature was rising. She was sweating already, the fan was broken again, but Stefan didn't appear bothered by the heat. The woman laid out in front of her needed surgery on her eyelid: scarring from trachoma had caused her lashes to curl in. She had been plucking them out, so her cornea wasn't too bad, but her lids didn't close properly and scarring was inevitable, one way or another. It wasn't going to be straightforward.

Nour waited for the anaesthetic to take effect, then made the first cut. She liked this sort of work better than cataract surgery, and she knew Ad did too. She glanced over to him, smiled, grateful that he was doing the duller side of the job today. He didn't see her, his head down, his focus on the eye that he was working on.

She sliced into the lid, adjusted its position, then started with the stitches. She needed to create a straight edge where there wasn't one, the woman had sight worth saving. She concentrated, intent on the detail for as long as it took.

She was into the fourth tarsal rotation of the day, and the air in the hut was unbearable. Her scrubs were sticking to her back, her hair was clinging to her head, and she wiped her forehead with the back of her arm. She trawled her memories for something cold, like the time it snowed when they were staying with Adam's parents, snow so deep it covered the beach. The sea never froze but it was always chilly, even in summer. And she was back there for a moment, on shingle, wind-driven waves riding onto the beach. They had stripped and she was running into the water's icy clutch, submerged—

“Nour!” Stefan was scowling at her because she had stopped. She dragged her mind back to the job.

When she had finished the final stitches she stepped back, peeled off the sweaty latex gloves and dropped them in the bin. She started to wash her hands again and glanced over at Ad. He hadn't eaten at lunchtime, and his skin was ashen.

For all his grumbles, some days he was the only person who kept her sane out there.

“Are you all right?” she asked, then she turned to Mariam who kept the whole system running. “Do I have any more patients?” Mariam shook her head. “No more lids.”

Nour scrubbed up once more, shoved her fingers into clean gloves and went over to Adam. "I'll take it from here," she said, because while she was hot and tired, he looked ready to drop.

"You sure?"

"Go!"

Nour completed the clinic with the last two cataract operations. Perhaps they were getting on top of the queue. There was a steady stream of new arrivals as word spread, but they could keep up if they operated six days a week, she hoped.

Back in the hut, Adam had fallen asleep. She went out to the enclosure where they showered, tipped a little water straight over her head before lathering up and using the rest to rinse off. She couldn't be bothered to dry when the water would evaporate in minutes, and when she went back into the hut she lay down next to him. They needed to eat something, and maybe Adam should take a break tomorrow.

Too hot to sleep, too tired to eat, she thought about the next four months. It was scary, thinking that she had to keep going. And it was worse knowing that some people would turn up the day after they departed, and the week after, and Mariam would still be there, but what she could do would be limited. No cataract surgery, so most of those who managed to reach old age would lose their sight. There would be no one to deal with trachoma scarring, tweezers the only way to temporarily prevent the scratch, scratch of lash against cornea that itched and scarred and blinded.

Ad stirred, rolled against her, and his skin was burning. She ditched the idea of waking him to eat, pulled on a loose cotton dress and headed towards the small kitchen area to find a Coke.

Adam was out of action for three days, lying hot and feverish in the hut, and all she could do was keep making him drink.

"Another few weeks, then we go to Banjul," she told him, when he was feeling better enough to be interested. She passed him the bottle, waited for him to have another drink.

"I need a city, somewhere to get a haircut, a cocktail," he said.

"You don't drink cocktails." She laughed at the idea of him with a cocktail umbrella and maraschino cherry in his glass. She pushed her hair off her neck, turned over the idea of cutting it. It would be better to have it short, whatever Michael would say when she got home.

“I will drink cocktails when I get back. Martini shaken not stirred, I’d kill for a Bombay Sapphire and Schweppes tonic, I don’t care if it’s got fruit and sparklers on top. Anything other than warm Coke.”

“Another month then we get a break, then three more months. And you know...”

“... why we’re here. I know. I know I know, just ...” he stopped. Was he having the same doubts as she was? Could they do more?

Another week. The fan was still broken. An hour in and her scrubs were clinging to her, her hands sweating inside the thin gloves. She rubbed the back of her arm against her forehead, then sealed the tiny incision.

“Gimme five before the next one,” she said, as the woman was helped from the table.

She peeled off the gloves, flung them in the bin and stepped out of the tin shed. It was not much better outside, but the air had a little movement as she walked round to the shade. She took a gulp from her water bottle and leant against the wall. She squinted as she stared out beyond the huddle of huts into the distance, miles and miles of dust and bushes that huddled low against the heat. She hadn’t got her phone to check the time, and it didn’t matter anyway. The sun was high in the sky, the shade had shrunk, it was another six hours until it was dark, maybe five and a half hours in the hut. She stretched her arms, tried to release the tension in her shoulders, then slumped back against the wall. She fiddled with the cap of the water bottle until she could tip a little over her head, the clinical scent of chlorine rising from the purified water.

She used to like the heat. Long hot days meant summer with Nannaa, running in and out of the sea, skin drying on the beach until she got too hot and ran in again. More recently, summer weekends with Ad at Folkstone, she craved the heat, needed more than English sun on her skin to balance out the Channel’s chill. Now she was thousands of miles from a coast, and even that sea would be all wrong, no grandmother to chide her for running free and sweep her indoors to eat kofta at the end of the day.

“Are you ready?” Mariam called through the open doorway.

Nour swallowed down the nausea, straightened up and went back into the hothouse. She went to the barrel, turned the tap, started a trickle of water, but she paused, transfixed by the spin and dance as the water circled.

“Nour?”

Ad was next to her, pulling off his own gloves, dropping them in the bin, waiting for the basin.

“What’s up?”

She shrugged, shook her head. “Nothing.” She couldn’t explain feeling sick because she was too far from the sea, too far from home. The sea-longing that swept her away was subsiding anyway. She shoved her hands under the flow, soap, soap and soap again, fingers finding the places that most people don’t clean, and she imagined that there was salt in the water, and its flow was unlimited.

Chapter 3

“There’s nothing to do here.” Her hair was freshly shampooed and hung loose again, but still she lifted it up off her neck and tried to feel a breeze.

Adam put his book on the lounge and repositioned his Kent cricket cap so it shaded his eyes better. “I thought that was why you picked this hotel. I like it.”

Nour glanced at the turquoise glitter dance of ripples in the pool. She was antsy, couldn’t wind down. An hour ploughing up and down the hotel pool hadn’t emptied her head of the queue they had left behind when they got the plane out last night.

“Did you tell Sandra we were taking the weekend off?”

“Of course I did. She understood. We need a break.”

She looked for the monkeys that she could hear chattering somewhere across the other side of the river. A bird squawked from within the mangrove trees.

“I’m going for a walk,” she said, hoping to walk off the jittery feeling she couldn’t shake.

“Want me to come?”

“It’s fine, you’re comfortable. How about I see you at dinner in an hour?”

She left Adam on the lounge. He had discarded the book and as she walked away he had his DS in his hand, playing a racing game, his way to get his head off the job.

There were lapwings on the riverbank, small groups of brown and white birds like she used to watch on the beach with her father, but the house on the coast felt like a million miles from The Gambia. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her dress and stared into the water. She would have liked to swim but they had been told the river was unsafe. She wondered about asking about transport into Banjul, but it was too late in the day and she didn’t want to wander round tourist markets, which is why they had booked this place anyway. There was a bar, Adam had told her: proper fridges, imported beer, he said, and he was planning to have steak for dinner because he had talked to the chef when he was out in the garden earlier. She checked the time, if she walked for half an hour then turned around, went back to the bar in time to meet him, maybe then she could start to unwind.

She followed the edge of the river, past the other lodges, as far as she could. It was still West Africa but it was so different to the dry scrubland surrounding their small huts, crowded with queues of people, and they were still a thousand miles from London. The time difference wasn't so great though, and Fi who she had shared a flat with would still be at work. Fi had texted, told her that she had passed her latest set of exams, was one step closer to being a consultant. Nour wondered if she should be more ambitious, if she should have opted for neurosurgery or cardiothoracic rather than ophthalmology, or aim for a clinic on Harley Street. Perhaps she should be thinking about marriage and a mortgage like Michael always told her, but she couldn't imagine settling down to a life like his.

Something caught at her leg and she jerked to a halt. Blood trickled from a gash in her ankle, and she realised that the bush was becoming denser, the path had become no more than a track. She was not equipped for trekking, so she paused, turned, made her way back but somewhere she must have taken a wrong turn because the track turned into dense forest, a scramble of thorny plants blocking her way. Her heart was racing, palms damp, however much she scanned her surroundings it looked the same. She took a breath, back-tracked again, counting her way back to where she thought she turned. She found the place where there was blood on the ground, and she looked more carefully this time, searched for her footprints in the dust. She retraced her steps and started to breathe more slowly once the path started to widen again.

She spotted the straight lines of a roof through the trees. The smell of meat cooking drifted over from the kitchen, and she knew that she was nearly home. She hadn't got lost, not really, but perhaps she wouldn't tell Adam. That had been enough exploring for today. Tomorrow they had a trip booked with a guide and would go up the river as far as they could.

The ache in her legs had finally shifted she thought, as she took Adam's hand and stepped onto the aging boat, narrow bows jutting out into the murky brown water. His hand was warm in hers, his skin still white against hers, his neat short nails a reminder that he was a surgeon. She was wearing a big straw hat that she had bought outside the hotel, he wore his grubby white cricket cap, a small reminder of his home.

They settled down at the side of the boat, and the guy started the engine. Adam put his arm around her shoulders as the boat started to chug and bounce gently over the water. They were quickly away from the outskirts of Banjul, into a dusty green countryside where the only sounds were the intermittent chug of the boat engine and the water lapping against the gnarled rooted banks. Her eyes were half closed against the bright shards of sun that bounced off the water, and

she watched for movement, for anything that might show a floating log that was really a crocodile. All they saw were small brown birds, flickering in and out of the mangrove roots. She could feel her shoulders drop. The guy steering the boat looked half asleep, the other couples had stopped talking and even though she had slept for ten hours the night before, she dozed her way up the river.

Too soon, she could hear shouts. There were boys running up the bank, and a jetty came into sight, and beyond that a fort. The boatman steered them in, and she could see that it was thronging with people shouting and waving goods as they drew near. They pulled in, a flurry of vendors ready for them, and she wished that they hadn't stopped.

"Do we have to get off?" she said to Adam.

"It might be interesting," he said. "The fort was built to help stop the slave trade." They followed the group up the jetty. It was a short walk along the road, but there was no shade, and all the way people tried to sell them carved wooden animals and brightly printed fabric, fruit and drinks. She didn't want or need what they were selling, but this was their job. The group came to a halt before she could decide what to do. The guide talked about the fort that they had reached, some remnant of colonialism. Her eyes wandered past the sellers who had fallen silent during the talk. At the side of the road, by the entrance to the fort there was a row of maimed and disabled men, women and children. She spotted a blind woman, a child at her side. The child saw that she was looking, pulled her grandmother forward, hands outstretched. Nour rummaged in her pockets but the guide shouted, anger in his voice, and the grandmother and child fell back. It was over in seconds, but she gave up any pretence of listening.

"Ad, can you see? It's probably cataract. Do you think I can examine her?"

"Don't, Nour. There's nothing we can do for her here."

She looked around, apart from the fort there were a few shacks, a small shelter for the drinks vendor, and she couldn't work out where the people begging would have come from, where they would go when the tourists departed. She knew that Adam was right, but she took a step towards the woman and child, because if she looked she might know a little more. One step then, she stopped. If she walked any closer, it would become a promise to help her, and right now, that was not a promise that she could keep.

"I've seen enough," she said. "Let's go."

But it didn't work like that, and the guide wouldn't let them walk back to the boat alone, so she followed Adam round the fort, listening to stories of battles long gone, and she thought about the woman and how she could get her into theatre.

The fresh fish at dinner that night didn't taste as good as the steak the night before. She looked at the time on her phone.

"We're too late for flights back tonight, aren't we?"

Adam nodded. "We'll be out of here first thing, back to work by tomorrow afternoon."

She couldn't forget the woman they had walked away from up river. There was a queue of people still back at the camp. She needed to be there, but someone needed to be here to help too, because the woman was probably far younger than Nour's father, but she was shrivelled, wrinkled, starving because she couldn't see, she couldn't work and buy or grow food anymore. She didn't need to be blind, cataracts could be removed, and all they would need is less than an hour in theatre. But it wasn't that simple. There wasn't an operating theatre set up, and even if she took the woman to the capital, persuaded the hospital to let her use their facilities, there would be hundreds or maybe thousands of other people still in need of help. When she was in Mali it had been easy to think of The Gambia as a holiday, not a place with the same shortages. Guilt submerged any pleasure that she had found in watching the birds that flew low across the water.

She checked the time again. "We could probably have done another fifty people this weekend if we hadn't ..."

"Nour! Snap out of it!"

Her head jerked up at his voice.

"You needed a break, I needed a break. We'll work harder, better because we've got away." His hand moved to touch hers. "Make the most of what we have, here, now. Go on."

She nodded. She wasn't to spoil this last night for him, but when she got back to the camp she was going to solve this problem.

Chapter 4

The days were a blur of queues of people, slicing into scarred tissue, popping out cataracts, constantly battling heat, tiredness, frustration that she couldn't do more. Nour was always up first to greet the queue that was still there however hard they worked, and she had started running calculations on how many people they could see each day, each week, before they had to go home.

"I volunteered for this," she said after a morning when she had had to decide that a woman was too sick for surgery, an afternoon where the queue outside was longer than it had been that morning.

Adam sighed. "I know. Doesn't make it any easier, though. We're not enough, you, me, Stefan, a handful of locals."

Nour was scrubbing the table because she wanted it done right. The choking scent of disinfectant rose into the heat. She coughed, stretched, then said, "We need to come back, with more people." She hadn't broached this before, unsure if he wanted to return.

"I know." He frowned.

She hesitated before saying, "Do you think four surgeons would get on top of things?"

"I guess."

"I might talk to Sandra. Four surgeons, a couple of nurses from the charity too."

Numbers were constantly at the top of her mind. She noted how many people they could see, and she struggled to work out why on some days they completed fewer operations than usual. Nothing changed the fact that when the light went, they had to stop. Even if they had better lighting she wasn't sure whether they could physically work longer.

Stefan had to return to Berlin for a week. Her spreadsheets showed that they carried out more operations because they were restricted to straightforward ops, local anaesthetic only, but there were a few complex cases that she had to ask to come back, and she didn't know if they would. Everything worked differently at the camp, and she should have known this from previous projects, people were happy to wait in a way they wouldn't have been in London, but few came back for follow up, probably because of the journey.

"She needs to bring him back," she told Mariam. There was a mother and baby, and the infant had a lump that was pushing down his lid, keeping the eye closed. "If I operate when Stefan is

back, he should be able to develop decent vision in that eye, if we don't find any other problems. Does she understand?"

The woman looked scared. Nour hoped Mariam could reassure her.

Nour made another note, then went back to typing numbers into the spreadsheet.

"Sandra's going to be delighted with you," Adam said as he leant over her shoulder. "There should be no problem proving effectiveness this time."

"I don't know." She shook her head. "We're not keeping up, not really. I don't know. I mean, even if we come back, even with more people. I just don't know."

Another week in, Stefan was back, and the mother did return with the baby, Nour operated and the lid looked great. The mother stayed in the camp and Nour checked the baby's eye the next day, but she wanted to do more.

In bed that night, she couldn't stop thinking about the baby. "We've got to come back, Ad. In another year we could get better visual acuities from the baby, see exactly what he can see with that eye. Two years maybe."

"How many projects have you done, Nour?"

"This is the fifth."

"And sure, someone might come back here next year, but chances are it won't be us. And how will the mother know that we're here, and she should come back?"

"This isn't working, is it?" She swung her legs around to sit on the edge of the bed which tilted as she moved.

"Why not? We've helped a lot of people. It's sad that we can't do exactly what would be best for each one, but it's better than nothing."

"Don't be so complacent!" Her voice was loud across the quiet room. She stood up. "I know this is the way we've always done it, but it's not good enough. I can't go back to London and leave things like this."

She wasn't sleeping properly, and neither was Adam. On every project she had been on she had been through the midway low, but it didn't make it any better. With two months still to go, everything Adam said annoyed her, and Stefan seemed to delight in provoking them to argue.

They barely spoke for three days. Adam walked across the room to get a drink, whereas before he would have asked her to pass the bottle. Only inches separated them as they lay in bed at night, but it felt like miles to Nour. She didn't know how she could miss someone when she was still living and working with him in the same small space, but she missed the thing that had vanished from between them.

It was dark, dark like you never get in London, when she was thrown to the floor, heap of arms and legs, Adam on top of her.

"Shit, sorry, Nour," he said.

He hadn't been in the bed when she fell asleep, and there was a torch in his hand. "What are you doing?"

"I tripped, sorry." He found the lamp, switched it on, and she could see that the bed had collapsed, metal legs folded at one end.

"What were you doing up? I need to sleep." She fumbled on the floor, found her phone. "It's gone midnight."

"Couldn't sleep."

She wrangled the unwieldy metal frame, legs folded and bent. "Give me some help. Ow!" The spring snapped back, trapping her hand.

He was there in seconds, pulling it apart, snapping the legs back into place. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not." Her hand smarted, "I'm exhausted, and the last thing I need is to be awake." She could feel tears on her cheeks as Adam took her hand, tested the fingers.

"Nothing broken. There's no ice, but I can get some cold water."

"Don't bother."

"I will, you can't work if it's swollen."

"Don't you think I know that?" She snatched her hand back. "Look, I need to get some sleep, or I'll be causing more problems than I cure."

“Hey, shush, it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine!” Her voice came out too loud, and tears were pouring down her face, and she was crying for more than a bruised hand.

“Fine, it’s all a mess,” Adam shouted back.

Everyone would hear them, but she couldn’t stop the words coming out. “We can’t see enough people to keep up, and there’s two months to go, then we have to leave and there’s no plan to come back, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

She was gasping out breaths as she shouted, her gaze on his eyes, and somehow something shifted and they were both saying sorry. They fell onto the sheets, his lips where her face was still wet, his hands where her ribs showed through, no space between them anymore.

“What are we going to do when we get back?” Adam asked a few nights later. She was still exhausted, but she could cope because everything else was okay again. She didn’t want to talk about ‘what next’ that night, though. She glanced at her phone, looked back at him. There was a long-term project in Pakistan, and Sandra always needed people to go out there, whether it was for a few weeks or longer. Nour knew she could go straight on after a quick break, and Sandra had emailed her the details, but she wanted to return to Mali too.

“I... I’ve been thinking,” she said, “We, I have to come back, Ad. There’s no funding right now, but if I email Sandra, and if I can find the funds, we could. So... what do you think?”

“That sounds like a lot of work. It’ll cost thousands.”

“I know.” She hesitated. They had sat outside, eaten dinner, the sun had set and Adam was yawning.

He pulled her closer. “We talked before about sharing a flat. Have you thought about it? A year together in London, it would be a good chance to live together, to see if...”

She was silenced, she hadn’t seen that coming. If he had asked her that first night when they were in The Gambia, then maybe. But even then maybe she would have had to say the same thing.

“I’m not ready for that, Ad. I... I don’t think you are, either.”

“I am, Nour. I’m serious about all this.” He stretched his arm to encompass the camp. “You and me, together. You want to make a difference to people’s lives, so do I. Maybe we could fundraise from London.”

“What if I could get a job in South Africa and we could come up here more regularly, run a clinic every few weeks?”

He frowned again. “I don’t know. Maybe we both need a break after this.”

“Why are you asking me to move in with you, Ad?” She bit her lip, then said what she was thinking, “We’ve never talked properly about what we want from the future.”

He kept his gaze focussed on the distance, even though all he could see was darkness. “What does everyone want? A home, a relationship, a family. I could get a permanent job, you’d have more time to fundraise if you wanted. We could save up and buy somewhere together.” He stopped, his eyes on hers.

She was suddenly unsure if she was ready for the future he described, and something inside her balked against his cosy idea of home. “We only get one shot at this life,” she said, “and I need to do things now. There are people here who need me to come back.”

“I love you, Nour, you know that. If you wanted, we could get married.”

“I’m not saying never,” she said, and even as the words came out she wondered if they were true. “Even if I can’t get the funding to come back here, I might go to Pakistan after this. Maybe we could try living together after that. Maybe.” But she wasn’t sure that she wanted even that, and how could they be talking about marriage when she couldn’t even imagine sharing a flat.

That night they lay back to back, not sleeping, not talking again, and all she could think about was why he asked her now, and why she didn’t want to say yes.

He acted like nothing had happened as they started to operate the next day.

“Sandra’s sent me costings for coming back here,” she said as he waited for the next patient. She was finishing up, another cataract op completed.

“What does she say?”

“You raise the money, you get your project.”

He stared at her for moments, and she dropped her gaze, fiddled with her gloves. Eventually he said, "You've convinced her, then, that's quite a feat!"

"I don't think I've convinced her yet, I imagine she thinks that'll put us off."

"Us." He stopped then said, "I haven't said I'll come back. I don't know if I can keep doing this, Nour."

She didn't know what to say, didn't like the part of her that had assumed that he would keep on working with her even though she might not want to settle down with him.

"Have you got a plan to raise the cash?" he asked.

"I'm working on it. We need to start with corporate donations. I've made a list. We can write to people while we're out here." She faltered. She had been going to ask him to contact some of his friends from college.

He was silent for a second then he nodded. "You should see if you can get permission to take some photos and videos. If you could make people see what a difference this makes that would help."

She smiled at him. "That's a good idea."

She was finishing up her last operation before lunch when she heard a scream. She glanced up, met Adam's gaze across the room, then looked back down and tied off the last stitch. Screams and yells weren't out of the ordinary here, but then a pop, pop, pop, stuttered across the compound amongst a roar of truck engines.

Nour hesitated. It couldn't be gun fire, could it?

"Bring her round," she said to Stefan, then she went over to Adam. "How far in are you?"

"Barely started." His gaze was on the doorway, figures running back and forth. "I'll wait," he said, but a small scruffy man with a headwrap covering his face and a machine gun in his grip came to the doorway and the question was immaterial.

They were ushered out, arms in the air, bloody surgical gloves still on her hands.

Everyone who was waiting was still lined up outside, but flat on the floor, faces to the earth. Oumar, the guard, was lying flat too, blood seeping into a pool on the ground around his belly. There were three trucks with their engines running, and in front of them sixteen or twenty men, machine

guns trained on the patients. The men wore the scars and flags of the insurgents. They were a long way out of their territory, hundreds of miles too far south, jumpy glances, trigger fingers. Some were Tuareg, with heads swathed and faces covered, some North African, some from sub-Saharan Africa, robed in an assortment of traditional dress and ex-army gear.

“Who’s the doctor?” one of them shouted.

Adam stepped forward as Nour reached out to hold him back.

“I am,” they both said.

“Wararni, come. I have him,” the man said and then a warrior strode from the group. No mish-mash costume for him, this man was wearing well-worn army boots, desert camo trousers and a sand-coloured vest. He towered over Nour, dark shining muscled arms, gun in hand, sunglasses hiding the last part of his veiled face.

“Come!”

There was no softness in his voice. He scanned them up and down, Nour felt naked, even though she was still in scrubs. She wondered if he was hoping for cash; a ransom request would be bad because the protocol was never to pay.

“You’re the doctor?” He was looking at Adam who nodded.

Nour was silent, unsure what would keep them alive for this moment and the next.

“The eye doctor?”

He nodded again.

“Show me your hands!”

Adam held them up.

“Yimlul, my brother,” the big man called, and all at once she could see why they were here. Another man, same build, but younger, mid brown skin rather than glistening black, stepped out of the truck, bandage across half his face.

“Examine him.” Wararni’s Arabic was flawless, hint of a north African accent, his posture straight.

Adam lifted the bandage and as Yimlul turned his face she could see a livid slash, from forehead to eyebrow to lid to cheek. Red raw, split, his eyelid no longer closed.

No one said a word, and in the silence she could hear wind blowing through the sparse trees that bordered the compound.

Adam looked at her, and she moved forward with caution, looked closer, didn't touch the wound. She closed her lips firmly, trying not to betray how she felt when assessing his asymmetric face. She raised one hand to the man's head, turned his face this way and that, examined the fresh-scarred line, pink and red against his skin. As the light caught the lens in his eye she could see that it was opaque. Cataract, but not some easy elderly cataract, the lens liquefied. Traumatic cataract, a surgical venture into the unknown.

"You can fix this?" the leader demanded of Adam.

Adam looked at her again, both of them trying to work out how to get out of this with everyone alive. She nodded, but Adam said, "It won't be simple."

Nour felt nauseous, because they were buying in to their demands, and promising to fix something that might be too complex. If there was dirt in there, simmering infection, if the pressure was rising in the eye already, if the drainage was compromised, all sorts of complications pierced her thoughts, but there was hope on the brother's face, and with people's lives at stake and she couldn't say no.

"When did this happen?" she asked.

"Tell him, brother." The leader turned, picked up a sat-phone and started to talk, and she was left with the brother and the small scruffy guard, machine gun raised. There was a burst of gunfire from a man by one of the trucks. She clenched her fists, swallowed down a surge of bile and hoped that they would release them when the job was done.

Adam and Nour walked towards the hut, exchanging glances. They were really going to do this.

"Wash. Get ready!" The leader reappeared, sat phone still in one hand, gun in the other. "My brother's eye. Now."

He used the gun to direct Adam to the basin. They start to scrub, driven by habit, under the stream of clean clear water from the barrel but Nour's hands were shaking.

"Maybe we shouldn't..." Adam started, but another man pointed his gun at him, and she put her head down and carried on scrubbing her fingers.

“You ready?” she asked Adam. He nodded, and she turned to the table to check the instruments, as ready as she could be.

Yimlul was waiting patiently, and he smiled with half his face. “You fix me,” he said, slow grin. “You fix me good.” And his one good eye met hers, but her gaze was drawn to the other side, to the lid that couldn’t close any more.

She nodded. “Okay. Let’s see what you can see.”

She checked his vision, then asked him to lay down, searched for the instruments she needed. Adam brought over an implant, and he was muttering. “I don’t like this, who knows what’s in there...”

Stefan was shoved through the door, gun to his back. The leader glared, arms folded.

As Nour cleaned Yimlul’s skin, she could see he was praying under his breath. She watched Stefan set up, then she laid a clean sheet over part of Yimlul’s face. She pulled on gloves then looked at Adam.

“Do you want to lead, or shall I?”

“I will,” he said.

“What are you waiting for?” the leader asked, his voice loud.

Adam spun round, shouted back, “Do you have any idea what you’re asking? You’ve shot Oumar already, maybe I should be stitching him up, not someone who’s killed innocent people.”

“Ad!” The words weren’t out of his mouth before the leader smacked Adam across the temple with his gun. Adam crumpled to the floor, and Nour stared, mouth open, she should’ve be crying but the tears were solid in her lacrimal glands.

“Right. You will operate.” The gun was pointed at her now, and she couldn’t stop staring at Adam. She took a step towards him, and the man shouted, “Operate. Now.” There was blood all down the side of Adam’s face. Was he breathing? She struggled to turn her back. If she operated, got it done, then maybe then they would leave and she could help Adam.

She turned, swallowed, exhaled. Gloves on, she started to probe at the lid, decided that she should seal the cornea first, and then there was the cataract, and she wouldn’t do everything in one go if she had planned this, wouldn’t do this at all, not here not now not like this, Adam and Oumar bleeding a few feet away. She inhaled, counted to seven, exhaled, still a tremor in her hands and she picked up a gauze swab and started to clean the wound.

“You can do this,” Stefan said, “You must do this.”

She glared at him. There was no easy way to fix this eye. She rinsed the wound, tried to avoid washing dirt into it. She started to stitch it up. It was hard. She needed to keep the corneal damage to a minimum, and part of her mind was still on Adam. He hadn’t moved. Wararni shifted his gun every time she glanced away from his brother’s eye. And then there was the cataract.

She slipped in the drops to dilate the pupil and waited. The hazel ring was still intact, a good sign.

“What are you waiting for?”

“I need the drops to work before I can remove the cataract.”

She waited as long as she could with Wararni pacing up and down, then she picked up her blade. She needed to make an incision, needed to ensure that the anterior chamber was deep enough even after the injury. She cut through the anterior capsule then began the slow business of wrestling the lens into tiny pieces. She probed, snipped, shredded, extracted. It felt like it was taking forever. She had to go slowly, though, couldn’t damage the capsule any further, needing somewhere to place the implant.

Clear as it could be, she slid the new lens in, stepped back, and breathed again. The man beneath her knife was tall, broad shouldered, had to be as tough as his brother, but right now he was hers. Nothing showed her the softness in his one good eye, the gentleness in his voice and she thought of holding a knife to his throat, forcing them to let her go. But one bullet would kill her as much as twenty would, and Adam was still on the floor, and there was Stefan, and Mariam, all the patients. Some of the men holding guns looked hopped up on coke, pupils wide even in the bright light outside.

And there was no softness in the gaze of the leader, not when he glared at her, not until he looked at the body of his brother.

“Don’t make a mistake,” he said, and she struggled to still the tremor in her hands. It was like the first time she had held a scalpel, the first time she cut into a live person rather than a cadaver, like the first operation that she led, but a hundred times worse.

“I’m going to deal with the lid now,” she said, calling on every bit of ophthalmic trauma experience that she had. Nothing was straightforward as she found a shard of metal inside the skin and hunted for more, hoped there was nothing left in the eye, but eventually she could start to rebuild the lid as best she could.

She closed, covered Yimlul's eye with gauze and stepped back. She moved to wash her hands and Wararni was there again. "Is it done? Did you succeed?"

She nodded. "He needs to be careful. No fighting. He needs to use antibiotics. He might still need glasses."

She looked him in the eye, had to ask now. "I need to see if Adam's okay." He was sprawled on the floor, just as he had fallen, utterly still.

Wararni's face closed over. "No." And he seized her arm, dragged her to the truck. As the sun set she found herself bound, lying on the truck floor, bouncing out of the compound over unmade roads and into the bush.

Chapter 5

mouth open scream

rat-a-tat-tat pounds my ears scream rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat

diesel roar

crimson runs into Saharan dust on boot-worn metal

jerk bind cut wrists

scuffed army boots, worn blue trainers, taped flip flops, dust-worn feet

machine gun butt strip of bullets hang

stinking sackcloth draped over my head half dark

face meet floor, grit my mouth

twist, can't tug wrists apart

scream engine scream

wheels spin

dust haze kicks smoke

heart in my mouth breathe through broken glass

air-held gun shoulder high

rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat blasts above

side to boot to mouth to floor

Oumar, bleeding, dead

can't hold

dust in skin, in eyes

blood rolling down his face

shrieks and jeers

burst of speed

dust clouds bloom

Ad must be alive, has to be, must be, can't

choke boot in my side - heart beats out

truck vaults

airborne I smack

back down on metal

bile mouth bump retch vomit

bag snatched from my head, lightsglare, choke, clean air, dirt, dust, choke, breathe

rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat flat to the metal

coat over head stifling stinking sweat
took me
vomit on face, in hair, in ear
cold now, cold dark, cold,
shoulder hip ache chill through my bones
thin damp cotton shiver
I alone
empty

 engine slows
 rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat
dry air cold thin damp cotton scrubs
I'm no longer
 rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat

The truck slowed to a halt, sand rising in choking clouds that penetrated the fabric over her head. She coughed as she was tumbled from the truck, a rush of fresh air in the mingled stench of sweat and machine oil. Rough hands wrestled her in through a door, coat still covering her, ties ripped from her wrists as she was thrust to the ground. Hard earth, thin foam mattress, door scraped shut, thud of a bar being slotted in place. It was dark, still dark, dark of night time as she pulled the jacket from her head, wrapped it round her shoulders, chill rising from the earth, descending from the desert air. She dragged the mattress to a corner, back against the wall. She hugged her knees to her chest and words spilled out with her breath.

“Can’t be here, can’t be, it was safe where we were, we were too far south.”

She’d been in that truck for hours, her mouth was sour, still tasted of vomit. She craved water, but even more than that she needed to know if Adam was alive. Cold dry air, scent of the desert, hundreds of miles from the camp, tears she couldn’t stop streaked her face, because Ad hadn’t moved since he was hit.

She sat rigid against the wall, as she realised her family would have to be told, and in her mind she travelled to their cluttered home, her father’s books spilling out from the shelves onto the floor like they had done since her mother died. He would be braced, his phone in his hand as he heard the news, Michael standing beside him, the frown that he usually kept for when the books didn’t balance pulling lines where his forehead met his nose. Her nephews, Izaiah and Gabe, would

be racing round as usual, oblivious, his wife Samia in the kitchen, rising smells of fried spices and damp washing on the clothes airer.

She clenched her fists, and the cold of the clay walls permeated her jacket, shirt, skin, bones, heart.

She dozed, slept, then jerked awake.

It was still dark.

She dozed, slept, jerked awake.

Still dark, her heart battered the walls of her chest.

Outside there was silence.

She was dragged from sleep by the call to prayer, footsteps outside, sounds of voices morphing into a rhythm of familiar words.

The rising dawn showed cracks in the brickwork, showed a wooden door barred with iron, showed no way out.

She swallowed as her stomach tightened.

She waited.

Much later, she woke again, didn't realise she'd slept, dirt ground into her face, her mouth dry. The door scraped open, and a lanky figure of a robed man was silhouetted against daylight. A steaming tin mug of black tea and a bowl of something like porridge was put down beside her. The man who delivered them wore a headwrap covering everything apart from his eyes, but still he didn't meet her gaze. The door slammed shut again.

She ate, drank, scraped the bowl, shocked at her appetite. That done, she stood, stretched. The room had no windows, but light seeped in through gaps in the walls, the roof, between the bars and planks that made up the door, and she listened, then peered through a gap she could reach. She caught glimpses of sandy ground, chunky tyre tracks, another mud-walled building, but nothing more, and she slumped back on the mattress.

Filled too fast, her belly cramped, and she wriggled, tried to find a comfortable way to sit. A shout from outside, and her heart raced again, sweat chills ran down her. She wondered if someone

was looking for her, if someone knew which way they had travelled, who her captors might be. She shivered, and she wished Adam was with her, even Stefan, someone else who could tell her, "It will all work out," "We will be rescued soon." But she couldn't wish anyone else in danger, and Oumar was dead and Ad could be too, if not from the blow to the head then from a bleed in the brain with no treatment for hundreds, thousands of miles, and maybe she would be dead soon too. She wouldn't become a consultant or get married or have children of her own and her parents may as well have stayed in Egypt. But at least Michael was safe and Izaiah and Gabe were growing up far, far away from any conflict and she hoped that they would pick a safe job like Michael had and worry about spreadsheets instead of staying alive. She picked at a scrape on her hand, probed where her hip and shoulder would be bruised if there was enough light to see.

Don't want Adam here, want him here, wish that she knew he was alive... wish that

she had fought harder against being taken

they hadn't taken her

she hadn't thought that she'd feel at home in Mali

she hadn't come at all

wish that

she and Adam were in London, looking for flats, a mortgage, the next good job, another life where they had settled down and were arguing over the wedding plans, if it was too soon to start trying for a baby, what interest rates were doing, who'd make consultant first

wish the last few months away, the last few years...

if she...

hadn't said yes to this project

hadn't persuaded him to come out here

had listened to her dad when he said it was too dangerous

hadn't said yes to going abroad at all or

hadn't specialised in ophthalmology or

hadn't become a doctor

if they...

hadn't come to England

hadn't been forced out of Egypt

if her parents hadn't wanted more for Michael, for her.

It grew dark outside and she thought about her cousin Sara, still in Egypt, safe and raising a family of her own. Worsening cramps seized at her stomach and she was forced towards the bucket in the corner, stinking stream of diarrhoea, punctuated by men's shouts and gunfire's staccato sound. She retched, expelling everything inside as engines roared, headlights illuminated every crack in the wall, door frame lit up, more gunshots, more, roar of engines louder until

nothing left inside her

engines faded

she fell onto the mattress

curled herself small

blackness once more.

Dawn.

The call to prayer.

Wait.

Wait.

Wait.

Scuffle of feet at the door, loud men's voices, slash of bright light, creak of hinges, scrape of metal on dirt floor, hands that didn't care about bruising her as she was dragged off the mattress, outside, dazzled, no attempt to cover her face.

A surge of heat hit her as they pulled her out, and when her eyes adjusted she could see why there was no need to blind her, because beyond the stockade made from wood and sacks and

beaten panels of oil drums, there were only miles of nothing but sand, miles and miles where she would die if she tried to run.

She was in the part of the country where they had been told never to go, where however much the need, they had been told they couldn't travel safely. And it had happened anyway.

They had taken her alive, kept her alive, fed her and with daylight her fear was pierced by a tiny spark of relief that it was only her, tiny hope that everyone else had been left, alive, that Adam had come round, nothing more than a headache, but those thoughts were drowned by terror as she was dragged onwards by a short, scruffy man, the same one who had forced her from the theatre at gunpoint, and the taller one who, now his headwrap had slipped, she could see had scars on his cheeks. Behind them a skinny teenager, no headwrap, pointed a gun at her.

Men were sitting in groups, relaxed and joking, as she was made to walk through their midst. She kept her eyes down, light too bright after a day on her own in the dark. Her stomach roiled at whatever they were cooking, unfamiliar spices rising as the day's heat grew. Dark skin, light skin, fatigues or robes, to a man the insurgents had guns in their hands or hooked over their backs, or propped against their legs as they put food into their mouths. She could see some of the same men who attacked the camp, same pseudo-military garb, camo, desert wear, meshed with the robes and headwraps swathed to protect against the harsh climate.

She risked a closer look at the scars on some of the men. She read bullet wounds, knife wounds, inept stitching on old weals, raised pink stripes sliced through black skin from untended injuries, the individual cost of a fight for their own land. She dropped her gaze again as a man with a bright blue head wrap caught her eye. She had stared too long, saw his fingers tense over a trigger, but she was dragged onwards, across a courtyard created by a couple of adobe buildings and tents.

A rapid discussion took place between her ill-matched guards, then she was jerked on again. She could catch some words of Arabic, she thought, but she couldn't understand more than that. Before she could hear more, see more, she was thrown into the doorway of the bigger building, cast to the floor. Her hands scraped on dirt, her knees banged against broken tiles.

"Careful!" the tall, black-skinned leader, Wararni, said in his impeccable Arabic. Yimlul stood beside him, gauze over one eye, and she itched to peel it back and check her work. But there was no test chart, no way to examine the cornea, nor check the pressure. She thought about a slit lamp, a pen torch, any light at all.

Wararni shouted, "Iken!" and the skinny scruffy man scurried forwards, like he was waiting for a blow. The lanky, long-faced man and the teen waited behind her, hands on their guns. More hurried talk, then Wararni turned to her.

"Check his eye!" he said.

She looked at her hands. "I should wash before I touch him." Wararni nodded, no problem understanding her Arabic.

Another nod, and Iken hurried off, returning seconds later with a bowl of water, block of yellow soap.

Her hands felt cold despite the dry heat around her, and her fingers shook as she peeled back the gauze and tape, as she touched his skin.

The lid was scabbed, swollen but the wound was clean, she saw with relief.

"Can you open your eye?" she asked.

Yimlul blinked his good eye a couple of times before the scabbed lid joined its partner and rose. With the naked eye she could barely see the stitches in the cornea, the pupil was dilated in the darkness of the room, but the iris looked flat and even.

"Can you come into the daylight? I need to see better," she said.

As they walked outside she watched his pupil constrict evenly, the skin round his eye wrinkle and flinch as the sun hit it. His cornea was mostly clear, and the opacity round the stitched wound hadn't grown.

"Your vision won't be perfect. There will be a scar," she said, but before the words were out Yimlul covered his uninjured eye and scanned the camp. A smile spread across his face.

"It's good, brother," he called, "It's good."

Wararni huffed, seemingly disinterested as he talked with another couple of men, words too fast and low for her to understand.

"Take her away, then," he said when he had finished his conversation.

"Wait!" Yimlul replied. He grabbed Nour by the shoulder and strode back into the room to face Wararni. "She has saved my eye."

Wararni narrowed his eyes and assessed her. He shook his head then turned away. "Deal with her."

“She could be useful.”

“She’s a risk.”

Nour’s nails cut into her palms as she strained to understand their rapid words, sweat making her skin soft and damp.

“What if we need her again, if there are problems with my eye, if someone else needs surgery?”

Wararni was silent.

“She could treat the injured,” Yimlul said, looking at Nour. She nodded, hopeful that if she agreed she might live.

“There’s nowhere for her to run to. She knows that she’d die if she tried to get away.” Yimlul’s grip tightened as he spoke.

Wararni shrugged, then turned back to his conversation. “She runs, shoot her.”

And instead of locking her in the dark, or worse, Yimlul hurried her over to sit a little way from the men under that shade of an awning. He called for a bowl, a mug of tea. She squatted and pretended to eat, but as she held her right hand over the bowl she looked around. They weren’t going to let her go, weren’t going to ransom her. No one was going to find her here, in millions of miles of Sahara, days of driving from the capital. She had to prove her use or risk being executed. She gritted her teeth, aware of the sand in her mouth, her eyes, and the ghost of the pressure from Yimlul’s hand on her shoulder. No one was going to rescue her from here: she would have to work out how to escape.

As evening turned to night Iken appeared and took her back to her cell. Chills chased through her as she huddled on the mattress. Thinking of escape was one thing outside, armed men around her, nothing she could do but plan. At night, on her own in the dark it felt impossible. She couldn’t walk out of here, would need to steal a truck. She reckoned her chances. Visions of her skeleton drying out in the desert stuck in her mind. But maybe UN Peacekeepers were already heading north through the Sahel, African Union troops could be scouring the locale. They could be, but she had to face the fact that government sanctioned troops couldn’t travel this far in safety, and even if they were searching, how would they know where to look? The vast desert outweighed any chance of them finding her. This group, whatever group this was, whatever alliance, seemed to have a secure base here, relaxed in their day to day existence.

The odds weren't in her favour, and for the first time in a long while she considered prayer. At home she had gone to church with the family, but after university she had finally managed to move out when she started work, and Sunday mornings were a rare chance to sleep, the weekend was for going out with friends. Was it wrong to petition God now, to call on him when she had nothing else left? She asked herself the question, but there was no answer. She still prayed for rescue, though, because divine intervention seemed to be her best hope.

Low rumble of trucks cut into her prayers, accompanied by shouts and gunfire. More noise, shouting, engines revved. She stood, hurried to the wall with the biggest crack. She could catch glimpses of men, split scenes when a truck turned, headlights straight on dazzled, darkness again until her eyes adapted, then more men, not just tens, maybe hundreds. A stampede of hooves cut into the low thrum of waiting engines, and men on horseback, flame torches in their hands, rode in. More cries, a glimpse of Wararni as he shouted orders.

Insurgents flocked to the trucks, more of them were wearing scarves round their heads now, more with sunglasses so no skin was showing at all. The trucks were open-topped and she could see the men standing, guns in the air. More shouts, more shots, and the thrum heightened to a roar as truck after truck led out.

The camp grew silent. Her eyes, used to the lights, saw nothing for moments. She pushed at the door. Now would be a good time to try to escape, odds better with everyone out of the camp, but however hard she tried it wouldn't budge. She dug her fingers into the cracks and gaps in the wall with increasing desperation, but however much she scraped, the skin on her fingertips growing raw, nothing shifted.

Chapter 6

Amastan stood next to her, washed his hands as she washed hers, a small dark shadow no taller than her. He could have been twelve and tall, he could have been sixteen and small. His skin was light like hers, his eyes were light brown too. He carried water, cut bandages, copied what she did. She had wondered about showing him how to clean a wound, to stitch it up, but realised as he watched intently, he was learning already.

He scrubbed the table, exactly like she had. There was water boiling because they knew the trucks would be back soon, dawn just breaking over the dunes. She stretched, yawned, readjusted the scarf they insisted she wear. She was ready, as ready as she could be, but could never be ready for this.

She had been dragged out to operate every night there had been fighting, every night since she had been in captivity, and she hadn't felt this unprepared since her first weeks on the wards. That didn't compare with this, though, no threat of death hanging over her.

Iken, and the man with the scar, Baragsen, lounged with Udad, who seemed barely old enough to shave. There was a gun across Iken's sprawling limbs, a knife loose in Scarface's four-fingered hand as he dozed. She watched them, weighing up her chances. If she was going to leave, it had to be in a moment like this one, when there were only a handful of men at the camp. She counted the trucks in and out, waited for the night when there was one left behind, but it never happened. Trucks got hit by bullets too, and there were never enough spare parts, so anything that could be driven went out each night, returning with a few more bullet scars.

Sometimes a night raid brought back more recruits, fresh young men, their skin unscarred. Sometimes they were so young she cried. Tears leaked out unbidden from her: she never used to cry this much but now as the break in the darkness brought the roar of trucks again, tears ran down her face.

Last night she had dreamt that Adam was there alongside her. Next to her, she wanted him next to her, he had worked next to her in so many places that she dreamt him here, dreamt him into danger, dreamt him alive when he might still be dead. She woke, heartbeatsweatchills, the roar of an engine, the ratatat of a gun, those were still dreams. As the sun sent shafts of gold into the shadows, the guilt still running through her was real.

She shivered, and watched the first men off the trucks, hauling a body over to where she stood.

Specialising in eyes, she had forgotten all she had once learned about the liver and stomach and guts. Until now. She rubbed her eyes, adjusted the headscarf they made her wear, took a breath, knew that she was faking it here, this man's life in her hands, because if she didn't keep faking it, if she didn't try to save him, it would be her life on the line.

Body on the slab, writhing in pain, the whites of his eyes flew up, blood in his mouth. She looked away, looked back to the mess that was his side. No anaesthetic, she had never thought that she could work while a man was pinned down, screaming in pain.

She had never seen the effect of trauma on skin, the shock of splintered bone, never smelled the stink of the human body sliced open, the cooked meat smell of burns and the stench of perforated bowels, and she wished for surgical gloves before she plunged her hands inside, wished she could call on someone senior who knew what they were doing, wished she could say, "I don't know how to do this." She had forgotten this blood, these guts, but now she couldn't forget. There were bodies in her dreams.

She let go her memories of neat clean surgery, microscopic blood vessels in a clean white eyeball in a sterile theatre. Reality was a scrubbed slab of wood, blood in fly-gathering pools round her feet, a blade that she used again and again in a war she didn't understand, didn't agree with what little she knew. What she did could have been taking place in any century and she glanced over to the young man dying from sepsis under an awning across the other side of the camp, wondered how any good leader could think that imposing their religion was worth all this death.

Even amongst the blood, there were brief respites that kept her intact, when she sat, eyes screwed under the glaring sun on days when no one was fighting, when no one was dying, when no one lay waiting to be buried, and no scent of human decay floated across the camp. She felt inside the man, tried to find an artery, and thought about moments when, no ache in her legs, a tin mug of tea, and near silence apart from the wind in the dunes, she could almost imagine something that could be happiness.

More trucks tumbled back in over the sandhills, men clasping limbs, blood soaked rags holding skin together and she had to decide whether this man was a lost cause, if there was someone else she could save.

She could hunt for the bullets lost inside this man, no blood to replace what was pouring out of him, or deal with a line of men with minor injuries. Rays of light illuminating his muscles, Wararni strode up, made the call for her as he saw the man writhing in pain, his oatmeal robes stained crimson from neck to hips.

“Don’t know why they dragged him back,” he said. He glanced round, then shot the man in the head.

Nour retched, death in front of her, death over and over again.

As more trucks drew to a halt, men clambered down. Yimlul’s eye had healed well, and he gave her that slow lopsided smile when he passed, ignoring the blood on her arms, the bullet hole in the head of the dead man in front of her.

“Hold this,” she said to Amastan. He had a black eye today, had been fighting with the other kids. He was small, wiry, but she had seen him fight more than once. When they mocked him for being a bad shot, he took on kids larger than himself with no fear, powered by some inner source of pent up fury.

The young boys in the camp spent much of their time fighting when they weren’t playing football or training, and perhaps it was no surprise. She had watched Yimlul rallying them to target practice day after day, and wondered if it was worse that he was asking them to kill or that she asked Amastan to spend hours washing wounds, cleaning and repairing where they could, watching the life leach out of a man when she failed. Yimlul was asking them to fight in the hope of eternal life, but what hope could she give Amastan?

Amastan had told her how he had stormed off after an argument with his mother about whose turn it was to look after the goats, how he had been sure he knew his way back, but even though he had been born in the desert he had got lost, until Wararni had found him. She had shuddered at that: he spoke in such a matter of fact way, but the vast expanse of sand and rock terrified her, and she had nightmares about being out there, alone.

She squinted at the fine thread she was using to stitch a gory slash on a man’s chest. Her eyes itched, her body ached, and she tried to think about the stitches. They had talked about dealing with stress in training before she had done her first stint overseas. “You can’t change everything; things can seem overwhelming. Try to focus on the small things that get you through.” And she tried. Some days she could find total focus on the man under her knife, no point in wishing for sterile surroundings or the trappings of modern medicine. But when she was not working, her body reminded her of the sore on her ankle where a bite had become infected, the pain in her back from hours spent bent over, the grittiness that never left her eyes entirely, and the fatigue that never diminished. The man twitched as she pushed the needle through his skin, as she drew the edges together, and she wondered why he kept his head covered when she could touch his body like this.

She blinked, tried to get her eyes to focus. She had been drifting, hands still, listening to the polyglot hum of voices that was always there. Amastan was still talking about his family, how Udad was like his big brother Zdan, and how his sister Taj had died giving birth. Nour wondered about her family. Would Michael and Samia be having another baby, would her father's bald patch have grown a little wider, his efforts with hair cream and a comb a little more pointless? Would he be getting his diabetes checks, and would the fluffy cotton wool spots at the back of his eyes have progressed, would he need laser treatment to stop diabetes stealing his sight? And she wondered if they were looking for her, and if anyone was ever going to find her, and it seemed less and less likely and she told herself to stop thinking about it.

She tied off the thread, put her hands to the painful part of her lower back, realising only too late that her fingers were still blood-dashed. She shuddered and stepped away, over to the bowl where she scrubbed at her skin. There were red raw cracks in between her fingers. The soap stung. It felt like there was dirt in her skin all the time. At night, bugs bit, and she itched, always itched. She was locked up at dusk, slept on the thin foam mattress on her own, but the rest of the time she sat with them, ate what they ate, listened while Udad tried to convert her to Islam, or tried to make out what was said in the strange polyglot of Tamasheq and Darija, Bambara and Songhai, odd words of French taking her back to lessons in her South London classroom, staring out onto the deep greens of Tooting Common.

All the time she sat with the men she had the feeling she was no longer Nour. She had come from Egypt via England because of men like these who wanted Christians out of Egypt. Some of them were Tuareg like Amastan. Others had travelled from places like Algeria and Libya. Some, like her, had been forced to leave their homes because of what they believed. Some of them had been born in Mali, been mercenaries in North Africa before returning south, but that didn't mean anything because their nomadic heritage cared little for borders, and maybe she should've cared less that this wasn't part of her life plan. Maybe she should've cared less that these men were Muslims and she had been born a Christian. She shook the water off her hands and turned back to the table. The body of the man Wararni had shot lay there. The sun had reached him, and she stood and watched as the rays lit him up with gold.

Chapter 7

Yimlul had brought her boxes of bandages that day, sutures, even gloves. His hands had touched hers as he handed them over. Wararni had watched the transaction, scowled when she tried to express gratitude, then strode away.

As she lay dozing on the thin mattress, waiting, Nour remembered how Yimlul's skin felt as it brushed against hers. There had been blood on the packaging as she pried it open. She had pulled on a glove, grateful for the thin layer of protection once more. The fine powder inside the gloves and the thin latex all felt like it always had, and she didn't ask where the supplies had come from, nor how many lives had been shed in order to bring them back.

She woke in a panic from a dream where she'd missed her father's birthday, and she tried to work out how long she had been held. In the beginning she had made marks on the wall in her room, but sometimes she had been left alone for several days, some nights she had been woken multiple times and dragged out to deal with wounded men, and she didn't think the marks added up any more. She swallowed back tears because, whatever the reckoning, it wasn't simply a dream, and his birthday must have passed, and Michael's too. And her mother's, which they would have marked together in March. She wondered what Dad and Michael would have done, Mama dead, and herself lost in some unknown location, good as dead in many ways. The boys would be getting older too, and she didn't think that she'd missed their June birthdays yet, but she had no hope of being free by then, nothing to say that she'd be alive.

More men were arriving every day, some battle-tired, some fresh from villages. She thought that some were there voluntarily, some were not. Despite the gloves, surgery in some NHS hospital, worn stainless steel surfaces polished to a sheen, seemed a far-off memory. Sleeping in a soft-sheeted bed curled up next to Adam's warm body was even more distant. And she knew she should be worried whether Ad was alive or dead, but death assaulted her daily and it was hard to think about someone she hadn't seen for... how long?

It was easier to think Adam was dead, she decided as she lay on the mattress in the dark, too tired to move, yet unable to sleep. She could hear gunfire in the distance, knew that she could be needed soon. If Adam was dead, then maybe there really was some place that they could be reunited even though he barely believed in a god and she didn't know what she believed in any

more. His parents had been the mainstay of their local church, much like hers had been, before her mother died. Adam's parents hadn't really understood why she wanted to go to church with them, didn't seem to believe that she could be a Christian too, and certainly didn't understand that was why her parents had moved to England. She wondered if they would have been happier if she had worn a hijab and talked about Allah, because that would have been a solid reason to tell Adam she wasn't suitable. As it was, they hadn't been able to fault her profession or her education or her beliefs, and they couldn't openly criticise her class or race, so it had to be more subtle. "They don't mean anything by it," Adam had said more than once when she'd cringed at his father's comments about coverage of the Arab Spring on the news. If Adam was dead that was one more thing they could blame her for. And if he wasn't, would they be glad that she was out of the picture? It was easier to think he was dead, easier to focus on somewhere where who you were and where you had grown up didn't matter and maybe soon they'd meet again.

Chapter 8

now, it's now, it's now, it had to be now, so she set Amastan to fetching water, long walk to the barrels. Iken was still asleep by the fire, all but one of the trucks were out, and Baragsen had vanished round the side of the building for a shit

groan from one of the men lying in the shade of the tent, she had stitched him up yesterday, his wound was infected, he wasn't going to see tomorrow

should she?

can't stay and wait, can't face one more open wound, can't let Baba worry, can't wait until they find her body, it's now, can't stay, can't bear another minute, now

she sent up a quick prayer to the god she hoped existed, ran to the edge of the camp, bent low in the half light, long shadows, sun rising across the desert no one back yet got to run now

because there was a truck in the shadow of the hut, saw them leave it as they rolled out last night,

she reached the truck, hand on metal not yet touched by the sun and she slid into the front seat, fumbled for keys, engine started, choked, try again, stuttered, her stomach in her throat

engine, choke, try again, stutter,

Iken had to be hearing this, going to wake

engine, choke, try again, stutter,

Baragsen was going to come back round the corner, see her, raise his gun and

engine, choke, try again, stutter,

Amastan had seen her, looked, looked away, squinting into the rising sun, unsure, he...

engine, choke, try again, stutter,

Hell! They had left this truck because it wouldn't...

dust clouds rose in the distance followed by the sound of engines and the sun rose, relentless, relentless, shadows shrunk as she twisted the ignition key again

As the first truck passed through the gap the sun broke over the top of the building. She was floodlit, hand on the wheel, the key pressed tight in her fist

It was Yimlul who saw her first, nothing wrong with his vision now. He was first out of the truck. He raced across the dirt, grabbed her and threw her to the ground as guns fired over her head. He kicked her, boot to her ribs, and she crumpled beneath the blows.

He seized her by the upper arm, dragged her to her feet and faced the men.

“Go!”

In that moment Yimlul’s voice had the same command as Wararni’s, “I’m dealing with her,” each word emphasised as he shook her, anger twisting his face.

In moments, only a few men were still watching. He hauled her away from the truck, towards the square of buildings and tents.

Amastan was still there, eyes wide, and for a moment she thought that she was going to be put to work again, because there was a man clasping his arm to his body, blood running through his fingers, but Yimlul dragged her on.

He shouted an order. Men scurried out from the main room, and he shoved her in. She sprawled on the floor again. They were alone now, and he glanced round. He opened his mouth so say something, then closed it and booted her in the side. She was caught unawares, could feel her ribs flex, and she coughed with the impact. She looked up at him, silhouetted against the doorway, his hand on his gun. She thought she’d been afraid before, didn’t realise how diminished that fear had become now death seemed inevitable.

“I’m sorry, don’t shoot me. Please. I’m sorry.” Her words spilled out in a torrent, sorry, sorry, sorry, please, please, please, but Yimlul’s expression didn’t change.

He took his gun out, squatted, and looked her in the face. Her breath juddered in and out.

“This one time, I can save you. Next time...” and he raised the gun and touched it to her forehead.

She drew back, closed her eyes, but could still feel the metal cold against her skin.

“Next time... I let them deal with you.”

She unfurled her lids, looked into his eyes, saw the scarred lid, the perfect lid, the light brown irises, the two clear pupils, dilating. Eye to eye, a moment passed.

“Get up!”

He dragged her up again, out to the tented area, watched, gun pointed at her as she scrubbed and stitched the man's wound. Her hands shook like they did when she had operated on Yimlul's eye. She hadn't thought how used she was to being here, to operating in an open tent with armed men all around. But the guns had stopped being aimed at her.

When she was done, Yimlul shouted at Amastan, who scurried away.

Placing the point of his gun against her back, Yimlul ushered Nour back to the room she was locked in every night. Amastan hurried up, bowl and mug in hand, laid them on the floor without a word. As Amastan scuttled out, Yimlul stepped back. He shut the door. Darkness all around her, she could hear the bar slide into place.

She was stiff the next day, livid purple bruises down her ribs and side. Yimlul must have held back, she thought as she watched him stride across the compound, because he hadn't damaged her face or hands.

The man with the infected wound died, and she was dragged from the barred room to face him. Baragsan and Udad brought her out, but it was Yimlul who handed her the spade, the pickaxe and an all-encompassing black robe.

She struggled into the jilbab while Iken and Udad rolled the dead man into a cloth, and they walked, carrying him, half a mile perhaps, sun blazing down. The pain in her side grew, as the heat beat down on the black cloth.

"Dig," Yimlul said, and she saw mound after mound ahead of her, flies buzzing as the hot air danced before her eyes. She picked up the spade, her movements slow, her gaze still fixed on the hazy vision of undulating burial mounds. It wasn't just the heat haze, she thought, rubbing her eyes, it wasn't just that she couldn't focus. More than that, she couldn't process this visible evidence of death: decay, the part of death she had never truly faced.

She started with the spade, shovelling aside loose layers of dirt, trying to find a rhythm that didn't jar her ribs. She thought about the cadaver they had been presented with in first year anatomy, waxy yellow skin and an invitation to cut in. She wondered if the bodies in those mounds were desiccated by the desert heat, if their skin was waxy or tissue-like by now, if it had decomposed so all that was left was bone. She scraped at the grit and dirt, and as she hit a rock the judder of pain in her ribs made her retch, each spasm bringing fresh waves of pain down her side.

Yimlul watched, waited, then looked at the spade again until she picked it up. When all she could find was stone, she moved on to the pickaxe. As she worked, she focussed on ideas of escape as a way to distract herself from what she was doing. Could she try again, was it worth it? Or was she going to die, whether they caught her in the attempt or simply from dehydration. Out here, it was even clearer how remote they were from anywhere. Looking at the uneven mounds, it was obvious what her fate would be. Her back ached, her ribs burnt as she struck blow after futile blow to the earth. The sweat on her palms made the pickaxe slip as she swung it. It had to be worth another attempt, she couldn't remain here, no-one was going to get her out. Sooner or later, they would find a reason to kill her. Perhaps next time Yimlul was injured she wouldn't be able to save him, and Wararni would lash out. Perhaps next time she did something wrong Yimlul wouldn't hold back. Sweat poured out of her, and she could feel tears on her cheeks. She tasted the wet salt with her tongue, and watched the men pass water between them.

Her breath jerked painfully in and out and the pickaxe began to burn her palms. She placed it down to pick up the shovel, but first she paused to look at the blisters that were developing on her hands.

Yimlul scowled as Nour stopped, and she rushed to pick up the spade, but he seized her wrist, looked at her palm for a second, then shook his head.

"We may need your hands tomorrow," he said, then spoke rapidly to the other men. They picked up the tools and started in on a different patch of dry ground. Udad spat in her direction as he picked up the spade, but Iken's gaze was sympathetic.

The walk back to the camp seemed longer than the route out, and half way there her guts started to cramp. She clutched her stomach, stopped.

"Go on!" Yimlul shouted, and she stumbled on, slower and slower as the cramps seized her. Diarrhoea, demanding its release, or did he do something more to her insides last night when he kicked her? Nour staggered on until she reached the room, and Yimlul pushed her inside. She tore off the robe, squatted over the bucket and stream after stream of diarrhoea came out. It was too dark to check for blood, and she fell onto the dirty mattress, exhausted. She dozed and dreamed of running through the desert.

Pre-dawn, Amastan released her for a mug of hot tea before she was bombarded with patients. She came out wearing her grimy scrubs and headscarf, like she had every day before but he shook his head and pointed at the jilbab. She scowled but pulled it on, one battle that wasn't worth fighting today.

The insurgents' battle was becoming more violent, too many bodies were on each truck as well as those needing surgery. She was forced to stop after three patients for another bout of diarrhoea. As she crouched with spasms wracking her guts, she wondered if she was really helping anyone, working like this, but she had no option.

By the time she reached those who had more superficial wounds she was unable to stand. Amastan brought fresh boiled water, needles, and rags. Together they made slow progress until the last man was done. She was done too, she sprawled on the mat as the sun burnt down, but Amastan pulled at her arm.

Yimlul strode over from where he had been watching them. He raised a hand and smacked Amastan across the face, shouting something in Tamasheq. Amastan let out a cry then stepped back as Yimlul went to hit him again.

She roused herself and said, "Stop, please!" and Yimlul met her gaze for a second before looking at the ground.

"Yes. I..." He lowered his hand and strode away, his robes flapping around him.

Nour scrambled off the ground and went to look at Amastan's face, but he pulled away from her touch.

"You must go back," he said, and he ushered her back to the room.

Someone had emptied the bucket, but the stench was still there. Amastan brought her tea and bread and left them inside the threshold of the room. He looked at her, apologetic, as he backed away and locked the door. She could see a growing red mark on his face. She drank the tea, thought about sleep and prayed for escape.

Chapter 9

She was locked in the hut, vomiting bile when the convoy skidded through the gates, screech of metal as they were dragged shut, guns still blazing from the sentry posts. The fighting was getting closer. She had heard volleys of shots all day, all night. She couldn't keep up with the injuries, and in between she would pray, doze, wake, pray, doze, never sure if the screams were part of a dream or if the blood was real beneath her hands.

When the retching stopped she stood, stretched, touched the bruises as she felt her bones crack. She rubbed her eyes, ran her hand over her face, then gently probed her belly where the bruises were darkest, wondering why she hadn't been dragged out to perform. Looking out through the chink in the wall, she saw the camp in turmoil. Fabric tents were torn down and bundled into trucks, guns and ammo piled in too. Seconds later, the door was flung open and Amastan shot off a stream of Tamasheq, handed her the jilbab, then tugged at her arm. She scrambled into the robe as he pulled her across the space that used to be a courtyard and onto the back of a truck already piled high with goods. Baragsen arrived up with ropes. He bound her wrists in front of her, then tied her to a bar, tight against the back of the driver's seat. More men scrambled on board, weapons in hand, bodies pressed against bodies. The same was happening with every vehicle, loaded to the brim, men hanging off the sides. As the engine started she saw Wararni shouting from one of the trucks, and she looked round for Yimlul, but someone threw a cloth over her head. She could feel when the truck set off but all she saw as she looked under the cloth were glimpses of men's feet.

The sound of hooves mixed with the engines, until the engine roared louder, and she felt an increase in speed. The truck jolted over the rough ground, there were gunshots, and someone pushed her down, her arms twisted up and to the side. Guns fired overhead, too close, and she wanted to cover her head. The muscles in her arms burnt and her ears stung with the stutter of weapons.

They drove, didn't stop, heat of the day burnt and Nour's bruises throbbed as she was jolted against the hard truck side over and over again. The guns stopped at some point, and she didn't know if she slept or passed out, because she came to, heart racing, when the trucks halted, sudden silence, gunshot, scream, loud men's voices, more screaming. She scabbled backwards, trying to make herself smaller, knowing that bullets wouldn't discriminate. The ruckus was over in seconds, though, she could hear everyone jumping off the truck and she was dragged off too. When the cloth fell from her head she could see in the twilight that they were in some barely-village. There were a few huts, and the residents were huddled against one of them. Villagers were bleeding, sprawled

where they had fallen. She wanted to help them, but she didn't even suggest it to Wararni, and she wondered when she had learnt to curb her instinct to help.

The insurgents were pulling everything they could find out of the huts - blankets, food, people. Shouts and laughter went up as they worked. She was dragged over to where a man lay on the ground, one of their men, blood pooling around his middle. She was covered in blood to her shoulder in minutes, trying to stop the flow. A goat skittered across the track and Baragsen sent it to the ground with one shot. He picked it up, took it over to a fire, got out his knife and slashed its throat. She watched him hang it to drain the blood. It flowed fast at first, then slowed. Her hands were deep in someone's entrails, but her gaze was drawn from the goat to a young woman as she was dragged off at gunpoint round the side of a building. Nour could hear her screams, but the man in her hands convulsed, and her focus was torn away.

Someone had found a truck in the village and the engine was being revved, while the other trucks were refuelled. She found one artery, blood pouring out, but even if she could tie it off nothing was going to replace the blood he had lost. She couldn't be sure which organs had been damaged, and she couldn't see how he could live.

She stitched him up, and finally, she was allowed to wash the drying blood from her skin. Yimlul brought her a tunic, a scarf, a big shawl, taken from one of the huts, and made her wash out the jilbab, then she was tied to the truck nearest the fire. The men seemed to settle down, watching as two of the boys started to cook. She shivered, adrenaline leaving her body. There was no one to notice, she thought, until Amastan brought over two bowls of food, and a tatty pink blanket. At some point she slept, waking every so often to unfamiliar animal sounds. Whenever she stirred, though, Amastan was sleeping, curled up warm against her side.

They drove again all day, her wrists tied to the truck, cloth over her head. The wounded man from yesterday, alive against the odds, lay flat on the truck beside her. There were diesel fumes in her mouth and nausea in her belly as the trucks bumped over unmade tracks, and she heard his moans with every jolt.

At some point she decided they were no longer in the desert, because even through the stench of male bodies and the smell of blood, she could smell something green. As the trucks stopped, the men tumbled out, lifted out their injured comrade, and the cloth on her head had shifted enough that she could see they were making a camp. No one came to untie her, though. She

couldn't feel her arms, then she moved and a sudden sharp pain drove down her as the blood flowed again. She cried out, biting her lips together.

Eventually, Amastan scurried over and released her, and she fell out of the truck, stumbled to her feet, rubbing her arms as the feeling came back. Someone had started a fire and there was water boiling, and the man was still lying on the ground, and she could see the blood seeping through the wodge of cloth bound to his middle. Another man walked up, a long cut down his face. Amastan passed her the bundle with the needles and scalpels, and it started again.

Three wounds washed and stitched, there was nothing more for her to do. She sat beside the man with the gut wound and gripped his hand and waited. Her lids closed, sounds of men's voices, mallets driving posts into the ground, the pounding of millet, and she hadn't eaten since yesterday, no one had.

She didn't know how long had passed when Amastan put his hand on her shoulder. The man next to her was still. His hand was warm in hers, but his eyes gazed, vacant, at the sky.

Amastan took her over to the fire, told her to sit a short way away from where most of the men were sitting. They shared millet porridge, and she could hear a sense of relief, laughter and jokes rising over the crackle of the fire and the scraping of tin bowls. The lightness was infectious, she didn't know why they were there, or what they had escaped, and a man had just died with his hand in hers, but for a moment everything was better.

After the meal, as the sky darkened to navy blue, Wararni shouted orders. She was taken back to the truck and tied up again. She sat there, trying to ease the places where the rope had burnt into her wrists during the journey, and watched the men curl up to sleep around the fire. The trees around her seemed impenetrable, as remote as the desert ever was. There would be even less chance to escape if she was going to be tied up all the time. As everything around her grew darker still, and the sounds became louder in her mind, the place seemed vast. She would never escape, and like the man who had died, this would be her resting place.

Chapter 10

No desert here, it was damp all the time. Not the crisp damp of an English spring, but humid with flies everywhere. Nour despaired, as despite her attempts, men's wounds failed to heal.

They had fled some unwinnable battle, she thought, uncertain exactly what or where but it seemed that the battle was following them. Each night she sat, tied, waiting. She gave up trying to sleep as gunshots rang out, sometimes intermittently, sometimes all through the night. Amastan seemed to know more than he could explain to her. He was on edge, all the time, his eyes flicking from side to side at each new sound. Her gut clenched at every unexpected noise, at each gun shot.

Yimlul and Wararni were rarely there, returning briefly at separate times to wolf down what little food there was. One time when they both appeared along with most of the men they had a fierce argument, but they weren't speaking Arabic and she couldn't understand what about. When she asked Amastan, he shook his head. "You don't want to know this," he said.

A row of men lay, fever-wracked, and they shifted camp every couple of days. As they drove she bounced on the heaped up possessions on the truck, her wrists bound to the bars, Amastan alongside her. In her mind, she tried to list the equipment and drugs she would have liked, starting with A for anaesthesia. But she could be more specific, perhaps anaesthetic should be listed under L for lignocaine, and then A would be for atropine or acyclovir. She faltered at sudden memories when she came to the letter D for Diamox, and of a patient who had come in, writhing in pain due to acute glaucoma. Everyone in the department had worked together and brought the woman's eye pressure down. They would still be doing that now, saving sight like she should have been, while she was held captive.

Back in the desert encampment Amastan had sometimes been there, sometimes not. He used to go off to collect water, or sit by the fire, or lose himself in a game of football with the other boys. Now, though, he was by Nour's side more often. She didn't think he had been told to be there. Baragsen still seemed to be in charge of her, and sometimes he shoved Amastan away, sent him to pound millet with another boy, but when the job was done Amastan would come straight back. He didn't seem to mix much with the other boys, they had a gang of their own, a hierarchy that he was at the bottom of and she wondered whether it was something about his race or face that meant nothing to her but put him at the bottom of the pile. Generally it seemed that the men rated those with lighter skin as better, but Amastan was light-skinned, and Wararni dark-skinned. She sighed as

she failed to fathom the rules. As Amastan sat a few feet away from her, tossing stones in the dirt, she wasn't sure what sort of protection she could be for him. Maybe he wanted to protect her.

She had noticed him touch her too now, something he hadn't done since Yimlul had hit him for it, a tap on the arm to attract her attention, a nudge, or just sitting shoulder to shoulder. It happened more after he pushed her to the ground, new danger when Wararni got hold of an RPG launcher, and the *whoosh* of the rocket through a temporary camp ended in a vast boom and with trees falling. She hadn't realised that no one had touched her in kindness for months, that every other touch had been an angry assault, that every time she touched someone else it was because they were injured and in pain, and more often than not she was putting her hands in places where hands were never meant to go as she plunged in after a bullet.

She was sitting by the truck, staring into the jungle, when there was a sudden cry. Yimlul grabbed a stick and started to whack it across Amastan's back.

"Don't!" she cried.

The scar on Yimlul's face was no longer fresh, not yet faded. His twisted expression was hard as he looked at her.

"This is not your problem," he said.

"But..."

Amastan shook his head at her as Yimlul raised the branch and hit him again.

She stepped back as far as the rope would allow, watched three more blows, her shirt tails clenched in her hand, her mouth clamped shut, and wondered if this was her fault.

Yimlul stopped and strode off, and she went to look at the wounds on Amastan's back, but he pulled away and shook his head again.

Helicopter circling overhead, under a makeshift canvas shelter in the scrub, she couldn't sleep. Bugs bit all night through. In her old life, she thought as she lay there, she would browse the net, download an eBook, watch the umpteenth episode of *Game of Thrones*. She thought about her family, wondered if anyone was taking her dad for his check up, but when she found her breath getting tight in her chest she tried to recall the pages of a tropical disease text book. Instead she found the rituals of the church service running through her head, chants and responses.

She lay, sweating, until she was dragged out to operate again.

Another day, another pre-dawn raid on a sleeping village. The group had grown as they made raids, taking young men and boys at gun point, stripping each village of anything of use. She was tied in one of the trucks and she huddled as low as she could, bullets screaming overhead. Amastan squatted beside her, flinching with her. In a moment of silence he said to her, "Stay away from Yimlul." She wanted to ask him to explain, but the gunfire kicked off once more.

They had roped her to the truck until Udad found some chain on a raid, and then they used that to tie her by the ankle. Night after night, then during the day too, until the skin round her ankle was rubbed raw.

When he saw what was happening, Yimlul brought her socks, but too late to prevent the damage. He handed them to her with a smile.

"You should be wearing these all the time," he said, and waited while she pulled them on.

As Baragsen chained her up after allowing her to go to wash, he wouldn't meet her eye. Some part of her wanted to tell him he was right to chain her up, because if she got a chance, she knew that she had to run again.

Every day, every raid, she kept her eyes open for a radio, a phone, soldiers, something or someone that could connect her with the outside world. Now they were on the move someone had to make a mistake, there had to be something that would give her a new route out.

The truck was parked where she couldn't see what was happening, could only hear. It was worse to hear the screams and gunfire, to wait, never knowing when the battle would move in her direction.

She rubbed her eyes, tried to brush away the tears and grit and tiredness as she thought back to the encampment where she had first been held. It had seemed like some sort of hell, but she knew differently now. Hell was being always on the move. Hell was being chained, weals growing round her ankle. Hell, now they didn't trust her not to run.

Desert surrounded her again, chained in the truck in the blazing sun while they mounted an assault. Even Amastan had been issued a gun. As much as she huddled into the tiny patch of shade, she wondered if she would die of heat exposure while bombs exploded a few feet away. And she sent up wordless prayers for some sort of safety. The heat and the noise grew into a blur, her vision was hazy, and she startled when the truck started up. Men leapt on, guns firing into the sky, shouts and yells rising over the noise of engines. The rough open ground gave way to tarmac and buildings until they parked in a hangar. She was startled to see a scratched and battered helicopter, alarmed to see deserted tanks.

She had thought it would be better when Yimlul said he would be the one to lock her up each night in this new place. Baragsen glared at him, but rank ensured that he couldn't argue. He and Amastan, Udad and Iken watched as Yimlul marched her away.

He would talk to her as he got out the padlock, told her about the year he had spent in England, wanted to know if she had ever been to Bradford where he had an uncle. She had never been there, but was nice to hear him talk about his school, his friends, the time it snowed, in his rusty English. She liked the conversation, but she didn't like the way he put his hand on her shoulder, his hand sliding under her scarf to the place where her neck was exposed. He would move his hand lower and take her upper arm, let his fingers skim her breast through the black robe, when she moved towards the metal bars. And his hand slipped under the robe up her leg as he locked the chain.

She stared a man in the face, explained that she was going to have to remove what was left of his eye. The man didn't understand, and she didn't think Amastan, standing close by as always, believed what he did understand.

She watched the man afterwards, waiting to recover, caught him trying to take the dressing off his face. She wondered whether she had cleaned the socket out enough before stitching the lid shut, wished again for antibiotics, wished that she was sure that the man understood that his eye wouldn't be there when he felt under the bandages, when he caught a glimpse of himself in a shiny surface for the first time.

They had raided some clinic, and Yimlul brought her offerings of blades and drugs, but checking off the items held no satisfaction. She looked at them, took them, thanked the men who brought them. Some of the drugs needed refrigeration which she didn't have. And she couldn't decide if she should eke out supplies or give a full effective dose to a few.

No one had time to count the blades they gave her, though, so she hid a scalpel wrapped in cloth and kept it on her all the time. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with it, if she'd have the courage to use it if she needed.

Then one day it was Iken who was carried back, bleeding. He died, no need to shoot him, died writhing beneath her hands, crying for help. Inspired by some bond of brothers, Baragsen screamed at her and waved a knife in her face. Yimlul knocked him to the ground. He dragged Nour off to the far side of the hangar and left her there. Her gaze remained on the small man lying still on the ground, his blood seeping across the concrete beneath him. She envied him.

Amongst all the men, one day someone brought in a woman, bleeding and oozing from her cervix where she had tried to abort her baby. Nour struggled to focus on the wound, knew that she was no gynaecologist, knew she couldn't save her from the infection that was dissolving her body from the inside out. She shook her head and turned away.

She sat in her place in the hangar, chained to a pipe, watching the pattern the headlights made on the walls as jeeps and tanks came in and out. Tonight was busier than usual, and she could hear volleys of shots in the distance, smell the stench of burning tyres. She sat, entranced by the patterns, her only movement an occasional blink as she tried to shift missed sleep and sand from her eyes. The dance of the lights and bars held her gaze as it moved along the wall, and she jerked, startled, as a rocket was launched close by.

"They're using gas," she heard, shouted across the compound, messages coming in with the buzz and crackle of the short-wave radios.

She pulled the jilbab around her, half stood, wondering how to prepare for chemical burns, but there was no point shouting for someone to unchain her, they'd call her when they needed.

She rinsed her hands at the tap, filled the bucket and sluiced away the blood that evidenced her work of the last few hours. It was easier in the hangar, with running water and concrete floors, but the heat laid heavy under the iron roof and her movements were slow.

“Take a break,” Yimlul said as he walked past. “Get a drink.”

She nodded, placed the bucket back under the tap and straightened. She put her hands on her back and dug her fingers in. She could feel her hair beneath her hands too. She hadn’t thought much about her hair since she had been kidnapped, and it was as long as it had been when she was a child. It felt greasy and tangled, though, and she longed for a hot shower and store-bought shampoo.

She was surprised when Yimlul came right up to her, put his hand on her sleeve.

“You’re tired,” he said.

She nodded, blinked, tried to focus on his face but everything blurred.

“You should get more sleep,” he said.

She huffed a small laugh. “I should. You’re right.” She blinked again and her vision cleared a little.

“Maybe you’d sleep better if we found you somewhere more comfortable.”

She shrugged, little hope of comfort. Since they’d captured the base she had been sleeping in the hangar, on a heap of rags, chained to a pipe. There was no privacy, but she was on hand when they needed her. During the day she worked while men dozed in the same space, others cooked meals, the smoke filling her eyes and lungs and making it hard to breathe.

“Is there somewhere more comfortable here?” she asked, expecting nothing.

Yimlul’s hands slid down to her hip. “I have a room,” he said.

“I’m fine here,” she said as she jerked back.

He raised a hand to her face, and she felt the warmth of his hand on her skin. “Since you took the bandage off my eye, there is something between us. You would have died before now without me, when you tried to escape. Wararni doesn’t want you here. It’s another risk having a western woman. You would be safer if you were my wife.”

She pulled away, looked for help but though there were men all around, men whose wounds she had stitched, whose lives she had saved, everyone apart from Amastan was looking anywhere else.

He slipped his hand under the jilbab, inside her elastic waistband and pushed his fingers down.

“Don’t!” she said as she gripped the waistband, the robe and pulled the fabric tighter around her.

He shrugged, picked up the padlock and chains. “I could make you do it anyway.”

“You wouldn’t,” she said, hoping it was true.

She moved her head back, tears blurring her vision. He had been kind to her in some ways, kinder than the others, kind within the bounds of a culture where men and women shouldn’t be friends. Could she really say he was kind when he was holding her hostage, though? And he had beaten her, was still beating Amastan, beating any of the men who displeased him. She hated herself because she could see what he said made sense. She had felt it too, that first time she touched his face. And if she gave in, he would look after her. But being his wife, he would beat her too if she displeased him, and there would be no one to back her up when the power was all his and always would be.

She bit her lip then turned to face him. His face blurred again as she looked at him. “Let me think,” she asked. “I need time.”

“You will give me an answer,” he said, and walked away.

Amastan’s gaze was still on her long after Yimlul left, and she wondered if he had heard what they said.

She spent the day sitting against the wall, right by the pipe she was usually chained to. Yimlul had strode off, but he hadn’t clicked the padlock in place. She arranged the chains round her ankle to deceive a glance but at the same time she wondered if he had done this deliberately. Did he want her to run? Was he giving her a chance? Or if she ran was it going to be the excuse he needed to take what he wanted?

She closed her eyes, trying to find respite from the grit and blur that plagued her. She could have tried to escape before, she thought, especially when there was only a rope tying her to the

truck, and she wondered why she hadn't. It had been bad when they'd caught her before, but the bruises had healed, her ribs had stopped hurting eventually. It would have been scary to take off into the bush, but would it have been worse than what she was dealing with every day? Now, though, she had an ultimatum. She frowned as she thought about how far she was from the Nour of a few months back that she would even consider trading her body for safety.

She sat there, listening. Without looking at what was around her, she could be in any peaceful encampment. There was a murmur of voices, a clatter of pans. But if she listened more carefully, the voices were exclusively male, and the tap, tap, tap of a hammer on metal was, she knew, no peaceful repair work. She opened her eyes and blinked, trying to focus on the men on the far side of the hangar repairing a bullet-ridden jeep. Colours smeared as she tried to clear her eyes, a mush of khaki and black and grey with the occasional splash of traditional blue. Her eyes stung, her vision wouldn't clear, even as tears started.

She dropped her head, let her headscarf fall forwards, not wanting to be seen. Most of the men ignored her, most of the time, but some of those she had helped would nod at her as they passed, and she didn't want to attract their gaze. She risked a glance across the room, but it was no better. She had to face this: her vision was being affected by something. Her eyes weren't sticky, it wasn't simple bacterial conjunctivitis, and she ran through the different tropical diseases she could have acquired, the small stock of drugs that she had available to her, none of which were going to help.

If she couldn't see properly, she would be of no use here and Wararni may as well kill her she thought as she clenched her fists until her nails cut into her palms. If she lost more vision, she wasn't going to be able to get out of here. If she wanted a chance to live, she had to do this now. Dusk would be approaching soon, and the men who were dozing would start to wake. The last moments of daylight were busy, a time of preparation for the night's battle. She stood slowly, blinked to clear her vision and failed, but she could still see men's faces as they passed close by, could still see Amastan as he drew near, rolling an empty water barrel.

"Amastan," she said in an undertone. "I need the bathroom."

He looked around, for Baragsen, perhaps, or Yimlul to unchain her.

"It's OK. Yimlul has undone me." She showed him the end of the chain, and he nodded, took the chain, and led her outside to the screened off space round the side of the hangar where she was allowed a small amount of privacy.

He was about to step away and leave her to it when she gripped his wrist. She hadn't meant to do this, was going to go alone, but when it came to it she couldn't leave him behind.

"I have to go," she said, keeping her words slow and calm. "Will you come?" She pointed out across the open ground to where she knew the River Niger ran, where Yimlul had pointed out the road lead to Mopti, where he had told the men there might be Government or African Union forces. She had seen the trucks set off in that direction: all she needed to do was pick a good truck, now, before anyone had set out for the evening, and stay ahead of pursuit until she met their opponents. Right now, with the sun setting, light bounced over the hillocks, and all she could see was stripes of sun and shade. Soon it would be dark with that sudden blackness that she'd grown accustomed to, but if her vision was failing it would make no difference.

He followed her gaze and nodded.

"We need a truck. A good one."

He nodded again, then held up a hand, signing her to wait.

She stood back against the woven screen while he scurried round the side of the building.

She waited, waited long enough to wonder if this was a mistake. The sun was still hot even at the end of the day, so she slipped behind the screen and looked at the bowl of water placed there for washing. She'd done nothing to prepare for this. It wasn't like in a story, she hadn't been saving food or water, there was never enough of either to stash. She could put the bowl in the truck but the water would be gone the first time they bounced over a rut in the road. And she thought of the ten-hour drive to Mopti and wondered if Amastan could even drive the truck she had asked him to steal.

She stuck her head out from behind the screens. Amastan had free range round the site, it was far less obvious if he was over by the trucks than if she was, but even so someone might stop and question him. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. He was taking his time. The sun was about to drop below the horizon: darkness would help them slip out of the camp but once they were in the Sahara it would make it harder to stay on the track. She bit her lip. This was a mistake, she thought as she rested a hand on the woven reeds. She should go back, chain herself to the wall and accept what was coming.

She pulled her robe around her. She was about to walk back round to the front of the hangar when a truck appeared, chugging slowly towards her. In the fading light she couldn't see the driver's face, and she hesitated until it pulled to a halt beside her. The engine idling, Amastan beckoned to

her across the passenger seat. She held the screen tightly in her hand until the crisp reeds crunched and spiked her palm. This was her chance. She had to take it.

She clambered into the truck, and Amastan pushed her head down, saying something she didn't get. His meaning was clear, though. He was going to drive the truck and she was to hide.

She hunched down into the footwell, and as she dipped her head everything went dark. She risked a look up, but it wasn't her eyes: the sun had set. Amastan didn't flick on the headlights, though, and the truck continued its slow trundle round the periphery of the tarmac. She wanted to check if anyone was watching, but she kept her head low and prayed that in the darkness this one truck wouldn't stand out.

Suddenly headlights shone across the tarmac illuminating the truck. She gasped, but Amastan kept going at a steady pace. She estimated how far they had to go in her mind: maybe they were half way to the road. There were voices now, shouts. Somewhere a gun went off. This was normal for this time of evening, she reminded herself, just the men getting ready for the night ahead. It was normal, they were going to be fine. She glanced up at Amastan, blinked to clear her vision, but even though there were enough headlights to light up the front of the truck she couldn't make out the details of his face. There was a sudden jolt over a bump in the ground, her shoulder jarred against the front of the truck and she had to grip onto the worn seat.

"It's done," Amastan said. She had learnt enough Tamasheq to know that it was the same phrase he used when surgery had gone well. The headlights were fading away and she risked raising her head. They were driving down the smooth, well-made section of the road that led into the airport. There were lights behind them, but ahead there was only darkness.

It was hard to see the road ahead and Nour squinted, trying to see an edge. This unplanned escape was going better than she had hoped, but she had to consider all that could go wrong. She peered at the petrol gauge, trying to assess whether they had enough fuel to reach Mopti. It was hard to see. The worst thing would be to stumble off the road somewhere midway and run out of fuel. If they found some village sooner perhaps they could stop, ask for water, but she had no money and she doubted if Amastan did either, so their chances of more fuel were small. The insurgents would have seized what they wanted but an unarmed woman and boy couldn't do that. They had to chance to luck.

Amastan was driving with relative ease: the truck juddered every so often but she put that down to the road surface. After a few moments he flicked on the headlights, then glanced at her.

She shook her head. "Not yet," she said, and he switched them off. In the dark of the desert even a headlight pointing into the distance would be enough to show the rebels where they were.

Nour exhaled and sat back. Perhaps this was going to work. They drove in silence for a few minutes more, but she noticed Amastan shifting in his seat, glancing behind. After a moment his unease spread to her and she turned her head. Amastan said something, and then pulled over, turned off the engine. It should have been silent, but she could hear it too, the unmistakable noise of vehicles. As she gazed back towards the blur of lights that was the base, a second blob of light detached itself.

"It might be fine. Maybe they're just setting off for the night. We need to keep going. Let's go!"

She gestured towards the ignition and Amastan keyed the engine again. He stalled it once, twice, but got it started the third time and put his foot down. It was a long stretch for him to the pedals, the steering wheel. As they set off the truck bumped and jiggled along the edge of the road, half on the tarmac, half on the rough ground to the side before he managed to steer it back into the centre of the road. His nerve seemed to be gone and he steered a wavering path at full speed.

"I should drive," Nour said, then bit her words back. She might be steadier under pressure but he could see more clearly. Amastan ignored her anyway, continuing his zigzag process down the road.

There was a crack of gunfire from somewhere behind them and Amastan jumped. The truck veered suddenly to the left and Nour grabbed the wheel, pulling it back round. Her heart battered at the walls of her chest as they returned to speeding down the centre of the road. She didn't have time to recover, though, before Amastan was jerking the wheel over the other way to skirt a heap of rocks, just in time. Once they were straight again she risked a glance back. The blur of lights seemed larger, closer, the buzz of engines loud enough to hear now even though their own engine was running flat out.

"We have to stay ahead," she said. "Can this go faster?" She waved her hands and Amastan seemed to get what she meant as he pushed the engine to new efforts. Another volley of shots rang out across the desert and she was almost sure she could hear the usual whoops and shouts that accompanied the evening forays to find the next battle. Another look back confirmed her fears.

"They're gaining on us. What's wrong with this thing?" Her fingers itched to take over the steering wheel, like they did when she watched some hesitant junior doctor attempt their first cataract extraction. She tried to see if his foot was flat to the floor but it was impossible to tell in the

darkness, and before she could say anything else the truck started to bump abruptly as it juddered over more rocks in the road. Amastan tried to wrangle with the steering wheel but this time he couldn't keep the truck under control and they skidded to a halt a few hundred yards into the soft sand that lay beyond the road edge.

"Hell!"

Amastan revved the engine, but the wheels only dug themselves further in.

"Let's see if there's anything in the back," Nour said. "We need something the wheels can grip." There were often bits of old carpet or board in the back of the trucks. She felt under her feet: nothing. She scrambled out, keeping one hand on the vehicle as she hurried round to the back. The tailgate was missing and she felt inside. There was no light at all out here, but her fingers quickly found two metal sheets.

"Quick, Amastan. Help me!"

He ran to her side at this familiar command. Together they tugged the metal round and wedged it under the wheels.

She'd read about what to do if you got a car stuck in the mud, but she'd never had to put this knowledge into practical use before and she wondered if Amastan had any experience. She had to make a quick decision as to which of them was more likely to be able to succeed in revving the engine just enough for the wheels to gain traction.

"I'll drive," she said, and she ran round to the front seat. She didn't need to look to see that the blur of light was growing, separating into distinct headlights, the shouts and shots growing louder. They had one chance to do this and stay ahead: otherwise they would be better off staying hidden and hoping the rebels went straight past without noticing the truck.

She started the engine, put her foot down. The wheels spun, then bit and the truck lurched forwards a few feet. She felt a surge of hope, which was quickly dashed as they ground to a halt, wedged in the sand once more.

She looked around, momentarily dazzled as she glanced towards the growing blur of headlights.

"There's no time, we need to hide," she said, as she grabbed Amastan's hand and tugged him away from the truck. Within seconds, though, she stumbled and fell to the ground. The sand was rough, uneven, full of rocks, and even as she picked herself up she realised she wasn't going to get far.

“Go!” she said, “You’re faster than me. Run!”

Amastan tugged her hand, “You have to come too.”

“No, you go. I’ll hide here. Quick!”

He let her hand go and vanished into the blackness. Now she needed to conceal herself. She still held out some faint hope that the truck was far enough from the road that the rebels would go straight past, and she slid in on the far side, tucked under the truck, face down in the sand.

Rocks dug into her stomach as she lay there, listening to the roar of engines grow. Any hope she had was obliterated as light illuminated the truck, engines stopped and she heard shouts. A bullet cracked loud, somewhere above her head and she pushed herself down into the ground. Perhaps they’d walk round the truck, perhaps they’d leave it there, perhaps they’d carry on with whatever attack they had planned, perhaps...

Footsteps, right by her ears. Voices, shouts, people walking around. Someone barefoot, more boots, still milling round the truck. Someone inside the truck, and she could feel the worn springs give as they moved about inside. Lights, headlights, a flaring wood torch, all still focussed on the truck, then with some moving away. They had to be looking for the vehicle occupants. Had they recognised it as one of their trucks? The repaired bodywork gave each truck its own unique scarred appearance.

Her stomach roiled and churned and she wanted to vomit. She took quiet, slow breaths, trying not to give herself away. Another shout, and she worried that they had found Amastan, but the search continued, no-one was dragged back and she hoped that one skinny boy could evade the searching men.

Her mind was with Amastan, out there in the desert, and she was startled as a light shone under the vehicle. She kept her face down, hoping that she would seem to be nothing more than a heap of rags, a bump in the ground, but a hand reached in and grabbed her by the ankle, pulling her out.

Shouts surrounded her, lights in her eyes blinded her, as she was dragged upright. She only stood there for seconds before Yimlul appeared.

“Where did you think you were going?” he asked, and she had no answer.

“Release her,” he called to the men, and she felt the grip on her arm loosen.

“You want to run, now’s your chance,” he said. “Go on. I won’t stop you.”

She stood there, uncertain. She could run, he could shoot her, or he could let her escape into the desert on her own. Out there she might survive a day, maybe two before dehydration slowed her, stopped her, killed her. Would she be so much worse off out there than if she stayed? But her feet wouldn't move and she couldn't tell which direction to go, so she looked down at the ground and shook her head.

"Look at me!" he shouted. Then he raised his fist and hit her across the face. A shower of stars dashed across her vision as she fell to the ground.

It was cold, cold like she never thought she'd be in Mali and she curled up in a corner, her head throbbing in sync with her pulse. Her wrists were tied behind her back, and she was shackled to a pipe in the small, windowless room that she had found herself in when she came round.

She thought of Amastan, hoping he had got away, wondering where he could go if he had. Judging by the glow of light growing at the bottom of the door, dawn had broken. She couldn't hear voices: most of the men would be sleeping now. There was a scent of woodsmoke rising over the burnt rubber smell that returned with the men sometimes when gas had been used. She wanted to rub her eyes, trying to erase the images that just wouldn't go as she waited for what she knew was to come. She should sleep, but her heart was still pumping too fast. Her ankle itched and tied hands meant she couldn't scratch it.

She wasn't watching the door and jumped when it swung open. She hadn't expected anyone until mid-afternoon when the rebels would start to come to life again.

She shoved herself back against the wall. Yimlul. He wasn't here to bring her water, nor food. He wasn't in a hurry like when someone had been brought in injured. He squatted down in front of her, and she imagined the scar in his lid, the tiny break in his light brown iris.

"Everyone asleep," he said, and she nodded, waiting.

"What now?" she asked eventually, if only to break the silence, to speed the inevitable.

He adjusted his robes, still smiling, then moved towards her.

She tried to shift back but the wall stopped her. He had always smiled when locking her up, even if his hands had lingered longer than she was comfortable with. He wasn't much taller than her, he didn't have his gun out, so why was her heart racing?

He moved closer, too close, so his breath was in her face, and bent in. She flinched as he took her arm, but all he did was release her wrists. He kept hold of one hand though, stroked his thumb over her palm.

She tried to move back, but rough concrete pressed against her body, and Yimlul pushed up against her. She wriggled, tried to push him off, but his wiry strength surprised her and she felt him growing hard against her struggles. She fell limp, tried to drop away from him, but her scarf had fallen off and he seized her hair and dragged her to the ground, flinging himself on top of her.

She pushed her body at his chest, tried to get away, but he ripped into her thin cotton trousers, one arm pinning her across her neck, his fingers still tangled in her hair. Her breath was crushed out of her by his weight, and the edges of her vision blackened.

Chapter 11

Cold brick burnt through to cold bones as she hunched into the corner.

She hadn't used the blade against him, could use it now, should have unwrapped it, could end this all.

Streams of tears, no sight left to blur, dark room, dark sight, no god here

Fumble to find the bundle of cloth that held the scalpel.

Wouldn't have needed to see to do it, she thought as she unfurled it, as she felt the metal, still colder than her hands.

Her fingers shook like they had when she operated on Yimlul, shook like they had when he'd made her work at gunpoint. They had stopped shaking when he pinned her down.

She inhaled a juddering breath.

should have done this before, should have waited, blade in hand by the door, should have attacked Yimlul when he came in.

hadn't really believed it would happen, hadn't thought that he'd go that far.

had let him do it, had given up betrayed Adam betrayed her parents betrayed herself.

She could still feel his burn between her legs.

The scalpel handle pressed against her palm. She could still use it, still slash her wrists, spear her jugular, bleed out in seconds.

would be better for them, would be better for her

would make it stop.

She inhaled, exhaled, eyes shut, metal warming against her skin.

tried to think about Adam, but his face was blurred

mum had died, dad would too

Michael had Samia and the boys

Amastan was free, she hoped, still out there, surviving somehow.

If he was alive, maybe that was enough.

Blade tight in her hand,

she gripped her hair

slashed at it again and again.

Cascades of greasy curls fell to the floor around her

she shivered at the sudden chill of air on the skin of her scalp.

There was a clank and scrape outside the door. She scrambled the blade back into the cloth and stuffed it inside her shirt.

Chapter 12

It was worse.

The men thought so too.

Wararni had a supply of something that he gave them each night, fire in their eyes seconds later, fire from their guns as they drove out towards the battlefield.

Boys with bloated bellies, lying on the hangar floor, listless, fever struck.

She rubbed her eyes, tried to focus, couldn't sleep, couldn't see, stitched wounds by feel.

They bled faster when they'd taken it, whatever it was.

It was night when they brought in the wounded for her to stitch, but as dawn broke nothing cleared and the glare just stunned her

she felt her way to the tap, splashed water on her face, closed and opened her lids

no good

hand in front of her face, fingerprints erased, even the lines on her palm

it was all gone and she stumbled away from the man as far as the ankle chain would let her, left the needle hanging

no sight, all the sun brought was haze

firesmoke stung her eyes

tears cleared nothing

She made Baragsen take her to Wararni, and she knew him by the sound of his voice. He didn't heed her at first and she seized him by the wrist, made him look her in the eye, couldn't tell if he was uninterested, unbelieving. Couldn't be sure, couldn't tell, couldn't see what his face was saying.

"Look! Look at my eyes."

She recoiled as he seized her face, gripped her shorn hair through the scarf, his face a shadow to her. Her gut lurched as she realised she might have just told them she could be of no more use.

But she couldn't struggle on with diminishing sight, never sure if she had cleaned each wound, stitches growing sloppy. Amastan could do better, she thought, wondering if he'd made it somewhere safer.

Her hands fell, Wararni stepped back, and she knew tears were running down her cheeks.

"Yimlul!"

She flinched as Wararni shouted, clenched her hands as she listened to them talk, whispers of what she might be worth if they asked for a ransom. Yimlul didn't want to let her go, and she didn't think kidnap was their business as Wararni asked, "Would they pay to get you back?"

She kept her head down, unsure what would keep her alive. Her father would sell everything he had, but even if he sent money it might not reach them, she might be killed regardless.

She raised her face. "No," she said, and braced herself because she couldn't see what was coming.

She stood in the blazing sun, waiting.

There was a volley of gunfire. "Take her away!" Wararni shouted, and Yimlul grabbed her by the arm and dragged her to the shelter of a building.

She could feel the gun at his hip as her body was pulled against his and she wondered if he was now finally her executioner.

Instead he sat her down on some sacks, rough under her skin.

She flinched at the sound of gunfire, far too close.

"Will this get better?" he asked, gripping her hand. "Is there something we can do?"

She struggled to concentrate, gunfire loud in her head, but dragged her focus together. "I need to see an ophthalmologist, someone who can look at my eyes properly."

"In London?"

"Any city."

Yimlul stood again.

“Come,” he said, and he took her to an inner room.

“Stay,” he said, but he didn’t chain her. She heard the door lock, though.

The room she was in was small, dark apart from a glow in the corner. There was a heap of fabric on the floor that tripped her as she tried to move. She fell in a heap onto the coverings, felt a mattress underneath and shivered.

Yimlul had taken what he wanted, and now she couldn’t see he was going to keep her. Safe, he’d say, he was going to keep her safe. She felt bile rise in her throat at the thought of what was coming.

She lay there, tried to sleep

knife in her grip

gunfire, loud, relentless

if my vision doesn’t clear there’s no point in keeping me,

if I can’t see I can no longer plan to escape

gunfire, loud, relentless

try to sleep

please God

if my vision doesn’t clear there’s no point in keeping me,

if I can’t escape I have to stay

gunfire, loud, relentless

try to sleep

God

if my vision doesn’t clear there’s no point in keeping me,

if I stay here he will

gunfire, loud, relentless

no god

At some point a key turned in the lock and she slid as far back as she could, blade still in her hand, but it was only Baragsen with a bowl of watery porridge.

“He’s back,” Baragsen said, then waited.

Nour waited too, uncertain. Finally, when she decided Baragsen wasn’t going to tell her any more unless she asked, she said, “Who?”

“Amastan. Just walked in. Decided to take his luck here rather than die out there. You should have seen the beating Wararni gave him.”

Having delivered the news Baragsen left, locking the door behind him.

Nour left the porridge in a corner, too nauseated to eat, and her thoughts spun in circles once more as shots rattled outside and she heard the whoosh from the rocket launcher.

days nights blurred time lost

no shift in light in this inner room

waiting

food she could no longer eat

waiting

he took what she could no longer give

His footsteps woke her, stumbling steps. He fell down beside her on the mattress and she pulled back, but he wasn’t fumbling at her clothes, and his breath was coming through in jerks.

“I can’t stay,” he said, uneven words, like he was struggling to get control. “Needed a break.”

She stayed where she was, beyond immediate reach, and listened to his breathing.

After a moment she asked, “Are you hurt?”

A bitter laugh, and he said, “No, not me.”

“Who then?”

“Wararni.”

She didn’t want to ask, couldn’t stop the pointless words. “Is there anything I can do?”

A pause, then, “No. Nothing anyone can do.” Yimlul was silent again, then said, “It’s down to me.”

She waited, and when he didn’t say anything else, shuffled a little closer and raised her hand to where she hoped his face might be. His cheeks were wet where she touched them. She left her hand there for a moment.

Key in the door, she scuttled back into a corner.

No words, but a small hand, firm on her arm.

“Amastan?”

“Come!”

She kept her knife in her palm as he tugged her forwards, down a corridor, pulled her to the ground as shots rang close by, up, on again, outside into the darkness, overhead tracer fire dazzling, finishing off what the keratitis had started. More than once she stumbled over her jilbab but he dragged her on. She could feel the air cut as bullets came close, couldn’t catch her breath as she ran on after Amastan, blindly.

“What’s happening?” she screamed at him, but her voice couldn’t rise above the sound of the onslaught.

This is hell, she thought. Blinded, deafened, muted, running without knowing safety would come.

The din loudened as a rocket roared overhead. Her world lit up, dazzle and blinding glare as it hit its target close by. Screams died in her throat as she and Amastan were flung to the ground.

Part 2 – London

Chapter 13

They were flying her home.

She had felt relieved at first. Now, with the airplane flying smoothly, she couldn't put her nausea down to turbulence.

It was dark outside, she could tell that much, even if the interior of the plane was a confusing pattern, starburst glare from each small overhead light. She had been put onto the flight at some airport, she didn't know where, didn't know who she had been handed over to, was wary of the British official who was sitting alongside her. She shrunk into her chair, leaned her face against the reinforced glass and stared out into nothing.

She should have been dreaming of this moment, the reunion with her family, but she would have to explain what had happened to her. She shuddered. She couldn't make it real once more.

She wanted to know what time it was, wanted to use the toilet, but that would mean asking the stranger next to her, and she couldn't even tell if they were asleep or awake. It was a youngish man from the way he had answered the air hostess, but she didn't trust her own guesswork.

"We will shortly begin the descent into London Heathrow," the pilot said. "It is currently eight degrees and 3.45 am in London."

Nour shivered, and the man next to her said, "Do you want a blanket?"

"Thank you," she said, nodding, but then he called the air steward over, and she could hear someone behind her complaining about the disturbance and she wished she hadn't asked. She pulled the blanket around her, pushed down the empty feeling in her stomach. She had picked at the roll, sipped at some Coke and left the rest of the mysteries of the food tray inside their foil containers. It had been too much hassle to unpack, risk a spill.

There was a ping from the tannoy, and she could hear more movement around her as people started to stir.

"We're coming into land soon. Could you put your seatbelt on?" a steward asked. "Stay where you are when we land, and I'll take you off last."

"You'll soon see your family," the man next to her said.

She nodded, then turned back to the window. She didn't want to talk to him, didn't know who would be waiting, didn't want to wonder if Adam would be there.

She thought about her father, hoped nothing had happened to him since she had been away, because all they had had since she was rescued was a brief chat on a fuzzy phone line. She shook her head, trying to clear out thoughts of everything that could have gone wrong.

Sandra would be there, she thought, casting her mind back to the crackly phone call they had when she was finally taken to the embassy. The hours between being picked up by what turned out to be MINUSMA forces and being taken to the capital had been interminable. They had thought she was a boy at first, had pushed her along with the rest of the captured men until Amastan screamed at them. She was pulled from the crowd, hadn't been able to tell who was taking her, screeched and fought them off as hands had pulled at her shirt. There was a pause as someone saw her breasts and then more hands pushed her clothes back together to cover her up. She stood there, arms hugged tightly around her, shivering even as the sun burnt down, waiting for someone to work out what to do with her. Eventually she was put in the front seat of a truck and finally a man who spoke English came over to her.

"You're a British doctor?" he asked, disbelief in his voice.

She nodded. Her voice was raspy, her mouth dry. "I was captured. Months ago."

"Hm." She could hear his footsteps thud dully on the compressed sand as he strode away again.

She wondered if she was supposed to follow, but he didn't call for her, and the seat in the truck was comfortable and maybe she was safer with this group of soldiers and maybe she wasn't, but if she sat still until she was told what to do, maybe she would be all right.

She wasn't tied up, but she was past the point of running.

She could feel the bruises on her ribs as she breathed in and out, could still hear ringing in her ears from the final explosion.

The plastic seat was hot underneath her legs. She could put her hand out, feel her surroundings, but someone would be watching her and that might be a mistake.

She wanted Amastan back, didn't know what had happened to him after they had been separated, wanted to know if he was safe, wanted him here so she could feel safer.

Loud male voices, a sudden stutter of gunfire, and she slipped from the seat into the footwell. A scream, and the gunfire stopped.

Minutes, hours passed. "Sit up please. This is no place for you."

The man's English was strangely formal for the situation, and despite the accent his enunciation was clearer than much of what she'd heard in Tooting or Balham. She didn't ask questions though, just sat up as she was told, then endured hours on bumpy roads where each jolt jarred her bones and bruises.

Mopti had been a little better. No one had known what to do with her there either. She was left in an office with a glass of lukewarm water and a plate of something that might have been goat, if she had understood correctly. She didn't know how long she waited, didn't dare sleep, couldn't stomach the food, couldn't tell if this was safer. No one was man-handling her for now, though, and after a while her thoughts returned to Amastan, and even Yimlul. Was he still alive or had he got away? Had he seen them take her? Was he looking for her now?

"Excuse me, ma'am, you can disembark now." A clear voice broke into her thoughts. "Ma'am, everyone else is off the plane, do you have any bags, can I give you an arm?"

She shook her head and struggled to disentangle herself from the blanket. She didn't know if she had a bag, didn't think she did, didn't have anything that mattered anyway.

She stood up, could feel the overhead locker brush against her shorn scalp, but she was just too short for it to bump her. She felt her way slowly between the seats, reluctant to reach out for the offered arm. She could manage as long as the seats repeated row after row, but then they stopped and all she could feel was a plastic wall.

"This way, ma'am." Someone took her arm, pulling her forwards. She reached out with the other hand, trying to feel for hazards. "It's all flat from here, then we have a chair for you."

A chair. Wheelchair, she guessed, and she was proved right as she was helped into it. She could feel the cracks in the plastic seat, the space on either side of her as she huddled to an edge.

"Do you have your passport?" the man asked.

Nour fumbled in her pockets for the passport. It was still there, product of the embassy at Bamako. She didn't know what the photo inside looked like, didn't want to see it. She nodded.

"Great. This is Karol, he will take us through to the gate."

She sat there, huddled against one side of the chair. She could hear voices come and go as she and Karol sped past, and she wondered if he was in a hurry to get home, or if he had hours to go on his shift. She couldn't tell if he was old or young, hadn't heard his voice, and it made her curl in on herself even more as she thought about being pushed at speed by someone she didn't know in a place she couldn't see. The embassy official was probably there somewhere but he wasn't speaking if he was. They said Heathrow, it had the dry smell of an airport, luggage and aircon, people who had spent all night in a plane. But it could be any airport, anywhere.

They stopped, and she jerked her head up, wanted to look around. She could tell there were bodies in front of her from the shifting shadows, the chatter and clatter and jingle of bags and currency. Then they were moving again and she wanted to say, 'Stop!', but she held out her passport when asked, went through the motions as she had when entering Mali. And she shuddered.

"I can't do this," she said, when Karol pushed her through passport control, but he didn't seem to hear her.

"Where is your family?" he asked, and the stupidity of the question almost roused her to anger, almost, but what was the point because he didn't know. Maybe he hadn't looked at her eyes, hadn't seen she was blind. And she hadn't seen him, wouldn't see him again. She could smell early morning pastries and coffee, hear voices raised in reunion rising over the hum of traffic from outside, and she knew there would be people holding up those signs. If Karol left her now, she wouldn't mind because this really did seem like London again.

She relaxed for a moment, listening to a taxi driver debate with a man who claimed to be his fare, eavesdropping on an American grandmother reunited with her British grandchildren.

"Can you see someone to collect you?" Karol asked again, and she shook her head, but his question was answered before she could even try to explain.

"Nour!"

Suddenly the background of other people's voices was no longer reassuring, not when everything was focussed on her. She could hear Sandra's voice, loud and clear as usual, Adam was there and all her worries about him being dead came back in a rush, and tears sparked at her eyes. Her Dad was there too and so was Michael. She gripped the arms of her chair as someone moved it forward, wanting to stand up, to take control of the situation, but the movement wouldn't stop and she couldn't tell whose hand was on her shoulder, her head.

"Stop!" she said.

It was all too much, but she couldn't say that out loud, could feel them looking at her, didn't know what to say to explain.

A kiss on the face and she fought the urge to recoil, submitting to the hug. Slight stubble rubbed against her cheek, the smell of the same hair cream that took her back to childhood when he had so much more hair to tame. After a second she relaxed into his arms, but then there was a flash of light bright enough to make her flinch.

"Damn!" It was Adam's voice. "Look, Nour, I'm sorry. There's an ambulance waiting, we need to move, the press have found out that you're back."

"Unless you'd like to give a quote." Sandra's voice, hopeful.

Nour shuddered, shook her head, and submitted to the breakneck wheelchair ride.

Everyone seemed to cluster round her as they stopped, outside somewhere, where the smell of exhausts filled her senses and the hum of traffic was louder still.

"Can I help you up?" A stranger, didn't say who she was.

"I'm coming too," Adam said.

"You can't all come." The stranger again. "There's only space in the ambulance for one extra."

Nour felt her way forward, cautiously searching for the step she knew must be there. She didn't want to be fought over, might have liked to be back in her father's arms, definitely wanted to get away from the airport and the unseen threat of pursuing paparazzi.

"Up you go. Now let's get you settled. I'm Gina. I'm going to check your blood pressure while we get going."

Someone seemed to have made a decision because the ambulance doors slammed shut, and she could feel someone sit down beside her. Adam. The brush of hairs on his arm against hers, the scent of aftershave and clean washing.

"Not there, love. Can you strap yourself in on the other side?"

His warmth vanished before she had time to think.

"Give me your arm, love."

The ambulance moved off and she was jostled as it bounced over sleeping policemen.

"It's all right," Adam said, and she could feel him stretch across the gap, could feel his hand grip hers. "God, I'm glad you're back."

Gina left her alone once she had the cuff on, once she had taken some measurements, and covered her up with a blanket. Adam didn't let go the whole time, and Nour was grateful to have him there, but didn't know what to say to him, couldn't think where to start, not with the paramedic listening, not now, not ever. She cast her mind back and shivered.

"Are you cold?" Adam and Gina spoke almost simultaneously. She didn't like the feeling that they were both watching her and couldn't stop shivering now it had started.

She shook her head, but Gina said, "Put your feet back up, I'll get another blanket."

Adam was rubbing her hand. "It'll be all right," he said. "We'll be at the hospital soon."

The blankets weighed heavy on her legs, her shoulders, and she was trapped again, so she pulled her hand away. She pushed the blankets off and swung her legs back onto the floor.

"I'm not ill," she said, despite the continuing shivering. She started to fumble with the cuff of the blood pressure machine. "I don't need a hospital. I saw a doctor already. I need..." and she stopped. She didn't want to be in the ambulance, didn't want to go to the hospital but if anyone had asked she couldn't have said what she did need. She took a deep breath.

"What's up, Nour?" he asked, his voice quieter than usual. "Nearly there. It's only the traffic making it slow."

"It's fine," she said, forcing breaths in and out. "I don't really need the hospital."

"I know, I'm sure you're fine, just let them check you over and then we can go."

"You're humouring me," she said, and she could hear the smile in his voice as he replied.

"Maybe."

"Stop treating me like a patient," she said, and she couldn't stop a smile coming to her face too.

She felt his hand brush against hers. "I'm really glad to get you back," he said, and when she didn't pull away he took hold of her fingers again, his thumb rubbing against her palm. She could feel the short smooth soft ends of his fingers, and the way they paused over the scabs on her skin.

"I know," she said. "You don't know how glad I am to be out of there."

She tried to blink back the tears that were stinging her eyes. "Don't," she said as she felt him let go, as he moved across to sit next to her. Gina didn't say anything this time, though, and he put his arm round her.

She let him hold her while she clenched her hands into fists, while she waited for the tears to stop.

"I've got a flat," he said. "Let's get you through what they need to do at the hospital then you can come back and chill out for a bit. No pressure, just have a bit of space."

She nodded. Space was what she needed now. And the ability to come and go when she wanted, not to answer to anyone, something she hadn't dared think about over the last few months. A place to come home to.

"What's it like?" she asked, all too aware that Gina was still there despite her silence.

"Small. Downstairs in a converted house in Battersea. Ian and Catherine found it. They dragged me round three different flats when I was back, when I had to start work. They thought they were giving me a choice, at least Ian did, but I think Catherine had this one in mind from the start. It was a bit like one of those TV shows where they try to find you a house but without the camera crew." He was trying to keep it light, but then he said, "I don't think I'd have managed without them. It all seemed a bit pointless." His voice trailed off, and Nour gripped his hand more firmly.

After those first few weeks when she would have given anything to know if he was dead or alive, she had somehow stopped thinking about him. She hadn't considered if he was at work, building a new life, couldn't imagine it at all.

"What are you doing?"

"I've got a full-time job at the eye hospital."

"Employed?"

"I thought about locuming again, but it's the right time to get back on consultant track."

She thought about that, wondered if she would ever operate again. He seemed to know what she was thinking.

"Sorry. That was tactless. Just, after Mali, I can't do that again." His arm was tight around her, and she could feel her breathing speeding up again. "And if you came back, when you came back, I wanted to be ready for you. It's a nice little flat, I can afford the rent. If you don't want to work you don't need to." He stopped again.

She thought about what he wasn't saying, about staying at home while he went out to work. An unknown flat by herself, the thought was terrifying but she couldn't work if she couldn't see, and she couldn't see herself squeezed back into her family home. Now that he was next to her, holding her close, being with Adam seemed safe and right and reassuring.

"God, Nour, it's felt like so long," he said. "Sometimes I thought they'd never find you."

"Sometimes I thought I'd never make it home," she said.

Maybe she had forgotten what a hospital was like, or maybe she had never really perceived the assault of scent and sound as she was pushed in through the entrance.

"We're coming in through A&E," Gina said, but those few words didn't convey the clatter of a trolley, the hubbub of voices, the crying child, the scents of perfume and sweat, blood, bathrooms and bad coffee and, underlying that, disinfectant and air-conditioning. The doors flapped wafts of air as she was pushed through them, with some sounds left behind, traded for the beeps of monitors, the murmur of staff voices, and the disjointed words of someone talking on a phone.

"Right, let's get you onto the bed, someone will be along in a minute."

Nour had to let go of Adam's hand as she shuffled from trolley to bed, blankets an unruly tangle round her legs. It was colder in here, and she pulled them up around her.

"What about my dad and my brother? Can they come in here? Will they know where we are?" She'd barely spoken to them, hadn't seen them, maybe Baba should have come in the ambulance instead of Adam, Adam would have found her, he knew hospitals but Baba didn't.

"It's fine, Nour. I've got Michael's number, I'll go outside and call to make sure they know we're here, now you've got a room."

He went outside, then came back.

They waited.

She thought about Adam phoning Michael, what they might have said in her absence.

Lying on a bed should have been relaxing, but she knew she was twitching at every clatter, couldn't control it. After a while she sat, feet up, arms round her knees.

She thought of the things she could say to Adam, but nothing seemed right. What she had to tell him wouldn't be what he wanted to hear, wasn't what she wanted to say.

A doctor came in, took a brief history, and said that he wanted to do some tests. They waited a while longer and eventually a woman came in to take swabs, draw bloods, to send it off for testing to the tropical medicine specialist lab.

“I’m Jeannie,” she said. “I just need to take some blood.”

“They’ve done this all already, in Bamako.”

“I know, but we don’t have the results so we need to do them here too.”

Nour braced her arm, could feel the woman’s attempts as she failed to find a vein at first try, she knew what Adam was thinking.

“It’s fine,” she said, before he asked for someone else. “I’m probably a bit dehydrated after the flight.” She brushed away his concern and suggestions of a drip.

It seemed to take longer when she couldn’t see what was being done to her, and she held back from asking what they were testing for. Adam would be watching, she knew, and she could ask him when the woman had gone. She sat back on the bed, and let the woman work, only flinching a little as she swapped the vials over.

“Can you go and look for Dad and Michael?” she asked him after a moment. “They should be here now.”

He squeezed her hand, and said, “Are you sure you’ll be okay on your own?”

“I’m nearly done,” the woman said. “Just a urine test after this.”

Nour nodded at Adam, and he released his grip. She listened to his footsteps retreating down the hallway.

“All done. Now I’ve got the urine container. Shall I show you the toilet? Can you manage once you’re in there?”

Nour nodded, couldn’t trust herself to speak. She let the woman take her across the corridor, into the toilet cubicle, let her close the door. Nour turned the lock and stood, paralysed. If she let go of the door she would be adrift, uncertain where the walls were, the basin, the toilet, and she could stumble, fall, keep falling, nothing to catch her. She held on, and it was all she could do to keep her breath dragging in and out.

“Are you all right in there?” the woman asked after a few minutes. “Shall I come in?”

“I’m fine,” Nour said. She shook her head, tried to clear the wave of disorientation washing over her. The pot was still clenched in her fist and she steeled herself to release the door handle, feel her way forward until her knee jarred against the toilet. She felt for the seat, checked twice then sat down. She flipped the lid off and sat with the pot in her hands. She could do this, could wee in the pot, could find out if what Yimlul had done would change her life even more than she had thought.

There was urine all over her fingers and she could only hope that there was enough in the pot. She wasn’t going to stick a finger in it to see. Her hand shook as she tried to put the lid on, blinking away tears, couldn’t work out why she was crying again, still.

“Are you all right in there?”

“I’m fine,” she said, her voice louder. “Nearly done.” She wanted to be left alone to do this.

She felt her way to the basin, put the pot of urine on the side and fumbled for the taps. She ran the water until it was hot, couldn’t find any soap, rubbed her hands anyway. She felt for the pot, caught it with the back of her hand, and took an involuntary step back as it crashed and splashed on the floor.

She inhaled, tears sparking. She could fumble around for toilet paper, try to clear it up, not knowing what had spilt where, or she could admit this was beyond her.

She felt her way to the door, hesitated for a moment. She could do this, she could ask for help. She opened the door, could see the woman’s form in outline, the light from the windows behind her.

“I’m sorry. I dropped it. I can’t see to clear it up.” She squeezed the words out, her hand gripping the door frame as she spoke.

“Not to worry, let’s get you back on the bed.” The woman took Nour’s arm, and Nour shook her hand off.

“Don’t pull me, please.”

She hated this, hated having to be led everywhere, couldn’t bear the thought that someone was going to put up a yellow sign outside the toilet, mark it out of order until a cleaner came to mop up her urine.

“Shall we give you a cup of tea, and then I could come in and help you in half an hour or so?”

“No!” Nour surprised herself with the strength of her voice. “Leave it.”

They reached the bed and Nour felt her way on to it, pulled the blankets up and closed her eyes.

“I need to get out of here,” she said to Adam, after she had submitted to being put on a drip, to having the sores on her wrists and ankles cleaned and dressed.

“I know. Let the drip run through. They want you to have something to eat too before they will discharge you.”

“I can have something to eat when I get out of here. I’ll be better once I’m out of here.” If she said it enough he might believe her, might wave a magic wand, might turn back time so none of it had happened.

“They still need to...” He stopped what he was going to say mid-sentence. “Look, let’s not rush. No point stressing. Sit here for a bit, have a sleep if you want, I suggested that Michael take your dad to get something to eat.”

“Thank you.”

They sat in silence and she rubbed her fingers over the blankets. They were clean and smelt of laundry liquid and she tried to imagine the colours, wondered if they had writing on them, the name of the hospital she was in, or the name of a completely different hospital.

“Can you tell me anything?” Adam asked, his voice hesitant. “Might be better to talk about it, get it out there.”

She bit her lip. He was right, it was what she’d say to a friend, but how could she find words to explain it all. After a moment she said, “I thought you might be dead, and I still had to operate on his eye, with you lying there.” And then her words came out in bursts interspersed with silence. She told him about some of the surgeries she had to do but that was the easy part to explain, if she focussed on the technical challenges.

At some point Adam clambered onto the bed next to her, mirroring her position, with his arm round her shoulders. He ran his hands over her hair, spiky where it used to be smooth.

“What happened to your hair?”

She shrugged, didn’t answer, because he wasn’t asking about her hair, not really.

“They haven’t had anyone look at your eyes yet, have they?” he asked after another pause.

She shook her head, started to talk, stopped, started again, words tumbling out, “Is there a slit lamp? There must be a slit lamp. You could look at my eyes,” She swung her legs to the floor, and stood. “We don’t need to wait, you could check, couldn’t you? You could look, tell me how bad it is.” She stood, took a step forward, hands outstretched because the room was too small and he was too close and this was taking too long. The drip tugged painfully at her wrist.

“I shouldn’t, Nour. I don’t work here. I can’t help myself to a slit lamp.”

“You have to. I can’t wait.” She fumbled with the cannula.

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do.” He took her hand again. “Sit back on the bed, I’ll go and find a slit lamp. You stay here. They might come back, you don’t want to miss the doctor.”

She was shaking on the spot, the air in the room all at once too hot. “I can’t do this, Ad. Can’t stay here, can’t stay and wait, can you... I need to go.” And she took her hand from him and felt her way forward.

“Take the drip stand,” he said, pushing it towards her. “Look, here’s my arm.”

She touched his elbow with her fingertips, just enough to feel where he was going.

“Let’s go find someone, tell them you’re going to walk up and down,” he said. As she followed him out into the corridor he said, “I wanted to ask this in the ambulance. How much can you see?”

She stopped, took her hand from his arm waved her hand in front of her face. “Hand movements, maybe counting fingers in the left eye on a good day.”

“How long has it been like this?”

“It took a while. I could tell it was going, but there wasn’t anything that I could... I... can we walk?”

She couldn’t talk about this either. Couldn’t see, couldn’t say, didn’t want to hear the questions, had to move. Her fingers closed on his shirt sleeve and she followed him down to the nursing station. Adam asked where they could go, and then they walked down the corridor. She could feel that there were people waiting, could hear the rise in volume of voices as they passed an area with more chairs, and she knew what hospital corridors looked like, but none of that stopped her wanting to see, wanting to see them watching her as she walked past, wanting to read strangers’ faces and see herself through their eyes.

She could feel air from outside blowing in from somewhere.

“Nearly there,” Adam said. “Just going past the ambulance entrance.”

“It got worse really fast, the last few weeks.”

The words spilled out unplanned as they went outside, but no words could explain the terror she had felt every morning when she woke, unsure how much she would be able to see. A siren wailed, with brief bursts of noise as an ambulance pulled out and she gripped Adam’s arm. He led her around a corner, away from the doors, to where the sun glared full on her face as she screwed up her eyes. Somewhere someone was having an illicit cigarette, trails of smoke scenting the hot air, merging with traffic fumes and the dirty scent of London in the summer.

“I... I thought if they didn’t need me they’d shoot me.”

She felt him stop. She hadn’t wanted to tell him, couldn’t stop now it was out there.

Tears ran down her face as he touched her hand, her arm, her shoulder but when he raised his hands to her cheek she jerked back.

“Don’t.”

Her breath was juddering in and out, and her body seemed to shake in time. She brought her hand up to her face, covered her eyes, her mouth, felt the tug of the needle in the back of her hand.

Adam said, “There’s a bench here.” She didn’t respond, couldn’t say anything. He paused then asked, “Do you want to sit down?”

She let him take the drip stand, let him put his arm round her, let him take her to the bench where they shuffled round until she could sit without tangling the tubing. They sat, and she kept her lips closed, didn’t want anything else to seep out.

After a while, she could feel the wooden slats of the bench digging into her bones. The air was hot and grey, and she wanted the air-conditioned room back.

“Can we go inside?”

Chapter 14

She listened, her eyes closed. She didn't want to sleep but she couldn't engage anymore. He was on the phone to a colleague, and it was worse hearing someone else say it out loud.

"Not much vision at all. No, I thought it was better if you looked. You're not so involved. Yes, no problem. We'll be there."

She could feel him move to stand next to her, knew he was watching her.

"Well?" she asked.

"I spoke to the doctor about a referral to the eye hospital. I know a good man there. He'll see you first thing tomorrow before his regular clinic."

"We can go, then. There's nothing else they're going to do here." She pushed herself upright, started to pick at the tape holding the cannula in place.

Adam put his hand on hers. "I know you can take that out, but why don't we give them a chance. The doctor said something about antibiotics too. Stay there and I'll check at the desk."

She flopped back on the bed and let him go, no energy to argue.

"How are you feeling?" Her father's voice made her jump, she hadn't heard him approach, his soft steps drowned out by the chatter and clatter in the emergency department.

"I don't need to be here, Baba. Adam's seeing about getting me discharged."

"You should come back with us. Samia asked if she should clear out your old room." Michael, sounding anxious.

"You don't have room. Adam says I can go back to his. He's going to take me in early to see a specialist." She tried to make it sound like it was purely a practical decision to go to Adam's, something that Michael couldn't possibly object to.

"Shouldn't they look at your eyes here?" Michael said, "You shouldn't stay with him on your own."

"It's better to go to someone who knows about tropical eye disease. The ophthalmologist here wasn't sure what the problem was." She hoped she sounded like she knew enough to convince them. She ignored Michael's second point. He had always objected to her relationship with Adam, and she wasn't sure if it was because he was white, or because he was English, or because he wasn't

Coptic, or all of these factors combined. Michael and Samia had waited until they were married before they lived together, and even though Nour had been dating Adam since university, once she had moved out she had always shared a flat with girlfriends, never really let on to her family if she was staying over at Adam's.

The sun had moved round so it was no longer blazing into the room as she waited to be discharged. Her father sat there, holding her right hand. She could imagine his face, gazing into the distance as he thought things through without any need to contribute to conversation. Michael talked about what Gabe and Izaiah were doing now, told her that Samia was pregnant again, that he might be promoted at work, but it was hard to work enough hours with the children and the guys he was competing with were childless. He didn't mention where she was going to stay, though, and she felt a small wave of relief.

Adam came in and perched on the left edge of the bed until she sent him off to chase her discharge. Someone came to take out her cannula before he had returned, though.

"Can I go now?" she asked.

It was the woman with the Caribbean accent. "No, love. You need to see the doctor first. And then you need to get your medication from the pharmacy."

Adam returned and said, "The doctor's on his way. I've spoken to him, he knows what's going on. Honestly, Nour, he looked about fifteen."

"So can we go?"

"Hold on. I'll see where he is."

"Have you got anything I can pack?" Michael asked. "Shall I go to the pharmacy?"

She shook her head, thought for a moment about her lack of possessions. Maybe it was a good thing that she couldn't mislay anything right now.

"I've got everything you took to Mali," Adam said. "I should have thought, should have brought you a bag."

"I can change into my own clothes when I'm at yours." She wanted to say, 'When I'm home', but she wasn't sure where home was right now. She thought about the aircraft hangar, where her place was chained to the pipe next to the wall, or the months when they were on the move with no place to return to. She thought of her time in the insurgents' camp when she at least had a room to herself, and before then the hut she and Adam had shared when they were working. She had moved

from place to place as a junior doctor. Now all she wanted was some place warm and comfortable, where she could come and go as she pleased, but most of all she wanted a space of her own.

Eventually the young doctor came and talked to her about the infected wound in her ankle; he went over which tests would be back in a few days and which would take weeks. "We have your mobile number, and we'll let your GP know and you should get a letter," he said. She wanted to tell him she knew that and she didn't have her phone and didn't know the address of Adam's flat and couldn't read a letter if it came, but Adam squeezed her hand and said, "I'll get your phone up and running when we're home," and he seemed to think his home could be hers.

"Are you all right?" she asked in the cab on the way home.

"I'm fine. Now you're back."

"That wasn't what I meant, not really. I mean, when I saw you last, when I was taken, they hit you on the head. Is your head all right?"

She raised her fingers, reached out, waited, unwilling to poke him in the eyes, but she couldn't see him, needed to feel instead.

Adam seemed to know what she was trying to do, touched his hand to hers and moved them both together to the side of his head where he had been hit.

"It's fine," he said. "It was only concussion."

She nodded, kept her hand on the close-cut hair at the side of his head, ghosted her fingers over his scalp, searching for scars. It might only have been concussion, but they had hit him hard. He hadn't moved the entire time she was operating and part of her wondered just how much he was glossing over weeks or months of headaches, just how much he was trying to protect her from something he thought she couldn't handle yet.

And he was probably right. She jerked her hand away, suddenly unsure about being so close to him, unsure how she could want to take away the pain he'd been through when she couldn't deal with her own pain, couldn't change any of it. She curled in on herself, suddenly unsure whether she was doing the right thing. She could have gone back with Baba and Michael. It might have been crowded, but it would be familiar. And all at once Adam felt like a stranger. She hadn't seen him for months, couldn't see him now. He said he wanted her to come home with him, but could he really want her still?

She was even less sure as she stood on the pavement waiting for him to pay the cab. She hadn't thought about money, she had no idea what she had in her bank account, no idea how to

access any of it. She gripped his arm as he led her down the short front path. It felt like just a few feet from pavement to the front door where she waited while he fumbled for his keys.

“Sorry, thought I had them in my coat, it’s too warm for a coat really, but it was cold this morning. I was up before it was light, are you warm enough? I should have asked in the cab, we’ll be inside in a minute.”

His words rose over the sound of traffic on the street, and she flinched as she could feel a lorry speed past behind her, warm dirty air brushing her skin, filling her lungs.

“Got them!” He unlocked the door, stepped up, then down again, and she followed. “This is the front hall. It’s shared with the upstairs flats. Hold on.” More movement as he scraped a key into a lock, opened the door, took her through another doorway into the dark.

“I’ll put the light on,” he said, then, “Shall I? I mean, I normally would, there’s no natural light, the door’s solid. It is better with the light on?”

“Ow!”

“Damn. Sorry. There’s a little table there, it’s got a phone charger on it, that’s all, I usually leave my phone there when I come in, charge it up, pick it up on the way out. I could move it, charge it somewhere else. If it’s in your way.”

“I don’t know,” she said, and she let him keep talking because she didn’t know if it would be better with the light on, didn’t know if the table would be in her way, didn’t know if she was going to stay here, didn’t know how she would come and go from the house, nor where she would go to if she did.

“This is the living room. I’ve got that sofa that Mum and Dad used to have. They helped me out with a few bits.” He led her into the room and she barely had time to adapt to the glare from the window before he turned around again and said, “I’ll show you the kitchen.”

“Stop,” she said. “Slow down. Where’s the sofa?”

“Sorry. I’m rubbish at this. It’s here.”

He took her hand, pulled her a little forward until he placed it on the velvety fabric.

“What colour is it?”

“Brown. Do you remember? Mum and Dad were talking about getting rid of it last year.”

She shrugged, could barely remember what they talked about that visit. Her mind had already been in Mali.

“What’s up? Do you want a drink, something to eat? Come and see the kitchen. I shouldn’t say see, should I?”

“Don’t be daft,” she said, but tears sparked at her eyes. “I’ve just had enough of today, I think.”

“Right, sit down there, I’ll bring some tea through,” he said, “Maybe a sandwich, then we can get an early night and...”

“Stop.”

It was like in the airport, when she wanted to take back control, but she didn’t know what she would want to do now if she had the choice.

There was silence, and she ran her fingers over the soft fabric of the sofa. Velvet, she thought. It was clean, smooth, and it was months since she had felt something like this. It was more than simply the feel, though, Adam’s flat smelled right, scents of fresh laundry, familiar cleaning products. And even though she had been able to wash once she had been released and taken to the embassy in Bamako, back here she still didn’t feel clean. All at once, she knew what she needed.

“Can I use the bathroom? And you said you had my clothes. Are they clean?”

“Of course,” he said.

She knew he was still hovering in the doorway of the bathroom, didn’t quite know how to tell him to go, even though he had explained how the shower and the taps worked and where the towel was and how sorry he was that it wasn’t the right shampoo. “I couldn’t find the right one last night when I heard you were on your way back.”

“That’s fine. I’m going to close the door now.”

“Do you think you should leave it open just in case?”

“No.”

She stepped forward, felt for the door handle, closed the door, turned the lock. And held on, couldn’t let it go for a moment as everything swirled around her. She was on her own. It was up to her to open the lock. When she wanted.

She took a deep breath and stepped back, fingers trailing round the wall until she found the shower screen. It was a tiny bathroom, no place to get lost, and she turned the taps on full, then sank down on the toilet seat, fully dressed. They had given her the clothes that she was wearing at the embassy, and she still wasn't sure what they looked like, could feel the thin cotton, couldn't tell the colour of the baggy t-shirt and stretchy trousers.

She pulled the t-shirt over her head, trying to avoid the dressing on her wrists. She hadn't really thought how she would bathe without getting them wet. She cautiously lowered a finger over the side of the bath, felt the water level and temperature. It was warm enough, she thought, not too warm. The dressings would have to come off, and she could sort them out later.

She picked at the tape on her wrists first, struggled for a moment, and wondered about looking for scissors in here, wondered about asking Adam to help, but she didn't want him in here, not now, not yet, not this soon, not when she had the locked door between her and the outside world.

She left her ankle until last, that was the worst one where there had been an open wound long before her vision went. It stung as she pulled where the dressing had stuck to her skin so she stopped. She could soak it off in the bath.

She felt for the shampoo, then she lowered herself into the water. She could feel the burn of water on open wounds, but more than that she could feel the way her bones rested against the hard plastic surface beneath the water. She knew she had lost weight, and for the first time since it all happened she had the time and space to assess her body.

The skin on her feet was rough and hard, her canvas shoes hadn't offered much protection from the desert, even after Yimlul gave her socks to wear. She tried not to think about the wounds on her ankle too much, a soak in the bath would probably help. The muscles in her legs were diminished, and she thought about how swimming might be if she couldn't see. She could count strokes, she decided, as long as the pool wasn't busy, as long as she could find her way there. Nausea bubbled in her stomach as she thought about navigating London on her own. She couldn't expect Adam to take her, he had his new job, this flat, and had moved on since she was away. She supposed she should have felt lucky that he hadn't found a new girlfriend too, but the job niggled at her. He had decided to settle down, to stay in London, to get his career back on track. She struggled for the words to describe why this felt wrong. She didn't want to resent him for earning a living, but he could have locumed. Instead he was making a good career move at a prestigious hospital, even while she was missing.

Her hands rested on her stomach, her pelvis. Her hipbones stuck out, she could feel her ribs, her breasts had vanished to almost nothing. Would he even like her like this? Did she like her own body right now? She craved the ability to stand in front of a mirror and assess the physical changes forced on her over the last few months. Yimlul had wanted her, taken her, even like this. But what he did wasn't about her body or what she looked like. Shivers ran through her. She sat up in the bath, let the water go and clambered out quickly, fumbling to find the towel to cover herself.

She was wrong, all wrong. Her body was wrong, her eyes were wrong. As she towelled her head she felt the tufts of her hair. Even that was wrong. She made her way to the sink, let the towel drop as she opened the bathroom cabinet and felt inside. There was a clank as something fell to the floor, she wasn't sure what. She could feel the cold glass shelves, took a breath, ran her fingers over the contents. The sticky tube of toothpaste, she could tell that it was the blue gel stuff he always used even before she brought her fingers to her lips. A packet of tablets of some sort, couldn't tell what, and then what she had been looking for, the razor.

She could finish this properly, she thought, like she hadn't been able to do in Mali. She unzipped the pouch, pulled out the razor, and it all clattered into the sink.

"Nour, are you all right?"

She jumped. His voice was close by, just the other side of the bathroom door.

"I'm fine." She bent down to pick up the towel and cover herself. As she came up she smashed her head on the sink. "Ow!"

"Right, I'm coming in!"

She stepped back, right against the shower screen as she felt the door open and a blast of cooler air.

"What happened?"

She pulled the towel around her in a tangle.

"I dropped some stuff." She'd locked the door, she had definitely locked the door, and he was right in her space. "Could you go?" She gripped the towel tightly, could feel the way it wasn't covering her, could feel her heart pounding hard inside her chest.

"Did you need something? Can I find it for you?"

She shook her head, but said, "Clippers. I was going to tidy up my hair."

“You got my electric razor,” he said. “I don’t think that’s going to improve things. Unless you want a number one.”

She forced herself to breath more slowly. “Maybe not,” she said. “I need some clothes.”

“I’ve got them in the bedroom. Leave the bathroom, I’ll clear it up. Come and see what you want to wear.”

Perhaps she should have dreamt of her first night in England when she was in Mali, she thought as she sat at the kitchen table. She was wearing her own clothes, her own bra and knickers, a long-sleeved t-shirt and clean cotton trousers, such a luxury compared to wearing the same second-hand shirt for months, swamped by the sweaty artificial fibres of the jilbab.

She ran her hand over the table top, trying to decide what it would look like if she could see it. Ridges of wood under her finger tips, the slight stickiness of old varnish. Her fingers brushed against the edge of the plate. Adam had put food in front of her too, eggs and toast and mushrooms, but she didn’t want it. She vaguely heard him telling her she should eat, but he wasn’t going to force her to do anything. She could choose, she thought, in a vague kind of way. And right now she chose not to eat, not to talk.

There was a bird singing somewhere outside the kitchen window which must be open, faint breeze and the constant hum of London traffic drifting in. It was quiet enough to hear his breath too, and she could picture him opening his mouth to say something, pause in his breath, then closing it again because finally he seemed to have run out of things to say too.

“I want to go to bed,” she said after a while, her plate still untouched in front of her. She would have liked to find her own way but the layout of the flat was still hazy and she didn’t have the energy to fumble her way along the wall. “Can you show me?”

“Of course. Look, take my arm, can I bring you anything in?”

They were in the bedroom in seconds and she wondered why she hadn’t been able to visualise the route in her head. This was a tiny flat, living room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, nothing more. She could do this.

“Tell me what’s in here,” she asked. She could see the shape of the window, a glare of evening light still shining, obliterating all the detail from the room.

“Nothing much,” he said. “The bed’s here, it looks into the garden. I’ve got a table up against the wall, look, here’s the chair. Then if you come round here there’s a wardrobe and drawers. Your stuff is in the bottom drawer. Would you like it if I moved it to the top?”

“No.”

And all at once her chest felt tight. She needed him to go, needed to close the door, wanted to ask if there was a lock and key.

“Can I have some time on my own. I haven’t been left alone since...” Her voice trailed off and she was back in Yimlul’s room, wrists bound.

Adam’s voice cut into her thoughts. “Of course. I’ll be in the lounge. If there’s anything you need, call me, I’ll come.”

She nodded, followed him round the bed to the door. “I’ll be fine,” she said, “Can you close the door?”

The door clicked shut and she waited, listened. He was standing in the corridor, she knew. She felt the door and although she found the handle there was no place for a key. That was good, because although she knew on some level he wouldn’t lock her in, she still needed to know that he couldn’t. Although there could be a bolt on the outside of the door and she wouldn’t know. She shook her head. Stupid, this was a flat in Battersea. No one was going to lock her in. She kept her hand on the wall and felt her way round to the desk. She clipped her hip on it but kept going until she could feel the wooden chair. It was hard, dragging the chair with one hand, feeling the wall with the other but she did it, got the chair to the door, pushed it up against it, wondered about doing that thing they did in the movies where they wedged the handle with a chair but she couldn’t work out how. Maybe the chair was wrong, and she was making noise that would draw attention. If she left the chair there it would alert her if anyone tried to come in. They would expect to find her on the bed, so she felt her way onto it, tugged at the duvet, scooped up a pillow and kept moving until she could feel the other edge. She slid onto the floor with the bedding and felt for the chest of drawers. There was a space at the side between the drawers and the wall and she wedged the pillow in there, pulled the duvet over her. She wouldn’t be where they expected and that might give her a few seconds if, if, if... Her thoughts stuttered to a halt.

duvet soft

pillow silk soft sheen smooth cotton

scent of lavender, fabric conditioner

bus engine lorry car siren in the distance

carpet pressing into the skin of her thighs

what would Amastan think of it all?

The clatter alerted her at once, dragging her from a doze that seemed to have lasted only a few seconds. Male voice, angry. She pushed herself back into her corner. He might not see her in the dark, futile hope, because if he wanted it he was determined and she waited to be dragged out.

“Nour! Where are you?”

Dazzle, glare, she hid her face, couldn't understand the way the light flicked on when the power had been out since they took the hangar. A torch shining in her face? It didn't matter, he'd found her, would want her, take her.

Hand on her shoulder she couldn't stop shaking.

“It's okay, Nour. What are you doing down there? I'm sorry if the light's too bright, shall I switch it for the small lamp?”

Adam.

She put her hand on his and gripped it tightly.

Not Yimlul.

Carpet underneath her, duvet wrapped round her.

Not in Mali any more.

Never again.

She wanted to open her eyes and see where she was, reassure herself, but even with her eyes open all she had was his voice, the feel of soft fibres against her skin, the fragrance of fabric conditioner.

“Sorry.” She couldn't get out more words, couldn't let go of his hand.

“I didn't mean to startle you. I was coming to bed, and you weren't there.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine, really. Do you want to get into bed?”

She shook her head.

“What about if I’m in bed too? You might feel safer.”

She shook her head again, dragged up a reply. “No, I can’t. It’s not that.” She focussed on the way his thumb moved back and forth over the skin on her hand.

After a moment she said, “Look, you take the bed. I’ll go in the other room. I can’t sleep properly anyway.”

“We could talk to someone about that tomorrow, get you some diazepam for a few days?”

“No. I can’t.” She needed to be alert in case something happened, couldn’t tell Adam that, didn’t want him to tell her she didn’t need to feel like that anymore. Words wouldn’t change the way she felt.

She gripped the bars on both sides of the chin rest while Carl shone the light from the slit lamp onto the cornea of her left eye. It was easy to stare straight ahead while he lifted her lid, easy to remain immobile while he kept her there, and she almost thought he was musing out loud when he said, “I could take a sample.” She could do this if she stayed still, became an impassive object, pushed her feelings down.

Her eyes felt gritty with lack of sleep, had felt gritty for weeks, months maybe, she’d lost track. She heard Adam yawn and felt guilty about the night before. He had stayed with her on the floor despite her suggestion that she should leave him to sleep in the bed. He had slept at some point, his hand falling to his side, but she wasn’t sure if she had slept again, and she knew that she had watched the light levels grow as the early summer sun rose and lit up the room.

“What have you had done already?” Carl asked, in a more definite voice.

She was silent, wanted to say, ‘I don’t know’, but couldn’t quite get the words out because if she didn’t know what they had done with her own blood, what did she know?

“They’ve done blood tests. Everything that’s come back so far has been clear,” Adam replied for her. “She’s...”

She could feel both their eyes on her as he spoke for her.

“She’s malnourished, and they’ve got her on a broad spectrum antibiotic for the wound on her ankle.” He paused, then said, “Is this okay, Nour?”

She nodded, kept her hands gripping the bars. It felt wrong to be on this side of the slit lamp and it reminded her of the early days when they practiced on each other, took turns to be the patient until they could clearly see the cornea. And then they practised dilating each other’s pupils so they could see the retina more clearly, leaving whoever was the patient with blurred vision for hours afterwards.

She dragged her mind back to the conversation.

“What do you think caused it?” Carl was asking, and she released the bars, sat back and shook her head.

“I don’t know. I didn’t feel great a lot of the time. I had a fever some days. I don’t think there was anything that particularly affected my eyes. I mean, they itched too, but I was tired, I thought it was because I was tired. And my vision blurred sometimes but it was dazzling bright outside some days and I didn’t have any sunglasses, then I’d be kept in the dark for a while, and I wasn’t really sleeping and...” She stopped, couldn’t say it, couldn’t go back there, because just the words put her back in that room, and she couldn’t sleep because he could come in at any time and take what he wanted.

“I don’t know what caused it.” She choked out a laugh. “It’s ridiculous, I couldn’t stop myself from going...” She stopped again. “Blind.”

Adam said, “It’s going to be all right. It is, isn’t it?”

He wasn’t asking her, though, as he gripped her hand.

There was a pause before Carl spoke, and she wondered what he looked like. His voice was gravelly. She could smell aftershave overlaid with mint. Maybe he was one of the old brigade who still smoked. Maybe his expensive shirt was stretched over his belly, maybe he objected to the ruling on short sleeves because he couldn’t wear any of his wide range of cuff links any more. “I’m sure we can do something. I’ll run some tests, see if we can find anything, but it may be that the original cause isn’t present any more. I’d be interested in those bloods. Where did they send them?”

She could feel Adam shake his head. “I should have checked.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll do them again.”

She felt Adam nod with vigour. “That’s why I said no to them examining her eyes. So, do you have any thoughts about what this might be?”

She sat there as they talked. If Adam’s hand wasn’t still gripping hers maybe she would have moved. If she had been able to see she could have stood up and walked away, but if she was able to see she wouldn’t be here and maybe they wouldn’t be talking about her like she wasn’t here.

“So, assuming everything else comes back clear, and I know we will have to wait for the results, what about a corneal transplant?”

Adam. Asking what she couldn’t say. She wanted to say, “I can speak for myself,” but she couldn’t. She tightened her grip on Adam’s hand.

“Yes, that may well be the way forward. I’ll get you back in as soon as we have the results and we can take it from there. How does that sound, Nour?”

She choked out a “fine,” pushed away from the slit lamp, let go of Adam’s hand and stood. “Are we done?”

“Thanks, Carl,” Adam said, “I know you’ve got a packed day, I appreciate you fitting us in.”

He reached out to squeeze her hand and she knew that she was supposed to say thank you too because in this hospital Adam was new and junior and the guy she couldn’t see on the other side of the slit lamp had been doing this for years.

“Next time I might bring a colleague or two in on this, don’t want to miss anything, haha! How does that sound?”

He was asking her permission, like she had a choice. She wanted to walk away but she was adrift in a light, bright room which would be full of equipment she could trip over. She thought about being one of those patients, the ones surrounded by medical students and held up as some sort of live examination topic time after time.

“Not students?” she asked.

“No, no, no. But we should discuss whether you’ll be better off with a penetrating keratoplasty, and I’d like to talk to someone about your retinal function, maybe run an ERG, or we could do that later.”

“We should do it now. I mean, if it’s not worth doing the corneal transplant at least I’ll know.” She took half a step away from his voice. This was over, should be over, she couldn’t stay

here, couldn't wait to leave the room, but then she would need to find her way out through the impenetrable maze of the hospital, of the city she had grown up in.

"I'm sure it won't come to that. I'll get my secretary to book you in anyway. Now, I really need to go and see what the list looks like today."

"Thank you," she said.

Chapter 15

"I'm really sorry," he said, again.

"I'll be fine," she said. "You've had enough time off."

Her chest felt tight, and nausea swirled in her belly, but her tension was cut through with relief at the thought of being on her own. It would be twelve whole hours, maybe thirteen if the operations he would be doing took longer than planned, if someone had complications.

"I feel really bad about leaving you. Could Michael come round?"

"He'll be at work."

"Samia and the boys, your dad maybe?"

"I can call them if I need."

"It's not that far to Tooting from here."

She shook her head, wanted to reassure him he could go. Samia would struggle to get the kids up here on the bus, and she didn't think her dad would come on his own, and anyway, she wanted the flat to herself, just for a bit.

"Go on," she said. "Don't worry about me."

"There's salad on a plate in the fridge. I covered it with clingfilm. Don't try to clear up and I'll bring something in for dinner."

She nodded, and felt his warmth against her face as he leant in for a kiss.

"Go back to bed, get some more sleep if you want."

"I will. Go on, you'll be late."

It all sounded so normal, seeing him off to work, and for a moment she felt like she should be wearing a housecoat and slippers, ready for a day of drinking coffee, getting her nails done and then lunching with girlfriends. But her nails were still short and broken, she had never aspired to be a housewife, and all her friends would be working. She gripped the doorframe as he left. Fumes from the buses wafted in as he opened the outer door, merging with the stale smells of old carpet and cooking in the communal hall.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. Seven at the latest,” he said, then the front door closed with a bang, and he was gone.

She gripped the doorframe a little longer, battling the uncertainty of letting go against the awfulness of being seen like this by someone from an upstairs flat. She had heard them moving round each night, heavy footsteps, lighter ones, sometimes shouting that dragged her from horrific dreams into a waking confusion.

Maybe they wouldn’t be up and out this early.

Maybe she could close the flat door, make her way down the hall and

watch TV

eat breakfast

drink the mug of tea Adam had made her before he had left.

But she couldn’t watch TV

and she wasn’t even sure if she could find the toaster again or the cereal packet

she definitely didn’t know where the mug of tea was and some time today she was going to stumble across it and knock it over

she should change out of the oversized t-shirt

but she wasn’t ready to fumble through her clothes and pick an outfit by feel

it was all so much harder than it should be

and maybe it was easier back in Mali because she didn’t have a choice of clothes, and someone brought her food, and she couldn’t choose where to go or not and constant fear stopped her having to think about things like how to stay busy all day in someone else’s flat.

Something fell to the ground with a flap and dragged her from Mali back to Battersea. Her heart beat hard in her chest. It had to be the mail, she reminded herself, no gunfire here. She could walk across the tiny hallway, pick up the post like a normal person and then what? She stopped. Because there was no point. It might be Adam’s mail, it might belong to someone else. Reading hadn’t been an issue in Mali. She shivered a little. Couldn’t stay here all day, someone would come

down from upstairs and think she was insane, standing here. Maybe she was. She pried her fingers off the doorframe, felt for the door handle and closed it.

The dark in the hallway was good, but there were goosebumps on her skin. She fingertipped her way forwards, one hand on the wall, the other outstretched to feel for the little table. Her phone was charging on the table, he said, he'd brought it back with him, kept it even when he didn't know if she would return, like he had kept all her things. They hadn't talked about how she might use the phone though. Her fingers touched cool hard wood, and she paused for a second, feeling the varnish against her skin. Inch by inch she moved her hand forwards until she found the phone. She paused there, fingers on the rubber case, they had both bought new iPhones the same time, both bought the same cases which came in two parts, a rubber inner layer and a hard outer shell, extra protection for the trip. Stupid, really. Internet connections were patchy at best in the places they ended up, and once she was taken she barely thought about a phone. She could have called someone, but what would she have said? "I don't know where I am, come and get me," and that was if she could get a connection, if the phone was still charged.

She picked the phone up, held it in her hand, pressed the button. If she remembered right, she could put her passcode in. She sighed. This was useless. No keys, no way to tell where her fingers were on the screen. She needed a phone that she could feel.

She laid it back down and thought about the phones they had been shown when they were training. Big clunky home phones with giant keys, old fashioned mobiles with voice activation. She doubted if she could see even enlarged keys, but maybe she could feel something if the keys were raised. It wouldn't be the same, though.

It was stupid, standing in the hallway, but she couldn't think what to do, didn't want to have to decide, didn't want to have to try. She felt her way up the hall, light levels increasing as she made her way to the bedroom which was all at once too bright. She closed her eyes: it made things better but her conjunctivas still burned. She blinked, trying to create tears, thought about getting back into bed. But she wasn't going to sleep again, broken night or not. A twinge of guilt again because she knew she had woken Adam and he was going to be operating today and maybe she should have been on the sofa. She could stay in the lounge tonight, she thought, as she put her hand on the duvet. Adam had told her it was plain white, and every night it still smelled fresh, felt soft, was clean like nothing had been in Mali, and she reached out and dragged it off the bed, because the sun didn't shine directly into the lounge. She was cold, but the armful of duvet was hard to handle when she wanted to keep one hand on the wall.

Back in the hallway she could see where the lounge was because of the glow of light from the doorway so maybe it would be too bright in there too, but the hall was dark and no one would be coming or going for the rest of the day so she kept on moving, round the table which she was going to have to ask Adam to move for her. She felt the doormat, rough prickles on her feet. She'd reached the front door. She shook the duvet out, wrapped it round herself, wished she had managed a pillow too, but it was too hard to go back and get one and she slid down the wall to the floor and waited in the darkness.

Sleep must have dragged her under at some point because the sound of the doorbell made her heart race. She gripped the duvet in her hands, wondering if she should answer the door, if it was safe, if she would have to cross the small entrance hall, if she could find her way back, if they would see her in only a t-shirt.

"Get a grip," she said to herself. All she had to do was find out who it was. Maybe it was a delivery. And as her heartbeat slowed and her mind got up to speed she remembered Adam telling her that he could buzz people in through the front door. There had to be something on the wall nearby, she could find out who it was, she didn't have to see them.

She stood up, wrapped the duvet around herself, and felt for the light switch on the wall. The bell rang again giving her more of a clue as to where she should be feeling. Her fingers glanced against another plastic box on the wall and she felt for a button.

"Hello?" she said.

"Nour! Can I come in?"

Fi. She pressed the buzzer, then reached out for the door handle.

As soon as she managed to open it she was enveloped in a hug.

"Marky said that Adam said he was back at work. I thought I'd keep you company. I've got the day off."

Nour let her talk as the words washed over her, and she thought maybe she shouldn't be in the hallway wrapped in a duvet wearing nothing but a t-shirt but Fi sounded the same and perhaps she didn't care that Nour wasn't the same at all.

Fi took her into the bedroom. She talked her through her clothes so she knew what there was and where it was. "I didn't expect him to have ironed everything," Fi had said, and Nour wished she could have seen that herself.

She stood there, hand on the top of the chest of drawers.

“What about that pale blue top?” Fi asked.

Nour nodded, took the top then said, “Did you see him? When he got back. Adam, I mean.”

There was silence. The moment lengthened and Nour wondered if Fi has stepped out of the room without her noticing, but then she spoke.

“I did.”

“How was he?”

Another pause, and Nour could imagine the expression on Fi’s face, the way she always bit her lip for a second before coming out with something she was reluctant to say.

“He wasn’t great. I mean, he stayed with his parents for a while. Marky and Ian and Catherine and I all went down there. He looked pretty rough. But he got it together, started to apply for jobs, said he had to have something for you to come back to.”

Nour rubbed the t-shirt between her fingers, then said, “Can you find me the blue trousers too, the ones with the little flowers. I can do the rest myself.”

Fi handed her the clothes then left her to get dressed. Nour thought about what Fi wasn’t saying, and she shivered as she pulled off the big t-shirt she had slept in.

While Nour got dressed, Fi made tea and sandwiches and brought them through to the lounge. “So, what do you want to do?” she asked. “Look, here’s your sandwich, eat that, then we could hang here or go out.”

Nour nibbled at the sandwich. It was good to be wearing fresh clothes, good to have her friend alongside, but the decision floored her.

“I don’t think I can go out. What if Adam called? He’d worry where I was. And we had a lot of trips to the hospital last week.”

It shouldn’t be like this, shouldn’t be awkward with Fi. Usually they would have put something on the TV, Fi would be persuading her it was her day off and not too early to open a bottle of wine, they would talk about work and who was doing what or what to wear later and where they could go. But the TV was silent because she couldn’t see it. And she was never one for drinking in the day and Fi hadn’t even suggested it. Fi wasn’t mentioning the latest developments in theatre, nor could she see what Fi was wearing. It wasn’t the same.

She laid the plate on her lap, wrapped her hands round the mug.

“It’s lovely in the park at this time of year,” Fi said, “You’ve missed the daffodils, but we could go to the café, have a walk down the riverside, get a bit of fresh air. The sun’s glorious.”

Nour shook her head. She could feel that Fi wore something silky and floaty that brushed against her feet.

“I’m still tired. I’ll go back to bed when you’ve had enough.” Had enough of me, had enough because we can’t do what we used to do. She wasn’t going to be able to help anyone revise for their next batch of exams, wasn’t going to be taking more exams herself. Late nights fuelled by tea and biscuits as they all sat round a table covered in text books wouldn’t need to include her any more.

“Look, actually, I might go back to bed now.”

She stood, and something fell to the floor. The plate. The sandwich.

“Bother, sorry.” She bent to pick it up, but Fi said, “Stop!” and, “Let me!” and their heads bumped together. She could feel Fi’s long brown waves brush against her, and tears threatened.

“Just go,” she said.

Nour felt her way out of the room, past the kitchen and bathroom, back to the bedroom. She went in, closed the door and waited. She heard Fi’s murmurs of low concern on the phone to someone. She didn’t let go of the door handle until she heard her go down the hall, until she heard the front door close.

She didn’t know how long she waited, wanting to be sure that Fi had really left. Couldn’t even tell the time, she thought as she stood by the door. She wouldn’t know when Adam would be coming back, wouldn’t know if it was him in the flat or someone else. Footsteps beat a rhythm across the ceiling and she flinched. She wanted to go out there, get back the duvet, find a corner where she could hide and wait, but she couldn’t move.

“Nour?”

Her legs were aching, her hand cramped from holding the door handle.

She tried to say, “Adam?”, but it wouldn’t come out. It was him, had to be him, and all she had to do was open the bedroom door and let him in, and he’d hold her and she could relax.

She wriggled her fingers, thought about the door handle.

“Nour?”

His voice again, closer this time.

“In here.” She forced the words out, made herself step back from the door because he would open it once he knew where she was, and she wished she hadn’t called out, because now he would find her. She stood, petrified.

“Sorry I’m late. You know what it’s like. How was your day, what have you been up to?”

The words flowed over her, didn’t penetrate, but he kissed her on the cheek and she could smell him, skin and aftershave and disinfectant and London travel and a shirt still fresh with the scent of laundry liquid. Adam. Here, in Battersea, with carpet under her feet, birds in the garden, buses outside the front door.

“You found some clothes, that’s good, I should have put some out. It was a bit of a rush this morning. Maybe I’ll get up earlier. Look, what do you want for dinner? Let me have a wash and I’ll put something on.”

He moved away and she could hear him pull out a drawer, could feel the air shift as he walked past her, could hear the water run in the bathroom.

A million miles from Mali.

Fi didn’t come back and she was glad and at the same time she resented her for being pushed away so easily. Adam kept coming back and she wasn’t sure why she was allowed to stay here when they hadn’t been together for months, when sometimes she flinched and pulled away if he touched her, when no one could really say she was behaving like a girlfriend should. She knew that if she could see his face, could see her own, they would have matching circles under their eyes, shadowed grey each night as she tried and failed to sleep, tried and failed not to disturb him. Who knew how difficult it was to move silently in the dark? She had thought, if she had considered it at all, that night time might be easier for the blind. No glare, no advantage in having sight. But she hadn’t perceived the value of small clues for the sighted: the night time shimmer on a hard edge, the reflections of moonlight and streetlights and the tiny glimmer that came from the light on the stove and the fridge and the DVD player. All gone, now. Night was properly dark in a way that the day never was. She was blind, sure, but day was a constant dance with shards of light slanting into her vision, a glow illuminating windows and doorways. Blind didn’t mean black, not during the day. She

saw edges and shadows and sometimes they lied, like when she spent the day hidden under the bed because there was someone in the hallway, simply because Adam had hooked a jacket over the lounge door. Dark on light on light on dark, shadows lied and friends were no longer friends.

Michael brought everyone up one weekend. Only once, though, because the boys were everywhere, and Adam laughed about it, but she could hear the anxiety in Samia's voice as she asked them to sit down, again and again. Her father talked about the books he was reading, like always. Until he remembered that she couldn't take up his recommendations, and someone mentioned audio books and she said no and the conversation died. Samia talked about the baby, and when it was due, and if it would be a girl and what they might call it, and would she like to feel the bump, she wouldn't say that to everyone. Nour shook her head, didn't want a consolation prize of feeling what she couldn't see. She listened to the boys' voices outside as Michael encouraged them back into the car, and she wondered if the children knew the difference between her now, and then.

Chapter 16

“Watch out for the buggy. I’ll ask Michael to put it out the back.”

It was always like this here now, Nour thought, wondering why she had let Michael persuade her to come and visit. She knew it was different, but she kept forgetting, kept thinking it was like when she lived at home, like when her mother was alive. She could hear Gabriel grizzling on Samia’s hip.

“Don’t worry, I can step round it.”

“Come on through to the lounge.”

“Can we sit in the kitchen?” She wanted it to be family, not party to a special effort for visitors.

She could hear the hesitation in Samia’s voice as she spoke, “There are clothes all over the place. It’s easier to put them on the airer, I don’t have to worry about the rain or about them getting dirty.”

She smiled. “I can’t see the clothes, or the toys, or if you’ve washed up.”

Samia sounded like she was smiling now. “I haven’t. I meant to, Michael was going to play with the boys, but he had to finish some work yesterday and I was so tired after dinner. He was tired too. He’s working really hard at the moment.”

Nour gave a small smile. Michael had talked about work all the way from Battersea as he manoeuvred the Fiesta through the traffic. At least it had stopped him from quizzing her about her living arrangements. “And you’re pregnant. How far along are you?”

“Seven months.”

“Not long to wait,” Nour said.

“It feels like forever. All I can think about is the birth. I’m hoping it will be quick, more like Gabe’s than Izaiah’s.”

“Come on, then. You sound like you need to sit down.”

“She does.” Michael had returned after finding a parking space. “You two go and sit in the lounge and I’ll make tea and bring it through.”

“Will you take some up to Baba and tell him Nour’s here?” Samia asked. “I’m sorry about Gabe. He needs a nap but he’s fighting it. We’ve put him in a bed and all he does when he’s like this is get right out of it and come downstairs. At least Izaiah is playing nicely up there. Would you like me to call him down too?”

Nour shook her head. “Don’t disturb him. The same goes for Baba. Is he reading?”

“I suppose so. He’s always reading.”

“Always. Mama struggled to get him down for meals.”

“Must be where you get your brains from.”

Nour shrugged. “Not that they’re any good to me now.”

Samia considered for a moment then said, “They’ll always be of use to you. You know how to learn things. I mean, look at you. Look at me.”

“What do you mean?” Nour asked, interested now.

“What have I achieved? A part time job in a supermarket, I’ll have three children by the time I’m twenty-five, I live in a messy house not three streets from where I grew up, never quite living up to your mum. You’ve passed exam after exam, you’ve gone to uni and passed more exams, you’ve lived all over the place, met all sorts of people.”

“But I can’t see, can’t read. I can’t do any of the things I used to do.”

“But you’ve got brains. You’ll work it out. There’s technology so you can read almost anything now. They’ve got a scanner at the library that will read books to you if they aren’t already in audiobook format. You can do almost anything on your phone with voice commands. And maybe they can do something and improve your sight. Aren’t you seeing some specialist Adam found?” She barely paused for breath before saying, “I don’t know what Michael is doing with the tea. Gabe’s dozed off on the sofa. Let’s leave him in here. Come on through, and I’ll get on with the meal.”

Nour stood and followed close behind Samia. She knew the layout of this house, had known it for so many years, and she didn’t need to ask to hold on to Samia’s arm. Her foot hit something, though, and she stopped.

“I’ve trodden on something.”

“It’s just a toy car. Don’t worry. I tread on them all the time.”

Nour laid a hand on the wall, her confidence shaken.

“Come on,” Samia said, followed by, “Michael! You were supposed to be making tea and getting Baba.”

“Sorry. I needed to look at this.”

“He’s on his laptop,” Samia said to Nour. “Again.”

“It’s work,” Michael said.

“It’s always work. And I don’t suppose you are going to get it all done so you can stay home and help me when the baby is here?”

“Baba is home. And Nour’s not doing anything, maybe she could help you.”

“Michael!”

Nour wasn’t sure whether to be offended that Michael had volunteered her for childcare, or that Samia so obviously thought she couldn’t do it. She was probably right, though.

“I wouldn’t be any help,” she said. “Not right now.”

“And Baba’s no help, he vanishes upstairs when the boys start to get noisy. Which is all the time.”

“They’re being quiet now,” Michael said. “I thought it was a good time to run through some figures.”

“You go and run through your figures, then,” Samia said.

Michael slipped out of the kitchen, and even without sight Nour could tell how oblivious her brother was to Samia’s irritation. She carefully felt her way forwards across the kitchen. “Don’t cook a big lunch. Please. I’m not really hungry. Let’s just have a catch up.”

Samia sighed. “It’s mostly ready. I did kushari, and I have some lamb to grill. Baba will like it, even if it isn’t as good as your mother’s.”

There was a clatter on the stairs, in the hallway, then Nour knew Izaiah was in the room. He went straight to Samia.

“I’m hungry.”

“Lunch won’t be long. Look, Auntie Nour is here.” Nour could feel the small boy scrutinising her.

“Where’s your hair?” he asked after a moment.

"I cut it."

"You coming for lunch?"

"That's right."

"I've got a car," he said, then, "Look!"

"Take it over and show Auntie, Izaiah, and I'll put the meat on. Then will you go and tell Baba lunch won't be long?"

Nour let Izaiah put his car in her hand. "There's another one on the floor in the hall," she said. "Is that yours?" She stood and gripped the edge of the table. "I should go and get Baba."

Samia sighed again. "I know you know where you're going, but there's washing on the stairs, and Baba's books are all over the landing and ... let me bring him down. You can talk to him while I cook the beans."

"You don't need to."

"We want to welcome you back," Samia said.

"So, Izaiah and I will go and get Baba down. We'll give you ten, fifteen minutes maybe. I can't look after a baby or help much in the kitchen but I think I can do this. Come on Izaiah."

She followed his noises as he zoomed his car through the air out of the kitchen into the hallway. Her leg brushed against something and she paused.

"Izaiah, can you help me?"

"Yes?"

"I can't see where I'm going. My eyes aren't working. If I put a hand on you can I follow you?"

"Okay."

It seemed like some strange new game to be following a four-year-old up the stairs, and Izaiah obviously thought so too.

"We're going through the jungle," he said, then, "It's Teta's plants really." She knew what he meant, the giant umbrella plant that sat in the window at the top of the stairs. "Were you in the jungle," he asked, "In Africa?"

"I suppose so. For some of it. And the desert."

“All sand. We’re going to go to the beach, I want to make a sandcastle.” He paused on the landing. It was dark up here and she guessed that the bedroom doors were closed.

“Should we knock on Geddo’s door?”

“All the books are in there,” Izaiah said in a whisper. “And there are more out here.”

Nour could feel the bookcases, the books piled high on top of them. Her father couldn’t bring his books with him when they left Egypt and he had set about rebuilding his collection as soon as they had money to spare. She could see how it might make it harder for Samia to keep the landing clear.

“There’s another box here,” Izaiah said. “And in his room.”

“I’ll knock then,” Nour said. “We can go see all those books.”

“I can see books any time,” Izaiah said. “I’m putting my car in the garage.” He ducked round her legs and seemed to vanish.

She shuffled forwards until her hand met the door. She knocked and said, “Baba, it’s me!”

“Come in!” She had spoken to him in English but he answered in Arabic and she guessed that was the language he was reading in.

She pushed the door but it didn’t open far before sticking on something.

“I can’t move it anymore.”

“Just come round. Oh, Nour. I thought it was Samia.”

She inched her way around the door, tried to go further but stopped as her feet found obstacles in front of her.

“How many books do you have in here, Baba?” she asked, screwing her eyes up at the light from the front window. “Is the living room ceiling at risk?”

He laughed. “Maybe. Perhaps I should move my books back downstairs. Come in, come in.”

“I don’t think I can get much further.”

“It’s not that bad. There’s a clear pathway to the desk.”

She wanted to know how bad the room had got in the months she had been away. Her mother had always kept this room as a bedroom, but since she had died, since the boys started

getting bigger and playing more boisterously, she knew that Baba had been migrating the books upstairs.

“Samia wants you to come down for lunch.”

“I should finish this chapter. Shall I see you downstairs?”

“I’ll wait,” she said, “Or you might start the next one.”

“Come and sit on the bed then,” he said.

“You’ll need to help me find it.”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose I will.” She heard his chair move, then his hand was on hers as he led her a circuitous path given the size of the room.

“It’s up against the wall on this side now, then?”

“I moved it a few months ago. It gives me more room when the bed is pushed to one side.”

“I see.” She cringed as she said it. It annoyed her the way Adam prefaced so many sentences with “look.” She guessed he had always done it but it hadn’t been an issue. She didn’t want to raise it now because it seemed petty to complain about what was just a turn of phrase.

“How has your diabetes been since I’ve been away? Did you get your eyes checked?”

“Hm?” His attention had been absorbed by his book again.

“If I ask Michael, will he know? Who went with you for your diabetes check? Baba? Dad?”

She had taken to referring to him as Dad when she discovered that was what all her new English friends did. It was hard enough coming to a new school when English was very much your second language and all she wanted to do was fit in. She had used the English word until she was fourteen, maybe fifteen, at some point she decided that they weren’t English and she shouldn’t pretend.

“I’m sure it’s coming up soon,” he said.

“Right. Come downstairs, we’ll look at the calendar.”

She heard him rustle some papers but he closed the book, and she stood and shuffled her way through the maze of stacks of books. One stack tumbled as she caught it with her foot, and she waited while he restored it to the correct order, then they continued a slow progress forward. She

had decided if she kept her feet to the ground, and slid them forwards, then she was better able to feel what was coming up, more likely to make progress without tripping or crushing a toy.

On the landing it was easier, the wall and bookcases to one side, the bannisters to the other. She gripped on tightly as she came down the stairs, in case Izaiah's idea of parking meant leaving a car halfway down the stairs.

She went back into the kitchen, her father behind her.

"Samia?" she asked, checking that she was still in the room. She had done that before, walked into the kitchen and started talking to Adam when he had gone to the bathroom.

"Yes, oh good, you're both down. Everything is on the table apart from the meat. Come and sit down."

Samia's hands touched Nour's and she gently brought her forwards until they were resting on a chair back.

"Give me a moment," she said. "Izaiah. Dinner! Michael, can you bring Gabe?"

"I wanted to ask..." Nour stopped, waited. There were several moments of chaos when Gabe was crying and there were too many people for the size of the room. She was glad to be sitting down already. When everyone was sorted with food on their plate, she tried again.

"Michael, has Baba been for a check-up for his diabetes recently? And what about his diabetic eye check?"

There was a moment of silence, apart from Gabe's chatter as he put food into his mouth.

"I don't know. Samia, is it on the calendar?"

She heard Samia push her chair back from the table.

"I didn't mean to make you get up," she said.

"He saw the doctor back in March. When should he have had his eyes checked?"

Nour thought back to the previous year. She had taken him herself, had arranged for an appointment first thing on a day she could get into work a little later than usual. "January, maybe February. Is it in the calendar?"

There was silence, and she wondered if there were unseen signals passing between her brother and his wife.

“It was busy then,” Michael said. “You know how work is, and Samia has the boys, and she has had to have extra checks during this pregnancy, and she can’t really take him and the children too, they don’t like it in the clinic.”

“I don’t need taking,” her father said. “I can go by myself.”

“But did you?” Nour asked, her voice suddenly loud.

“I, er... I don’t know.”

“It’s your eyes, Baba. All you do is read. How would you do that if you couldn’t see?” She took a breath, clenched her hands. “You know how important this is.”

“We had a lot to think about then,” Michael said to her. “We didn’t know where you were, Nour.”

She bit back the explanation of diabetic eye disease that she had been about to share with the table.

“Aunty Nour is crying Mama,” Izaiah said.

Chapter 17

“How was your day?” he asked as he came to sit down beside her.

“The same.”

She didn’t know why he bothered. What did he expect her to tell him? She should’ve asked him about his day, but she couldn’t listen to him telling her about what he was doing when it was what *she* should have been doing.

She had spent the morning in bed, thinking about getting up. The afternoon had passed as she sat by the French doors in the bedroom, feet on the deck, body still indoors because she needed to know that there was somewhere to retreat to. Even the new sunglasses Adam had bought her didn’t stop the sun making her eyes twitch and water.

“Is chicken okay for dinner? I’ll go to the supermarket at the weekend. It’s Friday tomorrow.”

“I know. I may be blind, but I’m not stupid.” She cringed as the words came out, didn’t like who she was, who she was becoming. “Sorry.”

“Are you hungry? I could cook now, or I could shower first.”

“Go and shower. Is there anything I can do to help?” Silence. “Look, forget I asked.” She waited until he had left the room, stood up and felt her way along the bedroom wall, past the bathroom door, into the kitchen. The flat was too small when she wanted to get away from him, too big when she was here by herself and there were creaks from another room, too small again when they lay together in bed, inches between them, and she was afraid to move.

After a few moments she heard the water start to run in the bathroom. Good. She could do something, show him that she wasn’t useless. How hard could it be to put chicken in the oven? She opened the fridge door, soft gold glow, and put her hand on a shelf. He had organised it so every day there was a covered plate on the clear bottom shelf with something he had made for her lunch. Mostly he prepared it in the evening. Some days when he worked late and was tired, he got up extra early to make it in the morning before slipping out of the house as quietly as he could. She would lie in bed with her eyes closed and let him think he had managed to do it all without waking her.

She could make tea now. “What about getting some gadgets to help you in the house?” he had asked.

“What? Make myself a cup of tea and everything will be all right again?” she had said.

“Well, at least you’d have a cup of tea.”

She flipped from anger to laughter in an instant, both of them laughing. If she had tears in her eyes too, it hadn’t mattered then. He had brought home a liquid level indicator which beeped when the boiling water neared the top of the mug so she could make herself tea. But she knew he wiped the counters every night when he got home and she hated it.

The chicken wouldn’t be on the bottom shelf because all it had held was the plate with its salad and tortilla, and she had picked at the cold, gelatinous mass of egg and potato that lunchtime and thought about how much nicer it would have been to have cooked it for herself and eaten it fresh, berating herself for being ungrateful.

She felt her way up to the next shelf, fingers quickly discovering a packet that could be chicken, thin cellophane sealed across the top, ridged bottom, about the right weight. She got it out and stopped. Probably chicken. She held the packet while she closed the fridge. She tried to peel open the top, then paused. Heat the oven first, then find a dish. She carefully put the chicken on the counter and felt her way round to the oven. She could do this, get it cooking, then maybe find some vegetables. She could peel a potato, couldn’t she?

She felt the face of the oven, hadn’t used it before, hadn’t asked Adam to talk her through what was where. How hard could this be? But her fingertips could feel two identical dials. She turned one, waited for the buzz that indicated the oven had come on. Nothing. She took a breath, turned the dial back, then turned the other one. She waited. Nothing. Maybe the oven didn’t hum like she thought it did, maybe that was something else in the kitchen. She could leave it for a few moments, wait and see if it became warm, find a dish to put the chicken into in the meantime.

She moved away from the oven, across to the low corner cupboard where Adam had told her he kept the pans. There would be something in there, she thought as she bent down and opened the door. She felt a moment’s reluctance as she reached into the dark. She gripped the side of the cupboard to steady herself as she squatted. Her other hand felt its way forward, then rested on something cold, hard, metal. A little more exploration found a handle, then the rough feel of worn non-stick coating.

She had to keep on, the shower water had stopped running, and she wanted to show him she could do this. She let go of the side so she could put both hands in the cupboard. If it was pans on the top shelf, maybe there were ovenproof dishes down below. She could feel something that felt right, but it was stacked. She pulled the pile out and pushed herself up to standing. If she put

them on the counter she could unstack them and feel which one might be ovenproof, which one might fit chicken breasts.

She held the stack against her stomach as she shuffled back towards where she had put the chicken. She laid the dishes down then lifted the top one. Too small. The second might do, she thought as she hefted it in her hand. Curved corners, probably some sort of earthenware, probably heatproof. She placed it on the hob, then felt for the third. That was cooler, heavy, and she thought it might be Pyrex. A little larger still and it would be just right. She put it back on the stack and felt for the chicken.

She ripped off the film and her fingers slipped, her skin met something clammy, fleshy, fishy.

Fish.

Maybe salmon.

That could bake still.

She could do this.

She felt for the dish with her spare hand, decided if she had got fish on one hand she may as well get it on the other. She concentrated on moving the fish from one to the other. Shouldn't be so hard, but she wanted it in the middle, wanted it right first time, didn't want to put it up against an edge where it might burn.

She picked up the fish in the dish, and stood holding it. She thought about whether it would be better with lemon and herbs on top, if she should cover it with foil, or if she should decide that she had done well so far and hope that the oven was warm.

"Nour?"

"Oh!" She hadn't heard him approach. Her fingers clenched, gripped, slipped, failed. She jumped again as the dish slipped, bounced, smashed, and she could feel the shards scatter and dance across her feet. "What did you do that for? Don't creep up on me."

"What were you doing? You didn't need to try to cook, I was only in the shower for a few minutes."

"I wanted to do something, to show I could."

"Is that the salmon? That was for tomorrow night."

"It was what I could find. I shouldn't have bothered." She bent to the floor. "I'll clear up."

“Don’t. You’ll cut yourself.”

She stood. “Fine, you do it.”

She walked out of the kitchen, too fast, clipped her shoulder on the door frame. Tears stung her eyes. She felt her way down the front hall, didn’t care about the fragments of pottery and spatters of fish on her bare feet. She opened the door, felt her way across the small entrance hall, arms outstretched until she reached the main door. She opened it and kept walking.

The slabs that made up the garden path were warm beneath her feet after a day of sunshine. She thought about how many steps would take her onto the pavement. One, two, three. She paused on the step that divided the garden from the street, her hand finding the garden wall. She wanted to keep going, hail a cab, climb inside, tell the driver to take her to Tooting and go back to the house where her mother would be in the kitchen and her father in the study and Michael would be at the table with his books. Her mother would welcome her in and tell her she was too thin and she must have been working too hard, was she studying enough? She would be made to sit down and eat more than she really needed but the breads would be warm and the salad full of herbs, and the meat would be just the way it always was. She took a step forwards, but the pavement beneath her feet reminded her she had no shoes on, and she had no bag, no purse, no money, and no chance of finding a cab. It would be Samia in the kitchen, Michael would be out at work, the kids would have left their toys all over the place and nothing would be how she remembered.

She crumpled onto the front step. Her head hung down.

“Nour?”

Adam’s voice. Quiet, cautious, concerned.

“I’ve cleared up. I couldn’t find you.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“Making more work for you. I shouldn’t have tried.”

“Or maybe I shouldn’t try to do it all. Come back inside. I’ll talk you through where things are, we can cook the chicken together.”

She let him lead her inside, but it was hard to find the energy to focus on what was where, and she could feel tears fighting to emerge.

"I should just let you do it," she said.

"It's hard. I get that. You can do it, though. We can do it. Look, here's the peeler. Have a go at the carrots and I'll get the water on."

She did what he said, pulled the peeler down each carrot, trying not to let them slip from between her fingers.

"Useless," she said, her voice low.

"Not useless," he said, and he put a hand on her shoulder.

Later that night, he said, "There's a leaving do after work tomorrow."

"Uhuh?"

They were sitting on the sofa, Radio 4 on again. They never used to listen to the radio but now Adam seemed to have given up on watching television altogether. He was doing something on his phone too but she couldn't tell what.

"Jim's moving on. He's invited us all. Would you like to come? I could come back and get you."

"Or I could get a cab? You'll all be going straight from work, you don't want to come back and go out again."

"I don't mind."

She thought about how the evening would go. She didn't know the people Adam worked with, he would have to introduce her, and they'd look at her. They would all be from the eye department. He had probably mentioned what had happened to her and they would be assessing her sight loss, her chances of recovery, and someone would have drunk enough to ask her about it and she would have to reply politely because it was Adam's work that was paying the bills.

"No. You go, you haven't been out since I got back. I don't think I'll come."

"Are you sure? It would be good to have a night out together."

She nodded. "Let's go out together another night. Just you and me, though. I don't think I can deal with meeting new people, not lots of them all at once." In a pub, Friday-night busy, she couldn't face it.

“How about I get someone to come round here tomorrow night then while I’m out? You might like some company?”

He didn’t suggest who, and she wondered if he had noticed if Fi wasn’t around like she used to be. Perhaps she had told him what happened. Perhaps they had been talking about her. She shifted on the sofa.

“No.”

“What about Fi?”

“Have you spoken to her?”

He was silent for a moment. “I’ve been in touch with her a bit. While you were missing, she wanted updates.”

“And since I’ve been back, since you went back to work?”

A longer pause. “She was worried about you. I said you needed time, a bit of space.”

“Can’t I speak for myself?” She stood and started to make her way to the door. She wanted to stride out of the room, but didn’t want to walk into the wall. “If my ‘friends’ want to know about me they can get in touch with me themselves. I don’t need you to speak for me.”

She could hear him take a breath in, hear him let it out slowly.

“She’s worried about you.”

She stopped. “She can keep her worries to herself. I don’t need other people’s problems, I’ve got enough of my own.”

She could sense that he had stood too.

“I was worried, Nour. Not just then, but today, when you left the kitchen and I didn’t know where you’d gone.”

“I’d left the house through the front door, Adam. I’m not a child.”

“I know, but, at work I sometimes wonder if you’re all right, if I should really be away from home.”

“You can’t do surgery like that,” she said, her indignation subsiding.

“I know.”

“I can’t tell you what I’m up to every minute of every day. And for most of the time I’m sat in here doing nothing anyway. Perfectly safe.”

“I know that really. Just...”

“Just what?”

“If I can get a day off, we could go up to the RNIB resource centre. I’ve looked online, you could get a phone that you could actually use, they could talk you through how to use it.”

“Maybe. I suppose. But you don’t need to take a day off to do that.”

“They’re not open at the weekend.”

“You need to be at work. I’m doing nothing. I’ll find someone to go with me.”

“Would you? Then you could message me.”

“It’ll be full of typos.”

“Call me then, tell me what you’re up to, tell me you’re all right.”

She wanted to shrug off his concern, didn’t want to have to acknowledge his worries either. But he had been through something too, and she thought about the anxiety in his voice when he had found her on the front step.

“What was it like?” she asked. “When you came back? Without me.”

When she had sat down beside him he said, “I didn’t want to come back to England without you. You’d been gone a long while when I came round, though, I found out later. There were soldiers all over the place. It was all hazy, I think I kept coming and going. They put me in a truck, took me to a hospital. It seemed to take hours. I kept asking where you were. The second or third day, I’m not sure, someone explained what had happened. I was more with it then. It was a man from the embassy and all he wanted to do was get me out of there, and all I wanted to do was go back and look for you.” She could feel his position shift, his voice drop as he seemed to be talking to the floor. “I didn’t come after you, though. I was scared. I let them talk me into staying in the hospital when I wanted to leave. I let them book me a flight home. I’m sorry.”

She felt for his hand and squeezed it.

“I don’t think you’d have found me. We travelled for hours, further and further north. There’s so much of the Sahara. I didn’t think anyone would find me.”

“They told me they were looking, that all the troops in the area had been briefed. I don’t think they knew who had you, though.”

“And they flew you back?”

“Mum and Dad met me at the airport. I’ve never seen them like that, Mum wanted me to promise not to go back, Dad was so angry. And neither of them understood the only thing I wanted to do was be back out there looking for you.”

“You couldn’t have done anything. It’s a vast country. And they were armed.”

“I did go back, though.”

“What? When?”

“Probably about two months later. Stefan and I went.”

“Back to where the camp was?”

She could feel his nod.

“We flew into Bamako. The Ambassador was at the airport when we landed. She was angry, said she couldn’t let us go into danger, couldn’t give the insurgents more leverage. But in the end we talked her round. Stefan explained that they had wanted an ophthalmologist because one of them had an eye injury. He said the kidnapping seemed quite spur of the moment, not what they had planned. Eventually she let us go with a contingent from MINUSMA. She was clear that we’d end up kidnapped, dead or worse.” He gave a bitter laugh. “I don’t think we got anywhere near any insurgents. I’m sorry, Nour. I really thought we could have, I don’t know. It was stupid to think we could track you down.”

She sat there holding his hand. She hadn’t really thought about what it had been like for him, still couldn’t really imagine what he must have felt when he found out what had happened.

“I’ll sort out a phone,” was all she said, and she squeezed his hand again.

As she lay in bed, Adam asleep beside her, she chewed over how to go and get a phone until she had thought out all the possibilities. Go by herself. Possible if she could get a cab, if a helpful cab driver would see her into the shop, if a helpful store assistant would call her a cab so she could get back. But that relied on too many people being helpful, and the image of herself stood on a street, hands outstretched, unsure which way to turn was all too vivid. She ran her thumb over the sheet,

listened to Adam's soft breath. She didn't have to go out, didn't have to get an accessible phone, but Adam wanted her to, and maybe it might be good to be able to look things up herself, to make a call without having to rely on him. If she wanted to ask a friend to go with her to the RNIB resource centre, she would have to ask Adam to dial the numbers. She could ask Fi, find out if she had a late shift, if she wouldn't mind coming with her. But she wasn't ready for that, and what if Fi kept asking questions? What if Nour felt it was all too much and she wanted to leave? Nour would be on the street, stranded. She shook her head. Other blind people could navigate themselves places. She thought about white sticks and guide dogs, and rehabilitation training, but that was for people who were going to be blind forever.

On Saturday morning, Adam sat on their bed waiting for her to get ready.

She ran her hands through her hair, thinking about mirrors, and whether there was one in the bedroom, and whether Adam had deliberately not mentioned it.

"Do you think Carl has had a chance to talk to his colleagues about what might be wrong with my eyes?"

A pause, then he said, "I don't know. Look, I'll talk to him on Monday, see if I can get in early and catch him before he starts. I don't want to interrupt his weekend if he's got time off. And he could be doing private work today."

She stood with her hand on the drawer, wondering whether she should wear a cardigan over her long-sleeved t-shirt. They were going out for brunch. Adam had gone to the leaving do, but had returned home not long after his usual time; she suspected he'd had one drink and left. He'd suggested brunch, and she didn't really feel that she could decline, as going out together had been her suggestion. She picked up the cardigan and started to pull it on.

"You ready?" he asked. "It will be quieter if we're there early."

"I am. Are you sure?" She stopped.

"Sure about what?"

"Doesn't matter. Are we walking?"

"Yes. It's not far. Catherine, Ian and I went there with Mark and Fi. It's nice."

"While I was in Mali?"

“Mm.”

She was silent as he picked up his keys, as she followed him down the hall. She had been taken at gunpoint, dragged across Mali, forced to operate on gunshot wounds, locked up, raped. And they had been having brunch.

“I’m not sure I can do this,” she said.

“It will be fine. It’s only a small place, we’ll get there when it opens. It will do you good.”

She locked her fingers round his elbow and followed him out onto the street. The sun made her blink and she said, “Sunglasses. I need to go back.”

“I’ve got them,” he said, “Here you go.”

She put them on then re-established her grip on his arm. She wanted to make a joke about being led down the street but it wouldn’t come out right. When he had told her about coming back to the UK, it had seemed really hard for him. And he had returned to Mali to look for her which must have been equally difficult. But within those same few months he had been eating out with friends, and she thought about them laughing together.

“Nearly there,” he said, “Just around the corner. It’s off the main road, so it’s less noisy than some places.”

He was being thoughtful, she knew that, but she didn’t want to be out, didn’t want to come to somewhere he had been with his friends.

“I can’t do this,” she said.

“Okay.” He stopped walking. “What do you want to do?”

“Turn round. Go home. I can’t sit in a café and have you choose food for me.”

“It’s only brunch, Nour. Eggs and something. You could probably guess everything that’s on the menu. You like eggs Florentine, you always used to have that. It’ll be fine. You’ll feel better when you’ve done it.”

“Will I? How do you know what I’ll feel?”

She started as a car came past too close, too fast, and the adrenaline rush added fuel to her anger.

“If you know how I feel, then you’ll know I don’t want to be here. Why don’t you call up Ian and Catherine and have brunch with your nice normal friends who can all read menus for themselves? Go on.” She let go of his arm and turned away. “I’m going home.”

“Hold on, Nour.”

“No, I’m done holding on. I’m done with all of this.” She didn’t quite know what all this was, but she knew that she had had enough. “I’m done waiting, too. Your friend Carl might be playing golf, or running a clinic, and you’re worried about interrupting him yet I can’t see enough to walk down a street by myself. I can’t read. I’ve been stuck in the flat all week because I can’t do anything, and you’re worried about whether you might interrupt his day off. You have no idea how I feel.”

She started to walk back along the pavement. She could do this without him, she could find her way home, and pack her stuff and...

“Nour!”

He gripped her arm and she pulled away.

“Don’t!”

She stumbled forwards. He had her, she had to get away, this was her chance to escape and she knew what was coming if she didn’t.

“Nour, stop!”

She managed a few more steps before she smacked into something hard, hot, metal. She spun round to face him, wondered if this was it, if he would shoot her now.

“You were nearly in the road, Nour.”

Her breath jerked in and out. “Don’t, please.”

“Don’t what? Look, we don’t have to go for brunch. Take my arm and I’ll walk us home.”

Her hands rested on the metal, already warmed by the morning sun. He was inches away from her but he wasn’t coming closer.

“Don’t take me back in there. Please.” She hoped Amastan had got away at least.

“Back where? We don’t have to go to the café. Do you want to go home? Nour?”

A hand on her arm and she tried to hide the shudder.

“Nour, do you know where you are?”

A vehicle roared past behind her and she dropped into a crouch.

“Nour? You’re here, Battersea. Not Mali. Hell, come on. You can do this.” A pause. “Come on Nour. It’s Adam. Look, it’s safe. You can stand up. We’ll walk home.”

He took her hand, placed it on his arm. “It’s safe, Nour.”

His skin was soft under her fingers. He was wearing a cotton t-shirt, she could feel it brush against the back of her hand. Birds sang in the trees. There were trees. There was paving beneath her feet, rows of parked cars on the street. She took a slow breath and somewhere over the petrol fumes she could smell cut grass. “Are we near the park?”

He nodded. “Really close. Come on.”

He led her to a crossing where they waited until the bleeps started, and then they were into somewhere cooler and quieter, somewhere that smelt green even if she couldn’t see it. As they walked she could sometimes hear the sound of trickling water, blowing in with the breeze.

Eventually he said, “What happened there?”

She shrugged. “I got a bit confused.” They had moved off the path onto grass which was springy beneath her feet. “It doesn’t matter. You don’t have to chase Carl up on a weekend.”

“That wasn’t what I meant. Shall we sit down?”

She could feel the grass under her fingertips as they sat, could feel cool patches of hard damp earth. She knew they were in the shade now, it was easier on her eyes and she was glad she had the cardigan.

“I should be able to cope with going in a café,” she said.

“Maybe. Maybe you need a bit more help. It would probably be a good idea to see someone and talk about what happened.”

“I’d feel better doing that if I could see the person I was talking to.”

“Fine. I’ll text Carl now. See what he says.”

“Thank you.”

The aroma of coffee and baking rose over the early summer scents of damp grass and new leaves.

“Is there still a café in the park?” she asked. “The one with the big outdoor seating area.”

She felt him nod. "Yes. Want a coffee?"

"Okay then," she said.

Chapter 18

“What if I got a second opinion?” she asked as she sat in bed on Tuesday morning.

Adam had overslept and was pulling on clothes as fast as he could.

“You could, and it’s probably a good idea, but he did have the case conference, and everyone seemed to be in agreement, and you’ve got some of the top ophthalmologists there.”

“And you all talked about me?”

“Anonymously, of course. It was kind of him to let me sit in.”

“I know.” It rankled that they had discussed her in her absence, that they let Adam sit in, that no one had thought to ask her. Right now, her qualifications counted for nothing.

“I’ll make you some lunch then I’ll run.”

“You’re late. Don’t worry. I’ll work something out.”

He paused and she knew he was assessing how late he was.

A sudden brush of lips on her cheeks, then he said, “Thank you. I’ll try not to be late again tonight.”

She had made a cup of tea and taken it out to drink on the back step. Ever since she had been back she’d felt intermittently nauseous and breakfast was the last thing she wanted. But now the nausea seemed to finally be shifting and her stomach made noises. She stood and turned back into the kitchen. She could find some cereal, pour milk, but she wanted to do more than that.

She felt in the corner cupboard, pulled out a frying pan. It slipped in her hand, and she gripped it more tightly.

She put the pan on the hob then thought. Oil? Gas? Oil first, then maybe she should get everything ready before she upped the stakes by turning on the heat.

Fridge. At least eggs were not like anything else, not like the day before when she had spread chutney on her toast. She had eaten it anyway. Could have been worse, could have been cooking oil in the bottom of a glass, add water, hoping for orange squash. She picked up what she hoped was the oil bottle and gave it a sniff because scrambled eggs cooked in orange squash would be a fail.

Need to put the eggs in something to beat. She felt in the cupboard, careful not to knock the pile of pans onto the floor again. A Pyrex jug: perfect! Eggs, crack one, crack two, she could do this blind.

She felt for the pan, , felt for the jug. Now she needed a fork. And toast? Did she want toast too? Too much at once, so just eggs. Maybe eggs and brown sauce, if she could remember the system that Ad had cooked up. One bumper sticker on the bottle for brown, two for ketchup, three for mayo because that was in alphabetical order. She was jumping ahead, she still needed a fork.

Fumbling in the drawer, something spiked her finger. She put it in her mouth, no taste of blood, she dipped again more cautiously. Knife section, forks next, she checked that what she had picked up had prongs, jug still in her hand because if she held it she wouldn't lose it, knock it, spill.

She shuffled to the right so she could beat the eggs over the sink then turned and felt for the hob and the pan.

She stood there, jug in hand, put on the gas. Had she turned the right knob or was the flame burning elsewhere? She didn't reach out to check because her hands had more cuts and scrapes than ever before. She knew Adam noticed each evening, sometimes suggested a plaster, but if she put a plaster on her fingertips she couldn't feel properly. Instead she waited until the hiss and spit of the fat reassured her. Tip, pour, panic as she could hear the eggs starting to set, she didn't have anything to stir. Breathe. She felt in the drawer until she finally found a wooden spoon. How could she tell if they were set? She waited, breathed. It's only cooking, she told herself.

It must be ready. She turned down the heat, felt for the bowl on the drainer, cereal bowl because she had spilled enough food off the edge of the plates. Bowl on the counter, she felt for the pan handle, twitched as she touched the metal, pulling her hand back. Lifting the pan, feeling for the bowl, again. She risked it, tipped it, felt the counter, picked up a scrap that had fallen and slipped it in her mouth. It needed salt and pepper and sauce. She felt for the fridge, stretched, shuffling stepped nearer. Sauces on the shelf in the door, she felt the lids, one dot for brown. She felt her way back to the bowl of eggs, shook the bottle, opened it, squirted, and wondered if she had drowned the eggs.

Fork in one hand, bowl in the other, she shuffled over until she could feel the edge of the kitchen table against her hip. She laid the fork down, put the bowl on the table. She sat, felt for the fork again, then shovelled the first mouthful in, waiting for the tangy bite of the sauce to blend with the creamy eggs. The flavours swirled round her mouth accompanied by a buzz of achievement.

As she sat there with an empty bowl in front of her she thought about the case conference and what she might have said if she had been there. Maybe there would have been nothing for her to say since they'd all agreed on a corneal transplant. All she had to do was wait.

"What did you do today?" he asked when he got in. Despite Michael having fixed her up with a phone she could use to connect with Adam throughout the day, he always asked.

She thought for a moment, before replying, "Nothing much."

Chapter 19

“So the vitreous is clear and undamaged, and you think the retina is probably fine too?”

She was back in the clinic. Adam wasn't with her this time, because he was operating all day. She didn't want to put it off any longer.

“That's right. I wish we could be more definite about what caused the keratitis but I'm optimistic that it is worth proceeding with a corneal transplant.”

She sat in silence for a moment. The retina was one part of the body that medicine had yet to learn how to repair. She knew there were experiments using stem cells but if she had retinal problems it was unlikely it could be fixed.

“I'll put you on the waiting list for corneas,” Carl said. “I hope it will provide a significant improvement. I don't want to be negative, nor do I want to give you false expectations.”

He paused again, then said, “Do you have any questions?”

She shook her head. “No. Thank you.”

She stood, and he said, “I'll get the nurse to show you out. How are you getting home?”

“My brother is meeting me.”

“Great. Well, I hope when I next see you we will have a cornea for you. And if there are any changes in the meantime, please let me know.”

She let the nurse lead her out of the clinic and sat where she was told to wait for a porter, calling Michael to let him know she was done. She complied when the porter arrived with a wheelchair and helped her into it. When they reached the café she said, “Can you show me to a table and I'll wait?”

She could have asked him to take her to the counter, could have asked for assistance in getting a coffee, but he would have more people waiting and she didn't have it in her to accept any more help today.

She sat there, phone in her hand. Michael would know where to find her, but he might call if work snared him for another half hour.

“Can I get you something?”

She thought about what to order which she could gulp down when Michael arrived. “A coffee please.”

“Anything to eat?” the man asked.

“No thank you.”

She couldn’t eat right now, couldn’t stomach the thought of food. She wanted to be out of here, out of a life that was full of visits to the eye clinic and waiting months for someone else to die for a chance to see again.

A cup chinked onto the table.

“May I pay now? How much do I owe?”

“Nothing.”

She wanted to question that this but stopped at the waft of familiar perfume.

“Nour! How are you?”

“Fi. Who was that?”

“Who was who?”

“Someone put a coffee on my table. I thought it was a waiter but he wouldn’t take any money for it.”

Fi paused and Nour guessed she was looking around.

“He’s a consultant here, not someone I’ve worked with.”

“Oh.”

“But how are you? I’m sorry I haven’t been round.”

“I wasn’t really ready to see people when you came. What have you been up to?”

Fi sat, and Nour listened as she talked about the hospital and Mark and whether they might move in together. She paused, then said, “Were you here for an appointment?”

Nour felt her face growing hot. She nodded, bit her lip then said, “They’ve put me down for a corneal transplant. But, what’s the point? I’m not going to be able to see well enough to operate again. I can’t be who I was. Someone else should have my place in the queue.”

She swallowed, trying to stop the tears.

“Don’t be like that,” Fi said. “You’re not only an ophthalmologist.”

“I’m not an ophthalmologist at all. Right now it feels like I’m a charity case if strangers buy coffee for me.”

“Oh Nour, I’m sure he was just being nice.”

“Nour! Are you ready? I’ll get you in a cab if you can manage the rest by yourself. Hi Fi.” Michael was there, breathless. “I’ve got a conference call in half an hour. Sorry, it was brought forward.”

Nour stood, leaving her coffee undrunk.

“That’s fine.” She reached out her hand to Michael and wrapped her fingers round his arm. She didn’t turn back to say goodbye to Fi as she felt in her bag for her sunglasses.

“Have you thought about...” Adam stopped as he walked into the bedroom.

She was buried under the duvet, didn’t want to turn her face to his because she knew her lids were pink and swollen, her skin blotchy from crying.

She felt the bed dip as he sat down beside her.

“What’s up?” he asked. “How was this morning? I should have called but I haven’t had a moment to myself.”

“I’m on the waiting list for a transplant.”

“That’s great.” A pause. “Isn’t it?”

“I suppose.”

“How was the journey in and out? Did Michael find the clinic?” He stopped again. “Did they find anything else? Should I have come?”

She rolled over to face him. “Michael got us there, but he had to nip out to the office because there was a bit of a wait, and he put me in a cab to get back here.”

“Oh. Maybe I should have come.”

She knew he wanted her to tell him it had been fine, that she hadn't needed him but she couldn't find the energy to reassure someone else.

"Did you get back in time to eat the lunch I made?"

She frowned. "I'm not sure. I mean, I don't know what time I got back. I didn't eat the lunch. Someone bought me a coffee in the café."

"That was nice."

"It wasn't. I didn't drink it. I saw... Fi saw me. I guess she's working there now. I don't know. I don't want strangers to think they need to buy me coffee."

"Oh." He sighed, she knew he did. "How about I get some dinner if you haven't eaten?"

"You don't get it. I'm not hungry." She turned away and pulled the duvet round her.

It was easier to stay in bed. There wasn't much to get up for anyway. If she was going to have to wait for a cornea she wasn't even sure she wanted, she could just lie here.

Adam wasn't convinced this was a good plan. He brought her tea and toast in the morning before he left, then when it became clear she wasn't going to get up and go to the fridge he tried leaving her lunch on a plate beside the bed. She didn't want it, didn't touch it.

He tried putting the radio on when he left, mixing it up between stations. "What was on Radio 4?" he asked, or "Did you like Radio 5 better? It's a bit more light-hearted, isn't it?"

"I didn't listen," she had replied.

She'd only leave the bed to use the bathroom, returning to the duvet before her body warmth could fade. Occasionally she trailed her fingers round the smooth cool bedroom wall to the French doors that opened into the garden. She'd push one door open and grab one of Adam's big jumpers she could pull over her knees if she was sitting in the right position. She leant up against the wall and listened to the birds that had strayed from Battersea Park, and the wind blowing the leaves in the trees. It was a London plane tree, Adam had said, vast and ancient and at the end of the garden, its trunk and roots spreading between four gardens. Not that she could see or feel, or even make her way to the end of the garden. She had thought about it so much, sitting there at the edge of the house, the edge of the garden, unable to let go of the brick security and venture out.

Adam had found her there one evening when he got back late. The sun had moved round, but she was still there because it was too much effort to move.

“You’re frozen,” he’d said. “Did you want to go outside?” and “I’ll cook something hot,” then, “How about soup?” It didn’t really matter what she’d said because he would cook anyway, food that tasted bland perhaps because she couldn’t see it coming.

“You can’t say no to visitors forever,” he said one evening. He had come into the bedroom after she had made it clear she wasn’t going to get up and sit in the lounge.

She didn’t answer. It wasn’t a question but a statement. She knew that she could keep saying no for as long as it took for him to stop asking. She didn’t want to see his friends, didn’t want to see her friends, didn’t want to pretend she was fine or that things were getting back to normal when they weren’t.

He had his laptop on the bed, she didn’t know what he was doing, didn’t care that much but he kept yawning. If she could find the energy she knew she should ask him the time, suggest he quit working and get some sleep. He tapped away for a few minutes, then said, “You might feel better with a bit of company. How about your dad?”

She shook her head. She made him tired, she knew she did. He’d woken early each day to make food she didn’t want to eat. She could tell him to get some rest but what was the point when it was her fault he was tired? The only way she could help him was to be less, need less. At some point perhaps he’d realise he didn’t need to take care of her. And perhaps at some point she would be nothing at all.

It was the weekend, Nour knew this because instead of rushing out the door Adam had stayed in bed long after she’d woken. She’d laid there, still as she could knowing he was exhausted, could hear it in his voice at the end of the day when he came back, could hear it in the morning too.

When he did wake, he immediately busied himself with washing, cleaning and planning meals. She stayed in the bed until he came through and insisted that she get out so he could strip the sheets from the bed. He made her shower before he put the washing machine on. Picking out fresh clothes for her, he didn’t comment on the fact that she’d been wearing the same t-shirt all week, instead gently telling her she’d feel better if she freshened up and had a change of scenery.

“You need to eat more.”

Sitting in the kitchen was no better than the bedroom but it was easier to give in and do what he asked. She wasn't up for being told to eat though.

“You say that every day.” It felt like she'd been up for hours. All she wanted to do was retreat.

“Have you seen how thin you are? Sorry, that's a stupid way to put it. You're losing weight. You must weigh less than when you got back.” She poked at the salad with a fork, wondering if she had made contact with anything, whether it was worth the effort of raising her fork to her mouth, whether it would matter if she did if it was empty.

“No one's looking at me.”

“Nour, I'm really worried about you. I'm going to take some time off and fix up a doctor's appointment.”

She pushed her plate away. “You can't.”

“Can't what?”

“Can't get time off. People need their cataracts done. And you can't make me see someone.” She folded her arms, thought about the bed. The sheets were whirring round in the washing machine, but she could still go back to bed, the duvet would still be clean and warm and soft, no resistance there.

She was sure he sighed again, mostly silent, but she knew.

“Do you think you should see someone?” he asked.

She had considered this herself, discarded the idea. She couldn't waste people's time, couldn't revisit what had happened. Nour said nothing. It wasn't worth arguing.

“Have a think about it. If you took anti-depressants for a while it might help you get through this.”

“So I'm anorexic and depressed. Why not section me now?”

The table was sticky beneath her fingers where she'd spilled food and drink time after time, where he hadn't had time to clean. They could get someone to help with the house but she didn't want a stranger around, someone else to tell her what to do.

“Nour! That’s not what I mean. Maybe if you felt a bit better you would have more appetite. I’m not your doctor but I can’t watch you go through this and not try to help.”

She could feel the frustration in his words, in the way she felt his knee vibrated up and down like it always did when he was worked up. She pushed her chair back from the table and stood.

“I don’t want to be helped. I’ve had it up to here with being helped. It’s easier to stay in bed. No help needed with that.” She started to walk from the room, cautious steps. However much she knew how far it was from the table to the doorway she didn’t trust herself.

He kept talking, though.

“And what about eating? Last month you were making food yourself.”

“Last month I wanted to eat. This month I don’t.” She gripped the doorway, felt the shift from lino to carpet beneath her feet.

“That’s not normal, Nour.”

She shook her head, her fingers on the textured wallpaper, ready to follow the patterns through to the bedroom. “I’m not normal. Nothing is normal. You really don’t get that, do you?”

“I get that I can’t understand what you’re going through. But you’re miserable. How much worse could it be if you went to see someone, got help to feel a little less bad. There’s no shame in being helped.”

She walked another few steps, throwing words back at him. “I’m not sure how much you’d like telling someone everything that’s going on in your head. And having to ask every time you wanted to leave the house.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t.” His words came from right behind her and she startled. “You’re right. But we could make things better. Not normal, perhaps, but less awful. And you could see about mobility training if you want to go out. You’re right, you’d feel better if you could pop down the shops without help. Or go get a coffee. Being stuck in here all day on your own must be depressing in and of itself.”

“They don’t give mobility training to people who are waiting for a transplant.”

“I know, but I could pay for it. Please, Nour, I can’t watch you like this.”

She let what he said sink in for a moment. Her fingers dropped away from the wall. She still had her back to him as she said, “Do you really think I’m depressed?”

He was silent for a moment then said, "Yes. I think so. I think I would be too if I'd been through what you went through."

Part of her wanted to keep on denying it, but maybe it was time to accept that he could see something she couldn't. He had no reason to make it up, and perhaps life wasn't just hard and bleak because she couldn't see. She could feel the warmth coming off his body only inches from hers.

"All right." She nodded and turned around.

"What do you mean?" he asked, caution in his voice.

"If you can find me a GP I'll go and talk to them, and if you book me a session, I'll try mobility training."

She had said it, and that was as much as she had energy for. She found the wall again, skimmed her fingers along the ridges and curves, across the bathroom door, and then onto the smoother walls of the bedroom, away from discussions of how she was feeling and what might help. She could get back into the bed, could dig back into a tangle of un-cased pillows and duvet, but instead she walked to the French doors, opening them both as wide as she could. The carpet was warm where the sun had been shining in all morning, though she could feel a chill beneath her feet as she stepped outside.

Chapter 20

She was glad Adam wasn't around while Aaron, the rehab officer, talked about white sticks in a rhythmical Welsh accent. She didn't want Adam to see her like this, didn't want to be doing this, but she took the cane nonetheless.

It was a long cane, Aaron said, and she could feel the way the end was ball shaped. It took a little practice to find a rhythm as she swished it in front of her, side to side as they made slow progress down the road.

"It's heavier than I thought," she said after a while. She wondered if he could hear her heart thud from where he was beside her.

"You'll get used to it," he said. "Keep practising."

She tried to block him out, focus on the stick, her steps, on breathing in and out and hoping her heart would slow. A bus roared past, rush of hot air. The paving was uneven, and she didn't want to be exposed on the street, relying on yet another stranger. They must be twenty, forty, sixty yards down the road now and if he cast her adrift she wouldn't be able to find her way home.

He touched her on the elbow. "Hold on, there's a road coming up. Can you feel the raised bumps under your feet?"

She hadn't felt them, so they retreated, approached again.

"We'll do this again, and you can count your paces to the crossing."

They were aiming for the corner shop. Adam would often call in there to buy milk on his way home. She had never been but could tell they were in the doorway with the shop's scents of spices and sounds of clatter from the till.

"I'm never going to be able to do this by myself. I'll get run over. Cars come around those corners without looking all the time," she said. "Look, maybe this was a mistake. I'll get a corneal transplant soon enough, I can wait."

"You could, but think about why you called me."

Nour was silent, thinking about last month, the days when she couldn't drag herself out of bed. The anti-depressants seemed to be having an effect, but like Adam, the GP had suggested that she needed to rebuild her independence.

"Look, we're here now," Aaron said after a pause. "Is there anything you want to buy?"

What a stupid question, she thought. How would she know what she wanted, what they might need? The contents of the fridge were still mostly a mystery and this sort of shop would sell cheap tinned goods, bruised apples, newspapers that were of no use to her.

“How about you buy a coke? Just for practice.”

She struggled to muster any enthusiasm. She remembered what London looked like when they arrived, the way everything smelled different, the chill wind that chased her as she scurried home from school, and the array of bright sweets she could find if she detoured to the corner shop.

“What about cola bottles? The sweets. Do they have those?”

“Why don’t you ask?”

She hesitated, tried to make sense of the shadows and glints of light in front of her. She guessed at the location of the counter, held the cane out in front of her and walked forward.

“Do you have cola bottles?”

“We have Haribo. I’ll have a look.”

On the way back, Aaron talked her through the shops they were passing. She tried to concentrate on his words, but it was hard when she wanted to feel the changing surfaces under her feet, listen for cars. Estate agent, dry cleaner, pizza place. She didn’t even know whether he was fair or dark, what colour eyes he had. “In case you need to know,” he said. “Now turn here, and we’re back in your street.”

She could feel the packet of sweets growing warm and shoved it in her pocket.

“How would you feel about doing that again now?”

“Buying sweets?”

“Anything. Would you be able to walk to the shop and back if I asked?”

“By myself?”

“If we go back to your flat, start in the front hall, let’s try it again. This time I’ll let you lead. I’ll be there if you need me, though.”

Three times, in the end, and her palm was sweating, the stick warm against her skin. Her head was filled with the pattern of clues on the route, the undulations in the pavement, the broken slab just before where she had to cross the road, the overgrown privet hedge that skimmed her arm as she neared their gate.

“Once more?” Aaron asked.

She let out a breath and shook her head. “I can’t. I’m done.”

“How would you feel about doing it by yourself?”

She swapped the cane to the other hand and leant against the bricks. There was no shade and she felt like she had walked further than she had done in weeks.

“I might. I don’t know.”

“Could you practice? On your own if you can, with your boyfriend if you want. I know he works but if you could do the same route every day that would really consolidate things. And next week we could try a different route, maybe to the bus stop.”

“I could. Maybe. But then I’d only know how to get to the shop. And the bus stop. You can’t show me every route.”

“I know, Nour. One thing at a time. Now, shall I leave you or do you want to unlock the door while I’m here?”

She wanted him to leave, wanted to be alone, but if she dropped the keys and couldn’t make them work, she would be stuck.

“Give me a moment, let me get them in the inner door then I’ll be fine.”

When she had unlocked both doors, when she had heard him close the outer door, she exhaled. She flexed her fingers and passed the cane from hand to hand. He hadn’t even asked if she wanted him to leave it with her. It was hers now. She gripped it lightly like he had shown her, stood a little straighter, and felt her way down the hall. She didn’t touch the walls though, and used the cane to feel for the location of the little table. She passed the glow of the entrance to the lounge, slid the cane end from carpet to lino as she entered the kitchen, and made her way to the lighter rectangle that marked the back door. She fumbled for the key in the lock, leaning the cane against the wall while she unlocked the door. She picked up the cane again, pushed her foot forwards to feel for the edge of the doorframe, then used the cane to touch the edge of the small step.

She stepped down and let the cane feel her way into the garden. She could feel the smooth, hard paving slabs, didn't know how many there were, didn't matter now as the ball of the cane moved left to right, right to left, ensuring there was a clear and level path in front of her.

The sun was high in the sky and she could feel its rays burning down on the top of her head. The ball of the cane dropped suddenly, and it was harder to move it. She slowed her pace until her feet found the same edge that the cane had dropped over. Grass. Longish grass, and she knew that no one had tried to cut it since she'd been home. She started to swish the cane from side to side again, slower progress now, until there was grass all around her.

She stood still for a moment, took in the warmth and the scent of seeding grass, then went on. She could feel the ground becoming uneven, the grass longer. Something scratched at her leg through her trousers. Then there was shade. She flinched as something flapped at her face, reached out, grabbed it. Soft leaves, she could almost feel their greenness. She let her fingers trace where the leaves joined into twigs, where the twig become a branch, stretched up to feel where the branch become a tree. The ground rose up here, and she could feel the roots of the tree through the thin soles of her canvas shoes. She ran her hand down the trunk, round the trunk until she found where it abutted the fence. She had reached the end of the garden.

After a moment she made her way back to sit on the grass. As she looked around she could tell where the shadow of the house was, the sun right above it now. Soon it would move over, shining into the bedroom and the kitchen. But she wasn't inside. She was out here.

She could feel the plastic packet of sweets in her pocket. They would melt, or she could eat them now. She lay the cane down on the grass and tore at the packet with her teeth. She didn't open it all the way, didn't want to drop the sweets on the ground. She felt inside it, recognised the sugary cola bottles. She put one in her mouth, then another, and concentrated on the acid fizz. They didn't come in a paper bag any more, but they tasted just the same.

"What one thing would you really like to do?" Aaron had asked her when she booked the first session. She hadn't had an answer then but she did now. She'd made macaroni cheese, had it ready when Adam got in. She had apologised throughout the meal for the mess she'd made and Adam had reassured her it wasn't that bad, that no one could grate cheese without spilling anyway.

Sitting with what she hoped was an empty plate in front of her, she said, "I want to go swimming." She paused, then added, "Not in a pool full of people. I don't think I could cope with that."

There was silence for a moment, and she wanted to be able to read Adam's face. Did he think this was a stupid idea? She spoke again. "I was looking on the internet, practising with the thing that reads it out like Aaron showed me, and I started looking at what other people had done. There's a list on Wikipedia of blind people. Did you know? Anyway, I'm never going to be the next Stevie Wonder. They listed Nelson, but he was only blind in one eye, and I'm not sure that counts. Not for what I'm after anyway. It was slow, trying to find stuff and waiting for it to be read out. I mean, I know it's easier than trying to learn Braille, but I'm used to going faster."

"It'll come," Adam said, "Go on. Who else did you find out about?"

"Well I remember David Blunkett and his black guide dog, and he got to the top of his career. But did you know about Miles Hilton-Barber? He's flown a microlite all the way to Sydney, climbed Mont Blanc and run across the Gobi Desert. There's this woman called Libby Clegg, she's a runner. And Trischa Zorn is a swimmer and she's won the most Paralympic medals ever. I don't need to do all those things, but I'd like to go back to the pool."

It had taken a little while to arrange, she wanted to try when the pool was quiet, empty ideally. In the end they had decided she and Adam would go in early on his way to work. He couldn't stay with her because he had to do the pre-ops, but Aaron would meet them at the pool.

"Are you sure it wouldn't be better to have someone who could come in the changing rooms?" Adam asked.

"I can get dressed by myself," she said. "You know I can."

"I meant for navigating your way round."

"That's why I picked the usual pool. I know where everything is. And all Aaron is going to do is help me plan out the best way to go from the changing room to the pool."

There was a lot more to it than that, though, and she wanted to give up and go home as Aaron made her repeat the route from changing room to pool.

"This should be easy!" she said, frustration in her voice. "I'm not even in the pool yet."

"You will be able to do this by yourself."

She nodded, bit her lip then said, "I want to swim now."

She had hoped it would be different once she got into the pool. There were three or four people ploughing up and down, Adam had said before he left, the usual morning group. Aaron helped her find a lane that wasn't busy, one at the edge where he could walk alongside her. She felt a sudden qualm. She would be able to swim, she hadn't lost that ability, but could she tell when to stop and turn, could she find a straight line, or would she be perpetually smashing into the wall or tangling with the rope dividing the lanes?

"How does it feel to be in the water?" Aaron asked from where he was squatting on the side.

She felt the weight of the water pressing in on her legs where she stood in the shallow end, one hand on the side. Suddenly cold, she shivered.

"Take your time," he said. "I've got my kit with me if you want me to get in after all."

She shook her head. "I need to do this by myself." She took a step forward, then another, until she felt the chill of the water against her waist. Inhaling deeply, she pushed forwards and down. The cold embraced her breasts shoulders neck face, stung her eyes as she opened them out of habit. The haze beneath the water was aquamarine, not the grey that she saw every day on the surface now. The clatter and chatter that had backgrounded the pool faded into echoes.

Nour pulled forwards with her arms, relishing the momentum and the way the water brushed against her face neck shoulders arms. Light danced in the water, bands of dark and light in the blue. She pulled forwards again, arms and legs working together, no hesitation like there was every time she took a step. Speed and strength came back to her like they always had. She knew where the side of the pool was, a shade alongside her every stroke. She pulled forwards once more, head down, eyes open, and felt light, like her body wasn't the thing she had been dragging around for months, and she forgot about her cautious feet that had been holding her back. No need to worry about falling, in the water, supported and buoyant she was free.

As she progressed up the pool she counted strokes just like she always did, knew how many times she had to raise her arms before she would near the end. She could almost feel it coming and she ducked and spun, ready for another length. As she submerged again she could taste the chlorine in the pool, and it made her think of the purified water they drank in Mali, where there was never enough water, where you couldn't immerse yourself, where dust stuck to sweat. And she wondered what Amastan would think of this, and where he was, if he was still alive.

Her lungs burnt, she surfaced, inhaled too soon, and spluttered. She paddled forwards another few strokes and clung to the side, waiting for her breath to even out.

“Everything okay?” Aaron asked, and she jumped at his voice.

“Fine,” she said, then pushed off again, because here she could still get away from everyone just like she always had.

“So I need you to show me the route until I’ve learnt it, there and back.”

They were sitting on the 344 on the way back. She had her cane in one hand, her bag of wet swimming things in the other.

“Bus or walk?”

“Both. Bus first, but I need to be able to get there if there aren’t any buses. How do I find that out?”

“There’s a bus app. And a number you can text, and one you can call, whichever you find easiest. Shall we work on that route next week?”

“Next week? I meant now. If we get off the bus and walk back to the house, I could drop my bag off then we could try it again.”

“I’ve run out of time, Nour. I have another client to see.” He spoke gently, but she felt her excitement deflate.

“Of course. I’m sorry.” She frowned, trying to work out if she could do it by herself. She knew where the pool was, he had shown her the way to the closest bus stop only last week when she had no intention of going anywhere by bus. That still left the short walk from the bus stop only two corners away from the pool.

“So shall we meet at your house at nine as usual next week?”

“Yes. No. Can we go earlier? The pool gets busy with classes. Or I might try... I don’t know. Do you think I could get there by myself?”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to with a bit of practice.”

And she would need to be able to do the same route in reverse too. Her mind whirred through her options as she left Aaron at the bus stop and carefully measured her way back to the flat.

She couldn't sleep, half of her mind still in the pool as she lay on the bed. Adam had asked whether she had enjoyed swimming again, and she had nodded, agreed, but enjoy didn't really describe the feeling of freedom she had experienced being back in the pool. Nothing was normal, nothing was like it used to be, but there she could move like she used to and she hadn't realised how much she'd missed that.

It was too hot to sleep. She had pushed the duvet aside, no idea how Adam could sleep underneath it as he lay beside her. Freedom. She had thought coming home would mean she was free, but she was still penned in. Going in the garden was a start. If she could get to grips with the buses she could go anywhere. That might really feel like freedom.

Night time in London was nothing like the darkness of Mali. She had thought about Amastan in the pool, hadn't realised that she had stopped thinking about him at some point. She wondered if she could bring him to London too somehow, what he would think about the traffic and the people and the buildings, whether he would think it was freedom, whether he was free now, whether he was still alive and how she might find him.

Chapter 21

She had walked to the shop enough times now to know where to go, and the shopkeeper recognised her, brought her milk or bread when she asked for it, answered her when she asked what the date was on the package. After the first few times when the effort of getting there and back was enough, she grew bored and started a game. It originated when she fancied an avocado. She had asked, expecting nothing, but the man had provided one. Now it was a challenge to ask for something she was sure they wouldn't have. He hadn't let her down yet.

It has been another challenge to open the avocado. She had slit through its skin, pulling it apart without too much difficulty. She used a spoon to sample the first half, unsure if it was good and green or soft and brown. It tasted great, and she ate it with a spoon standing at the kitchen counter. She wondered how to remove the stone. In the past she would have thumped a sharp knife onto the stone and twisted it out, but she didn't want the knife to slip and hit her fingers with force. In the end she used the spoon to scoop the stone out, licking slithers of avocado off her fingers.

When she'd eaten, she washed the stone and stood there holding it. She 'd heard about growing avocado plants, and she fumbled in the kitchen drawer for toothpicks. It took her a while to pierce the stone, took even longer to get it balanced in a glass of water. She wanted to ask Adam if he thought the water was at the right level, but she had done it. She placed it in the centre of the kitchen table and wondered if it would grow roots.

After that, she'd returned to the corner shop and asked for cumin seeds, fresh chillies, coriander leaves. Adam's cooking was too English, too bland. Perhaps it should have been no surprise when the man handed those over. The shop had smelled of spice from the moment she'd walked in.

He did surprise her with strawberry juice, but she thought that she had won her game when he couldn't come up with sugarcane or hibiscus juice. Or so she thought until she went back in again, asking for milk.

"You want sugarcane juice?" he asked.

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter." She could feel her cheeks growing red, didn't want to explain the game. It suddenly seemed stupid when Adam could get almost anything delivered by the supermarket.

"I have some today," he said.

“Did you get it in for me?”

“Maybe.” She could hear that he was smiling. “I asked a mate.”

His voice was pure south London, but she took a risk. “Someone Egyptian?”

“No, love. Jamaican. I drank sugarcane juice back when I was a kid too.”

“You’re Jamaican?”

“You really can’t see, can you?”

“Oh!” She felt the flush in her cheeks deepen. The entire time she’d been coming in here, he had thought she was a fake.

“And I can’t go back,” she said when she finished explaining to Adam. “Not when he thinks that.”

“Or maybe he realises that people have different degrees of sight loss,” Adam said. “Like maybe he realised you couldn’t pick out items in the shop but might be able to see bigger things. He must see you every time you walk to the bus stop to go swimming.”

“Maybe.” She thought about that, didn’t like the thought that the man in the shop could see her, could know what she was doing. But on the other hand, maybe he thought she was good at getting about, maybe he didn’t realise that she could get to the shop, the pool and the park, but no further.

She slumped in her chair.

“You’re doing really well, Nour.”

“I’m still ‘the blind girl’ though, aren’t I? That’s what he’ll have said. ‘I’ve got this blind girl who comes in asking for sugarcane juice. Do me a favour, mate, and get me a bottle for her.’ I don’t want to be someone who needs special treatment.”

“It won’t be for ever. You’ll get the transplant.”

“And then what?”

There was silence for a moment, then Adam said, “There was a letter for you today, from the GMC. Shall I open it?”

She nodded, didn't really want him to, was glad that she got few letters. She waited while he tore the envelope open.

"I can read it word for word, but basically, your fees are overdue."

She sat there in silence. If she stopped paying, if she came off the register, it would be harder to be a doctor ever again.

"You could give up your license to practice," Adam said, "but that takes three months to restore and in three months you could have a new cornea. And it's five years until you have to revalidate."

She didn't reply. It was hard to imagine getting a cornea in the next three months, then returning to practice, harder still to see five years into the future.

"If you go straight back in as soon as you can, you might not even have been out of practice for a year."

"Stop! I can't do that. Not even if I have one working eye. I can't just rush back in, Ad."

"No, I'm sorry. It came out wrong. I didn't mean you should rush, I just..."

She took a breath. "What if I stopped waiting for a fix? I mean, maybe this is it. Maybe the transplant will fail, maybe there will be complications or retinal damage. I can't sit around waiting for someone to die."

She waited while he thought. "So, what does that mean?" he asked.

"I need to get on with living. Living like this."

"And what about the GMC?"

"I'll pay my fees." She swallowed. "I could start looking at what else I could do. Maybe not as an ophthalmologist, not as any sort of surgeon."

"As a psychiatrist? Or a GP?"

"I don't think so. I know that I need to do something more than wait, something more than walk to the shop, get the bus to the pool. Something more." Just what something more meant, she had no idea.

Chapter 22

It was her fourth counselling session. As she sat down Nour wondered, as she did every time, what the counsellor looked like. She felt a tug of anxiety about whether she would ever stop thinking about the visual, whether there would be a cornea someday soon and if the clouds and tones of grey would resolve into colours once more.

“I was thinking about Mali this morning. I don’t know if I can ever go back.”

She didn’t know why she was telling the woman this, didn’t know why she kept thinking about going back when Adam was clear he never needed to set foot in West Africa again. It wasn’t a problem anyone else could solve, and if she decided not to go back it wouldn’t be a problem at all. She scraped her fingernail on the arm of the chair, up and down over soft ridges of corduroy, colour unknown. It smelt damp in this basement room, felt a little colder than it was outside, and she remembered the night-time cool of the dark concrete room in the hangar, how she would shiver as she waited for Yimlul to return.

“How do you feel about that?”

“Angry. I don’t want to be afraid of a whole continent because something bad happened to me. Adam would be happy to stay in England for the rest of his life, but I need to go back. Not Mali, especially, but I have cousins in Egypt.” She thought about the noisy family meals, her cousins, her cousins’ children, how every time she went there had been someone new to meet over a meal where the dishes kept on coming from Aunty Na’eemah’s small dark kitchen. The sounds of the sea were always in the background. Nour thought of how she hadn’t made time to go back for the last three years, how she had been too busy to accompany her mother on what turned out to be her last visit, how her father had stopped suggesting they visit together, how Michael was too busy with work and his children. And could she go now, like this? She felt overcome for a moment by a craving to go and hug Aunty Na’eemah, the only person who smelt like her mother, with the same soft curves and strong hold.

“I need to go to Egypt,” she said, thinking of how it would feel, when the meal was over and darkness had fallen, the children finally dozing. Now that she was one of the adults, maybe she would have someone else’s toddler in her arms, and someone would be smoking, music playing in the background, the weather would be warm, and there would be family. Her family. Amastan could still be somewhere in Mali, on his own, with no family.

There was a clock in the room, she was sure, a second hand ticking distantly in the silence.

“And I think I do need to go back to Mali. I need to find Amastan.” Her voice dropped a level. “I need to know if he’s alive.” She stopped again and listened for the ticks.

“Tell me about Amastan,” the counsellor, Helena, said when Nour had been silent for a while.

“He wasn’t there voluntarily. I think he’d been taken, like they took me. He was too young to be torn away from his family. But when I was out there, he was the only one who was always by my side, no matter what happened. I wouldn’t be alive without him. I need to find him.” She paused then said, “And I think it might be impossible. How do you look for someone in a country of that size? How do I look for anyone if I can’t face going back, if I can’t see?”

Sudden tears seeped from her eyes, and she couldn’t speak for a moment.

“It’s okay,” the woman said, “Take your time.”

Nour felt the soft brush of a tissue against her fingers, took it, held it, didn’t try to blot her tears.

“And Yimlul.” Nour pushed the words out between gasps of breath.

“What about Yimlul?”

“I know what he did to me.” She paused, waited for the tears to slow. “I need to know what’s happened to him too. If he’s free, if he’s alive. I don’t mean I’m worried about him finding me. Because everything is different now. But I need to know what has happened to him, if he was captured, if he was killed.”

“What would that mean to you, knowing what has happened to him?”

“I don’t quite know. Maybe it’d be about justice, or resolution, but part of it is that he was a person and I liked him, out of all of them. And he liked me, and he thought he was doing his best for me, keeping me safe in an impossible situation. And that sounds like I’m making excuses for the guy who raped me, and that’s why I can’t talk to anyone about this. Adam and Fi wouldn’t get it.” She exhaled slowly. “He was a person, not just a rapist. He didn’t rape me until the last few weeks. We all thought that we were going to die. He had nothing to lose.”

Silence filled the room and Nour heard her own words again in her head, wondered where they had come from, if she really meant what she had said.

“What about you, what did you have to lose?”

Nour tried to swallow down the lump in her throat, but it wouldn't go, and she could feel tears starting in the corners of her eyes.

"Nothing and everything. They had taken away everything from me already, I thought, when they captured me. Adam might have been dead. And then I began to struggle to see well enough to work, which I thought was the only reason they kept me alive. And Iken died, and Amastan was missing. I didn't think I had anything left to lose." She paused. "I know better now. Yimlul took everything and he went on taking. I could never say yes to what he wanted, because that would have been admitting that I'd never get back home."

The seconds ticked by. Somewhere upstairs she could hear voices, a loud man, someone quieter responding, a slamming door and reverberations through the building.

"I wanted to turn back time, to be at home, to be safe. And if I couldn't have that, I wanted to be able to see, because it was bad enough before, but I couldn't tell what was happening. And once Amastan was gone I had to rely on Yimlul to tell me everything. There wasn't a TV or a radio, I couldn't access the internet, I couldn't even speak to half the men—only the ones who spoke Arabic and they didn't always want to talk to me. I wasn't one of them. Yimlul wanted to make me belong." She waited for a moment then said, "I know what he did was wrong. I wish I could have stopped it happening. I let Adam down. But being here, safe, I'm letting Amastan down. And all the people I went out there to help. They're not getting eyecare any more, not simply because I'm not there, but because I was kidnapped no one's going out there anymore."

Nour waited for the counsellor to say something, but she didn't, so Nour carried on.

"I might get a corneal transplant at some point. I might not be able to see after that, but maybe I don't have the worst deal here, because I get to sleep safe every night and get enough to eat and have people who love me. And there's the NHS, and a consultant who is going to do everything he can so I can see something again, maybe in just a few months. And there isn't that in Mali, and if Amastan is alive he's probably hungry and alone. And I need to change things. I can't go out there and do it myself, but there are things I can do."

She felt her way out of the room, cane swishing ahead of her. Up the stairs, through reception, onto the street where she screwed up her eyes, reached for her sunglasses. Bus stop, around a hundred paces down the road. Aaron had shown her before the first session, come with her three times, but today she was on her own.

Sunglasses hid her face, hid the reddened lids, but they made her look more like the blind person she was. She stood at the bus stop, thought about whether the shadow alongside her was the tree she knew was there, or a person standing next to the tree. She could ask them to help identify the bus number so she got on the right bus, but she might be speaking to a tree. She let out a breath. She was too tired for this.

When she was finally on the right bus, she pulled out her phone and called Sandra's number.

"It's Nour. I need to talk to you about Mali."

She reminded Sandra of the emails they had exchanged.

"I still have them," Sandra said, "I didn't want to bring it up. I didn't think you would want to. And anyway, we can't send another project into Mali, not with the situation like it is."

"I know. I wouldn't ask that of anyone. I want to do things differently." And she explained how it might be better to raise funds to train people who were there already, so people like Mariam could learn more about treating trachoma and how to do cataract surgery.

"If we train people to go back to their own country then eventually we will stop needing to fund missions. The whole work of the charity could be about facilitating training, and Mariam could train others, and at some point there might be enough capacity for everyone to get the eyecare they need."

"It is a great idea, Nour, but I haven't got the staff to do something new like that," Sandra said, and Nour could hear that she was trying to be kind.

"I'm not doing anything now," Nour said. "I need to do this, Sandra." She paused. "I need to do something. I need to prove to myself I can."

Chapter 23

“How are you feeling?” he asked. It was Saturday night, and she’d wondered if he would suggest going out again, had felt relieved when he hadn’t. Now they were next to each other on the sofa, plates on their knees.

“Fine. Better.”

“You’re looking better. Much more like yourself. Is the counselling helping?”

She shrugged, didn’t want to talk about it, didn’t think she could explain even if she tried.

“Are you enjoying the curry?” she asked by way of changing the subject.

“Mm,” he said, his mouth full. “How about you?”

“It’s fine,” she said, because he had phoned for it, paid for it, fetched it, and she didn’t want to seem ungrateful. It’s not that there was anything wrong with the food itself, but perching on the sofa to eat seemed fraught with perils, and she didn’t want the sauce to drip on her clothes or the rice to fall from her fork onto the floor. She didn’t want to look like she was blind.

“Nour?”

“What, sorry?”

“I asked if the radio was okay, or whether we should switch over.”

When he went to collect the takeaway he had left her listening to Loose Ends, which had been amusing enough. Now the radio was broadcasting a profile of some politician she hadn’t heard of. She forced herself to smile.

“Good idea. This is dull.”

“What do you want to listen to?”

“Oh, I don’t know. How about some music.”

“Pop? Classical?”

“You choose. Surprise me.”

She could feel him delving in his pocket for his phone, selecting a playlist probably, and she wasn’t surprised when dance music started to come from the speakers.

“That’s more like Saturday night,” he said. “I’m going to get another beer. Are you sure you don’t want something more interesting to drink?”

She shook her head. “Can I give you my plate?”

“Are you finished?”

She nodded.

“Why don’t we go through to the back then? It’s still sunny.”

“Okay, you get your beer, I’ll follow.”

“I’ll open the French doors.”

She trailed after him and carried on towards the bedroom. He was right, the sun was shining into the room, lighting it up with a gold glow even to her eyes. She rested a hand on the wall, listened to the sound of a cap coming off a beer, then Adam’s soft steps, bare feet on carpet.

He paused right behind her, not touching her, but so close she could feel the warmth radiating from his skin. He stood there for a moment. The music was still playing in the living room, but the bass was a muted thud and the vocals no more than a scratch in the air. She could smell the hoppy aroma of Adam’s beer on his breath, mingled with garlic and spice.

“You really are feeling better,” he said, and she wasn’t sure if it was a statement or a question.

“I am,” she said, because that’s what he wanted to hear, what they both wanted to be true.

His voice was soft and his hair brushed against hers, his lips touched her cheek when he said, “I wondered if you wanted to, I mean we haven’t, I haven’t liked to ask.”

She felt a tightness in her chest. Her shoulders grew rigid. More than anything she wanted to move away but her feet could have been embedded in rock.

She swallowed.

She should have thought about this, prepared for it. She was staying in his flat. They were sharing a bed. He was bound to want sex, sooner or later. Now. He wanted sex now. He had probably wanted it for a while, been too nice to suggest it.

And part of her wanted it too, because sex with Adam had been great. And another part of her was saying that she should just get it over with. She couldn’t never have sex again. One bad

experience shouldn't put her off for life. And Adam was a good guy, if she was going to have sex with anyone it would be him.

But a bigger part of her wanted to recoil, scream, run.

And she didn't have to say yes, because even if Adam threw her out right away she could call Michael. He would take her home, no questions asked.

She had a choice.

"I'm not ready for that, Adam," she said, and her voice came out clear and firm, didn't betray any of the doubts she felt inside. "I don't know when I will be. And," she paused, "if that's a problem, maybe I should move out."

She felt him move back, could no longer feel his warmth against her.

"No, of course not. I don't want you to move out. I shouldn't be rushing you."

"You're not," she said. "Why don't you open the doors and we can sit on the step. Do you want to put the music on in here?"

And they sat on the step down from the bedroom to the garden, Calvin Harris tracks filling the silence. But there were inches of space between them, and when *We Found Love* came on, Nour felt tears stinging her eyes.

Chapter 24

Nour rubbed her thumb over the raised scar on her wrist, her nurse in the pre-op clinic asking one question after another. She was weighed and measured, the nurse took her blood pressure, samples and swabs for MRSA. It had to be done, but she didn't like the stream of questions, wished she could fill the form in herself, and if she was honest with herself, would have preferred to be the one asking the questions. Adam had offered to come to help, but Nour had refused. "No point in two of us wasting a morning."

The woman stopped speaking, and Nour let her thoughts drift as she half-listened to the sound of fingers tapping on a keyboard. All she had to do was sit through this then she could go home. She wanted to be able to see again, but she didn't want to have to think about the surgery, and the longer she sat in the hospital the more it weighed on her mind. Finally, the nurse said, "I've got a little pot here, can you fill it with urine for me? It's across the waiting room. I'll show you where."

Nour stood, and the nurse took hold of her arm. Nour tried to repress the urge to shake her off.

"It's easier if I can hold your elbow," she said.

Cane in one hand, she rested her fingertips on the woman's arm and followed her through the waiting area and down a corridor.

"Here we are then. Shall I come in with you?"

"No!" Nour tried to wipe the outrage from her voice. "I can manage."

She went into the cubicle, using her cane to feel her way ahead.

"Just pop the sample on the side when you're done."

"Which side?" Nour asked, her irritation growing. She thought the eye hospital staff might be better trained to understand the sort of help people needed when they couldn't see.

"Above the basin. There's a little shelf."

"Which side? Forget it, I'll work it out." She could have let the nurse help, could have asked for Adam to come to the appointment, but if she had to go through this she was going to do it on her own.

She used the cane to locate the toilet, pulled down her trousers and sat, laying the cane beside her.

She'd done this before and could do it again. It wouldn't matter if she got urine on her hands because she could wash them. She just had to make sure that the lid was tightly screwed on the bottle this time.

"You all right in there?"

She gripped the bottle in one hand, hovered over the toilet seat so she could wee into the container. Ignoring the urine on her hands as she sat, pushing the lid firmly onto the pot. She checked it twice.

"I'm fine."

"Shall I come in?"

"No!"

She left the cane on the floor and felt her way forwards, hands outstretched, until she felt the wall, found the shelf and placed the bottle on it.

"Just washing my hands," she said as she ran the tap and felt for soap, hoping to stop the nurse bursting in on her. "Just a moment."

Her hands still wet, she pulled up her trousers then shuffled back across the floor until her toes reached the cane. She bent to pick it up then pulled her t-shirt straight.

"I'm done," she said as she opened the door.

"Come on through to the waiting area, take a seat."

The woman reached for her arm, and Nour said, "No. It's easier if I take your elbow. I said before. Have you had any training in working with people with sight impairment?"

"Not yet, I've only just started here. Right, here we are. Now, take a seat."

Nour wanted to ask more, but the nurse had moved on already.

She knew she could check the time on her phone but she was self-conscious about using the speech function in public. It could have been half an hour before she was called back in, maybe an

hour, but she knew that people around her had come in, been seen, and had gone while she was still sitting there.

“Could you come with me?” It was the new nurse again. “Sorry to keep you waiting, we had to speak to your consultant. He’s come down.”

Nour’s gut clenched. There was something wrong, they weren’t going to go ahead. Carl was going to break the news to her.

“Have a seat please.”

She knew Carl’s voice by now, wondered for a moment what he would look like, when she could see him. It was strange, she might be able to see him soon, yet she had to let him cut into her body first.

“Now, something a little unexpected has come up. It shouldn’t be a problem. May I ask a question?”

There was a pause, and she scoured her mind to think what he could possibly ask, anxiety and concern bubbling away inside her.

She could hear his pen scratching the paper, wanted to know what he was writing.

“I’ve spoken to the anaesthetist, we can go ahead, but do you know that you’re pregnant?”

“Oh!”

He continued to talk but she couldn’t make sense of his words. She didn’t feel pregnant, couldn’t be pregnant, hadn’t had sex with Adam since she returned. But then she thought of Yimlul and how many times he had raped her. There had been no contraception. She hadn’t thought about her period once her sight started to fade. Perhaps she could have done something about it if she hadn’t dropped the urine bottle at the first hospital, if she hadn’t been so keen to leave, to avoid being a patient at all. She had grown used to feeling sick all the time, but it had just been background noise when the rest of her life was a confused mess. She had eaten all the wrong things. She wasn’t ready to be a mother. She didn’t want a lifelong reminder of what had happened, couldn’t look a baby in the face and tell them how they were conceived.

“I can’t,” she said, over the top of whatever Carl was saying.

“Don’t worry. The operation is relatively short, and research seems to show that a general shouldn’t cause issues for the baby. Now if everything else is all right, can you sign here, to say I’ve explained the risks to you?”

She took the pen he placed in her hand, placed it where he had asked and mechanically scribbled her name.

“You can’t tell anyone,” she said as she finished.

Chapter 25

“Shall we come to yours for ten?” Samia had asked when she had phoned a couple of days ago to suggest that they take the boys to the park.

“Don’t worry, I’ll see you there. By the big entrance gates.”

Nour had thought about cancelling, but this had been arranged, and she couldn’t stay in and worry about what to do about the pregnancy any longer.

She hadn’t told Adam that evening after the pre-op. He had arrived home late and she had dinner waiting. It had been easy to say everything was fine, to say she was tired, and why didn’t they get an early night. He had fallen asleep within minutes but she had been awake most of the night. She couldn’t keep this baby, couldn’t get rid of it. At least going to the park with her nephews would fill her mind for a few hours.

She knew that she could make her way to the park and had practised the route with Aaron. She had even walked down to the river with him, but didn’t feel ready to be in the open spaces of the park on her own yet. There were too many ways she could lose the route. It wasn’t like a street where she was funnelled between hedges and walls on one side, cars and kerbs on the other.

She paced her way along the road with care, wondering if at some point it would become easy, if she could go somewhere without it taking her concentration completely. It seemed unlikely and although thoughts of the baby growing inside her flickered across her mind, she had to keep most of her focus on how far along the route she was.

She waited at the crossing at the end of Prince of Wales Drive. The traffic was always busy here, there was a cycle lane too. Nour wanted to hear the bleep of the crossing lights before she risked stepping out.

“Hold up. We’re right behind you!” Samia’s voice made her jump. “Ouf. I can’t run anymore. Hold on Izaiah, wait for the green man. Did you make it up here by yourself?”

Nour paused, nodded, then said, “Can I put my hand on the buggy too? It’s easier, if you don’t mind.” Having company reassured her during this last hurdle, she was relieved not to have to stand and wait, all the time risking a stranger approaching to ask if she was all right.

They crossed the road, walked into the park and paused while Samia released Gabe from the buggy.

“Thanks for coming up here,” Nour said, “I’m not sure I could make it to Tooting on my own.”

“The boys needed to get out of the house. It’s nice to come somewhere different. I should come up to Battersea more often. The boys like the bus. I’m not sure it will work well when the baby’s here. I don’t really want a double buggy, I’ll never get it on the bus, and I don’t know if Gabe would walk.”

“There are those things that clip on the back of the buggy that he could stand on. Or you could have the baby in a sling. I could help. If...” She hesitated. Could she help? What if she had a baby of her own?

“How are you feeling?” she asked, wanting to think about something else. “How many weeks are you?”

“Thirty-seven. I’m fine. I’m tired, of course. Michael barely sees me as I’m ready to go to sleep almost as soon as he gets in. Then I can’t stay asleep because I need the loo. And Gabe’s still waking in the night. And I can’t get back to sleep when he wakes me up and all I can think about is the birth.”

“I wish I could do more to help. I can come down, but I can’t really tell what the children are doing. Is Baba helping?” The words came out, but at the same time Nour wondered about what it would be like to be as pregnant as Samia, what it would be like to give birth. She didn’t think she looked pregnant right now, at least no one had said anything. When she arrived home the day before, she had pulled up her top, ran her hands over her belly, trying to feel if there were new curves. She could still feel her hips, her ribs, though, and she craved the ability to see herself.

“He’s helping by mainly staying out of the way! I’m not sure what he thinks about having three little ones in the house. Two seem more than enough for him. I’ve talked to Michael about whether we should get our own place but he doesn’t see the need. What do you think?”

“I’m not sure Baba would be better on his own. At least there’s always food in the house and someone to call him for meals.”

“I suppose.” The sounds of the playground rose over Samia’s words and Nour leaned her head closer to hear what she was saying. “It’s busy today. Can we sit down? The boys will be happy for a few minutes and I need to get my breath back.”

“Are you still out of breath?”

“You should see how vast I am. Not long to go now.”

Nour sat on the bench and listened to the sound of children playing. Gabe didn't go far from the bench, first coming back for a drink, then a biscuit, then to ask to be pushed on the swing.

"I'll do it," she said. "Show me which swing."

He took her hand and she followed the small boy with care, aware that the playground would be full of children and equipment. She kept her cane in her hand, but it was hard to sweep ahead of her when she had Gabe right beside her.

When he stopped she lifted him up, let him drop his legs into the swing, and tried to find a rhythm so that she could push the swing as it reached to top of its path. The squeak of the chain gave her clues, but she still found herself mistiming each push. It was nice though, listening to Gabe's excited shrieks, though, "Higher, Auntie, higher!" There were children's voices all around, mothers chatting, wind blowing through the giant London plane trees that surrounded the playground. There was water somewhere, fountains a little way away, the clang of the gate as people came in and out of the play area, and as always, a distant police siren.

Samia's voice cut through the sounds: "Nour, I'm taking Izaiah to the toilet. Back in a moment. I'll take the buggy with me if you're all right with Gabe."

"We're all right, aren't we?" she said to the small boy. He just giggled and said, "Higher, Nour, higher."

As she pushed him, the sun was warm on her back. With her sunglasses on, the cane lying on the ground, she felt as if she looked like any young woman, nothing to mark her out from the crowd. No one knew about the baby growing inside her. She had made it here by herself, Samia was trusting her with Gabe, and maybe they would get coffees and sit while the boys played, then she would walk home and make herself lunch. In the afternoon she could work on the project plan for the new training sessions for local health workers so they could do straightforward cataract surgery. Then Adam would be home, and between them they would cook something. It wasn't a big plan, but it was some sort of plan for the day, and maybe it was a life that she could live with. But a baby would change all that. What would Adam say? She couldn't keep it from him and resolved to tell him tonight.

"Down, Nour, down!" Gabe shouted, bored with the swing. Nour lifted him up, struggling for a moment as his feet remained hooked in the bars of the swing. She lifted him higher until she felt the swing drop away.

She lowered him until she felt his feet touch the ground then bent to fumble for her cane which had slipped. "Hold on, Gabe," she said as her hand lost contact with his hoodie.

"Climbing frame!" he shouted, and she couldn't hear his footsteps because his trainers didn't make much noise against the asphalt and there were children's steps and voices all around, and parents chatting, the sound of cars, and a siren. Something brushed the air close by, a landing pigeon maybe, and she still couldn't feel her cane, couldn't see Gabe, and he could be anywhere, could be heading out of the play area, over towards the fountains which he loved, or the river or the road.

Her fingers felt the cool hard cane and she tried to grip it, felt it slip, gripped again and stood.

"Gabe," she called, "Where are you?"

"Have you finished with the swing?" A man's voice, Portugal via south London. "My kid wants a go."

She nodded, took a step away, stopped, didn't know which way to go, didn't have a map of the playground in her head, was lost, as lost as Gabe was.

She stood there, sweat making the cane slip, then she took a tentative step forwards, cane swishing in front.

"Gabe?"

No response, and she couldn't really expect him to pick out her voice amongst all the others even if he was still nearby.

"Gabe?"

"You all right love?" Smell of cigarettes and perfume, voice from somewhere behind her. Nour swung round.

"I can't find my nephew."

"What's he wearing?"

She swallowed a lump in her throat, couldn't bring out the words, "I don't know," because she hadn't thought to ask Samia to tell her, hadn't thought she'd need to know, had thought that looking after a toddler for a few minutes was within her capabilities.

"I'm back, Nour."

Samia. Thank God. But she was going to have to tell her she'd lost him.

"Gabe, I ..."

"Did he get bored on the swing? Gabe, not too high!"

"You can see him?"

She knew Samia wasn't mocking her when she said, "Of course. He's on the climbing frame. Third rung up. I don't think he'd been that high before. Take my arm, I think we better move closer just in case he can't get down."

"I can get higher than that," Izaiah shouted as Nour hooked her fingers onto the fabric covering Samia's elbow and followed her.

Her heartbeat slowed, there had been no crisis, nothing to worry about. He was fine. And she would just have to remember to hold on more firmly next time. And ask what he was wearing just in case.

"How about a coffee?" Samia asked.

Nour felt her phone vibrate in her pocket.

"Just a moment while I get this. Hello?"

Izaiah was shouting, he had reached the top, and it was hard to hear what the woman on the phone was saying.

"Sh, Izaiah," Nour said, "Wait a minute. Can you say that again, please?"

The woman said, "We have a cornea for you."

Chapter 26

Her heart was thumping, but the healthcare assistant looking after her was calm. “There’s no rush. Do you want to get changed here? I’ll pull the curtains around.”

The woman’s voice was warm, London meets Jamaica, like the neighbour in the first house they lived in when they had first arrived.

Nour shivered, took a breath, tried to still the adrenaline that had been coursing round her body since the call came.

“I don’t need help,” she said, and the woman stepped outside the curtains. She could take her own outer clothes off, she could do this. She felt for the hospital gown on the table beside her, picked it up and rubbed the well washed cotton between her fingers. She could hear the chatter of nurses somewhere nearby talking about the problems of parking, and the more distant hum of voices in the waiting room.

She could take her clothes off, could pull the gown on, everyone struggled to tie the strings behind them, and she could ask the woman to help with that part, so why didn’t she just do it? She wanted the chance to see again, didn’t she? The donor was dead already; no rush, the woman had said. She should be eager to hurry towards the operating table so she could go back to operating on people herself.

She stood, robe gripped between her fingers, palms growing sweaty. She hadn’t felt like this since, she hesitated, waiting, locked in that room, waiting for Yimlul to come, when he wanted, to take what he wanted. And now she was going to strip, to allow herself to be anaesthetised, to lie in a room full of strangers with a man who would cut into her body.

“You ready, love? Shall I come back in?”

“Not quite. Give me a minute.” The words came from some surface level of her brain, commonplace politeness while every other part of her was screaming for her to flee.

Another moment, then she pushed out more words. “I can’t do this.” She spoke so softly that she didn’t think anyone would hear but the woman must have been listening.

“I’m coming in. Don’t worry, it’s normal to be in a bit of a flap before something like this. I can help you.”

Nour shook her head. “I’m an ophthalmologist. I shouldn’t be freaking out like this.”

“Are you? Well, we’re all just human inside, aren’t we? Now let me hold the robe, and you start with your shirt. Then we can slip the robe on and you can take off your trousers.”

Her fingers shook as she fumbled with the buttons and she thought about the hands of the man who would be removing her cornea, replacing it with something sliced from someone else’s eye. She shivered again.

“Not very warm is it? Shall I help?”

“No!” She flinched as she felt the woman’s hands approach. “Give me a moment. I can do it.”

She scrambled to undo the buttons, pulled her shirt off, let the woman take it from her.

“I’m holding the robe in front of you. There we go. Let me do the ties.”

Nour stood, five years old again, as the woman tied the robe at the neck and waist. She slipped off her sandals, pushed down her trousers and folded them together.

“Where do they go?” she asked, another wave of panic washing over her at the thought of her clothes vanishing.

“If you put your hands in front of you, you can feel a plastic basket. We put everything in there and it will be right by your bed when you wake. Now, take a seat and I’ll run through a few last checks.”

Nour tried not to flinch as the woman put the blood pressure cuff round her arm. She took slow breaths in and out as the machine inflated and deflated.

“Right, that’s all fine. Pop your flip flops back on and I’ll take you out to a seat.”

As they moved out into a hallway, Nour felt someone approach her, knew it was Adam before he spoke.

“I’m here, Nour,” Adam said, his fingertips touching hers. “I managed to get someone to take over from me. Come and have a seat.”

Nour waited while they sat then said, “Has she gone? What do you think we’re waiting for?”

“How are you feeling?”

“Stressed. Gabe ran off when we were at the park. Samia left him with me for two minutes. And she came back and could see him, then my phone rang. And they said I had to come in.” She

took a couple of breaths. "It was fine. Samia came back, he was only on the climbing frame. And I got here. I'm fine really. I'd rather not be sitting half naked in a hallway."

"Don't worry. There's no one else here, it's not like the main waiting area. You're next on the list. I asked."

"Oh. Really? Oh."

Adam squeezed her hand, then said, "You're cold. Do you want a dressing gown?"

Nour shook her head. "No. I just want to get this done."

"Don't think about it. You'll be fine. It will all be straightforward, and in a couple of hours it will all be over. And you'll be able to see again."

"Probably."

"Don't be like that. Sorry. You be however you want."

She sat in silence for a moment, irritated by the knowledge that she was being unreasonable. His hand was warm in hers, his skin radiated heat down the side where her arm brushed his.

"I'll be glad when it's over."

"Me too."

She could get up, pick up her cane, ask for her clothes and leave. She could, she wouldn't, shouldn't, just had to wait, listen to the doctor, nod and agree, wait for the anaesthetist, lie down where she was told, wait for oblivion. Then Adam was right, it would all be done.

"It seems a long time since I came back," she said. Adam didn't answer, squeezed her hand again, then released it and put an arm round her.

She might have her sight back in one eye within the next hour or two, she thought, but that was just the start. Her vision would take weeks to settle, they might need to adjust the stitches depending on her spectacle prescription, she would need eye drops for months and wouldn't be able to swim.

It didn't stop. The consequences kept on unravelling. Maybe she should build up to working in ophthalmology again, maybe she would never see well enough to be confident in the detailed work of examining someone's eyes. The future in front of her might be as blurred after the operation as it was now.

And what about the baby?

“Adam, I need to tell you something.”

“What’s up?”

“When they did the pre-op, they found something.”

“What is it? Why didn’t you say?”

“Because I didn’t know what you’d think.” She stopped, waiting while someone walked down the corridor, the sound of soft rubber soles kept on going past then faded away. “I’m sorry, this isn’t the right time, but you have to know. I’m pregnant.”

He was silent.

“You know it can’t be yours.”

“I know,” he said, then he squeezed her hand.

“Would you come through?” A woman’s voice came across the room.

“It’s you,” Adam said. “Shall I come too?”

She nodded, gripped her cane, took his arm as they stood.

She wanted to see Adam’s face as he signed the page for her, wanted to take back what she had just said, wanted to ask him what he was thinking, but there was only time for him to squeeze her hand again and say, “It’ll be all right,” before she was led through a couple of doorways, taken into a room, asked to step up on the table.

“Where’s my cane?” she asked as someone jabbed a needle into the back of her hand. More hands were loosening the neck of her robe, and she could feel her breath speeding up, her heart starting to race.

“I’m sure it’s with your belongings,” someone said, a man, “Now I’m just going to put this over your face, breathe normally for me please.”

Her breaths came in and out, and the last thing she remembered was wondering what normal was anymore.

Chapter 27

It wasn't like waking from sleep, warm and slow. She was suddenly, sharply alert, and she needed to vomit.

"Take a moment."

There was someone beside her, a cannula still in the back of her hand, something covering her legs, the beeps of a monitor in the distance, and a wodge of something stuck to her face.

She wasn't going to vomit. Breathe in, breathe out.

"How are you doing?"

"Can I see?"

It was a stupid question to ask the post-op nurse, she thought, almost as the words came out of her mouth.

"Everything went fine, I think. Leave the bandage for now."

She instinctively wanted to touch her face, to strip off the tape and gauze. She needed to know now.

Now.

She was swamped by a sudden rush of remembering.

"Oh!" A baby. She was pregnant. There was a baby. Her baby. Inside her. And she had told Adam.

She battled with a fresh surge of nausea.

Yimlul's baby.

"I can't."

It was dark in the room where they had taken her, her throat felt hoarse, her face felt bruised, her eye was stinging, gritty, and her breath jerked in and out.

What would Adam think? she wondered. She had told him that the baby wasn't his, she hadn't managed to spell out what had happened, hadn't known what to say, could barely look after

herself, couldn't look after a baby too, not now, not even if one eye could see, maybe not ever. Not Yimlul's baby.

"Nour? They said I could come in for five minutes. How are you?"

She didn't know what to say, didn't know what he was really asking.

"Pregnant," came out first.

"I know. What about your eye?"

"Sore. They gave me some morphine. I didn't know if you'd come back."

"I said I would, before you went in."

"I don't remember. It's not yours, it can't be."

She could feel his weight as he sat on the bed beside her.

"I know. And I can't imagine what happened to you out there, but none of it was your fault, and we can talk about the pregnancy, but you have choices, and you're still you, and I still want to be with you."

She could feel tears forcing their way out, again, more, wondered when she would stop crying, crying because of what had happened, was happening, was going to happen.

"I want it to stop," she said. "I want to wake up like it was a year ago, when all we had to decide was whether we stayed at your place or mine. Not... how can I be pregnant? I've been back for months, I should have known. I don't feel pregnant. Do I look pregnant?" Everything she had kept inside her since the pre-op spilled out in a torrent.

She felt his arm wrap around her, felt the support he had unwaveringly offered her ever since she had been back. She wasn't sure how she would have managed these last few months without him, but the pregnancy changed everything for her if not for him.

She had been awake since first light, waiting for this. Carl's fingers tugged on the tape, a brief burn on her cheek.

"Hold on, I want to clean it up a bit."

Her lids felt crusted together, the eye was still sore but she wanted to pry her lids apart.

“There we go!”

Her lid opened before his words were done. It was blurry, like looking through a bubble, but she could see Carl’s pink face, could tell he was wearing a pink shirt too, and her eye was stinging and weeping, everything blurred again.

At some point Carl suggested he should check the retina.

Her throat was tight as she sat up, forehead to the slit lamp bar. The light blinded her again, making stars with the stitches in her cornea. She could see the lines of veins at the back of her eye for a moment, then all she could see was red.

“It’s looking good,” Carl said. “All clear back there.”

The tears streaming down her face weren’t just from the irritation in her eye.

Chapter 28

Hannah curled up against her legs as she sat on the old wood-framed sofa on the terrace. The multiple courses from hummus to baklava had proved too much for the two-year-old, but her older brothers were still lively. They had set up heaps of bricks for goalposts and were playing football with their cousins on the dirt in front of the house. The men were sitting outside too, small china cups in their hands, cigarette smoke drifting across to mingle with the fading aroma of cooked meats and doqqa as the sky darkened from turquoise to navy. She watched her father laugh at something his brother said. In the glow of the early evening light as the sun dropped into the Mediterranean the years fell away from him. They didn't look so different to how they used to on Friday afternoons when the university was closed and they all went down to the sea, Mama, Baba and Michael, Uncle Nazur, Aunty Na'eemah, all her cousins.

She had swum in the sea with the boys and she had revelled in the freedom. Mama and Aunty Na'eemah would sit and talk and watch, but Baba and Uncle Nazur would chase them into the water. Even when Michael would tell her she was too small to join in, she could keep up in the water, could swim faster than Sara and Mina, faster than Daniel, just as fast as Benjamin and Michael. She remembered her father doing a cartwheel on the beach, all the kids trying to copy him, getting covered in sand as she tried and fell, then running back into the sea to wash it off again. They had played their own games too, something like water polo mixed with piggy in the middle, the boys always winning against the girls until Uncle Nazur joined in to even things up. And as the light fell, the men would build a fire, Mama would boil a kettle on a little stove, while Aunty Na'eemah opened a big pan of stew and unwrapped the bread and divided it up amongst them. They would stay sitting around the fire, aromas of coffee and cigarettes mixing with woodsmoke until she grew drowsy. Back then, she had thought that was how life would always be, but that was before. Before the adults started talking in low tones late into the night, before the priest was found with his throat cut.

It was still clear in her mind, that night when her mother woke her, pushed a small bag into her hand, and hurried them to the airport where her father was waiting. She did remember yawning, her eyes wanting to close as she clasped the little rabbit she had always slept with and leaned against her mother's long skirts, while her father argued with a man in a uniform. Eventually they were allowed on a plane, and she only woke when they had landed. She remembered her mother rubbing her eyes as they stepped out of the airplane and saw London's dull grey landscape for the first time.

Before England, that was how her father classified things. Ah, well that happened before we came to England. Another time, another land, and she was glad that she had found the time to bring him back, had been glad since the moment they got off the plane, buffeted by holiday makers in search of a beach. From the second they opened the plane doors the air had smelled different, smelled right. Warm and dry rather than damp. Daniel had been there to collect them, waiting with his eldest son. She sat in the back of the car on the ride north from Cairo airport, let the men catch up, streams of rapid Arabic washing over her as they passed stalls selling koshari, kofte, and kebabs late into the night, the sounds of constant clamouring coming from honking horns.

She wished her mother was with them too, to see Baba looking younger again. There was always a certain look on his face when they were in England, frown lines brought on by the new life, the effort of speaking English all the time, a look that had been most acute when he had returned late at night after a shift at the restaurant, or early mornings as he frowned over application forms for positions at universities where no one bothered to reply to him. And later, too, when Mama received letters from the hospital.

Before. His before wasn't hers. The transition from one country to another had back then seemed like just one more inexplicable adult decision. Now, she could look back and tie it to what was happening to Copts in Egypt, but not then. Michael had tried to explain to her why they had moved to England but his ten-year-old grasp of why they couldn't live in Egypt made scant sense to her six-year-old mind. Her father had worked at the university in Alexandria, then he was a waiter in England. The south London streets soon felt like they had always been home, and her mother examined the vegetables heaped up on the market stall before buying them like she always had.

Sara brought the small steaming cups of coffee to the low table in front of Nour and sat. Nour watched as her cousin shifted to get comfortable, curling her legs in under her. It was only a week or so after the birth, her tunic sat tightly around the rolls of her belly, her breasts were full and stretched the fabric. Sara had four children, the boys who were playing football with their older cousins, Hannah who was sleeping next to them, and the new baby girl who was in Auntie Na'eemah's arms being cooed over by Mina and Benjamin's wife Leila. Sara glanced over to the baby, then said, "Go on, drink it while it's hot."

Nour picked up the coffee and sipped at the bitter-sweet brew.

"We were so pleased when Uncle told us you had been found," Sara said. "And it is so good to see you here, truly safe, back to normal. How are you?"

Nour smiled, thanked Sara for her concern, and told her she was doing well, but the word normal burned inside her like hot coal. They wanted her back to normal, and while she knew part of it was out of concern for her, they also asked so that they could get on with their lives. And she didn't really blame them for that. It was good to return to Egypt, to feel, and she hesitated over the word, to feel safe. Aunty Na'eemah would make anyone feel safe and at home, her nurturing extended well beyond her own children. Her father felt safe here amongst family, safe enough for him to return and smoke a cigarette with his brother, her cousins and her cousin's husbands as they watched the sun go down.

But nothing was normal, however hard she pretended. Sure, the house was the same, but the children were inches taller than when she was last here and there was a new baby to meet, and Leila was pregnant again too, hoping for a girl after her three boys. Her cousins were the same people, but Sara and Mina were both a little plumper, Barnabas had a little less hair, Daniel a little more religious fervour. And in a lull in the conversations she could still hear the sea, the same noise of waves rushing onto the beach as there always had been. But the coals still burned inside her because her cornea wasn't hers anymore and if an ophthalmologist were to examine her eyes with a slit lamp the fine line dividing alien flesh from her own was all too clear.

Her wrists were circled too, with scars that would fade from sight but not mind. She had had to face the decision whether to tear a child from her body piece by piece, whether she could live with months of growing evidence of what Yimlul had taken from her, given to her, when losing her sight had meant that she had given up, given in and she had failed to calculate the cost of her weakness.

"I might go to bed," she said as she placed the tiny gold rimmed cup back on the table, the coffee undrunk.

"It's still early," Sara said. She was right. The boys were still playing football even as the first stars were starting to emerge in the sky as the last of the azure blue vanished.

She wanted to explain how she felt to Sara but it was too hard to find the words, and nothing in Sara's life would help her make sense of what Nour would say. She shifted in her seat, unable to stay there and pretend.

"Back in a moment," she said. She stood, and left Sara to the coffee and the sleeping toddler. She walked towards the men, smiling at her father as he raised a hand to acknowledge her.

“Will you be joining us for church tomorrow? You will need to wake early,” Daniel asked as she passed them. Nour smiled and nodded: going to church with her family was easier than explaining how she had left God somewhere in Mali.

She skirted around the boys and their football game, only pausing to send the ball back with the side of her foot when it came her way. She walked across what they called the road, which really wasn't much more than a wide track, their house the last one finished before the sea. She glanced over at the silhouetted concrete piers and metal poles where the El Masri family had started to build, and for a moment she wondered where they were now, and why they never completed the house, but she forgot about them as she set foot on the path down to the sea.

It was growing darker, but she didn't need light to traverse each turn and bump in the path, nor to know each scrubby thorn bush that had been there, seeming neither to grow nor diminish all the years she could remember. The hard dirt beneath her feet soon turned to soft sand. She slipped her feet out of her sandals and left them where they lay.

When she had left the terrace all she had wanted was to get away, but as she came to the place where the sand was damp and firm with the waves brushing against her toes, her purpose became clear. She was tired of trying to be the same as she was before, tired of trying for other people. She had done her duty, had brought Baba out here.

She untied the cord and let her loose trousers fall to the ground. She was tired of answering questions about her health, her eyes, tired of knowing that people wanted to ask far more intrusive questions about what happened 'out there'. She was tired of talking about when she might return to work. She couldn't solve other people's problems, couldn't trust herself to restore their vision, not now. And she couldn't imagine how she had ever thought they would make an impact on sight loss in a country as vast and, in some parts, as lawless as Mali. She laughed at her arrogance, the sound bursting out and rolling across the water until it dissipated and was lost in the waves.

She stepped forward until the waves reached her ankles. She thought about taking off her loose cotton tunic, could hear her mother's voice reminding her she wasn't a child anymore, so she kept it on.

The waves lapped at her calves, chill splashes before the water warmed against her skin, knee, thigh, before the water entered her like he had.

The salt cleansed and absolved her, groin hips belly chest breasts. She shivered as she immersed her shoulders, where he had first gripped her.

The sea washed away every touch he had forced upon her, and she kept walking until her feet needed to lift from the ground.

There were no safe edges here. Her tunic billowed around her and she pulled forward with her arms. She lost her last toehold on the sea bed, with nothing holding her back.

Across the sea she could see reflections glinting on the waves. They must be tankers in a distant line, a shipping route illuminated by golds and greens. Somewhere beyond that, lights danced, perhaps from a port, maybe on another continent.

She surged forward, arm over arm over arm over arm. She swam until her breath was tight in her chest and only then did she turn and glance back at the lights from the house she had been born in. She sculled at a pause for a moment. She never wanted to be too old to swim in the sea, she thought. She turned and swam on until the lights on the land became nothing more than stars.

Chapter 29

May 2013

She locked the cubicle door and started to undress. She didn't get changed in the open changing room anymore when she came to the swimming pool. Instead she opted for one of the cubicles where she could tug her costume on swiftly, away from the large mirrors and the watching eyes of others. She glanced at the scars on her wrists as she pulled off her shirt and pushed it into her backpack. They were still faintly pink, as was the larger mark on her ankle from where she had been chained. She didn't have much time to notice them now, not like after the corneal transplant when the changes in her body obsessed her. Her improving sight had meant that each day new flaws became apparent. The scars circling her wrists bothered her most at first, raised pink weals against her skin. She discarded short-sleeved tops, relishing the chill of winter when everyone donned long-sleeved jumpers and she could hide her arms.

The pinkness of the scars had been visible even in those first few weeks after the operation when her vision was blurred. She had been shocked at the ragged state of her hair and had wondered why no one had told her about it. She took herself for a haircut the first time she felt up to leaving the house, watched transfixed as the shaggy tufts fell to the ground and a new, sleek crop emerged. "I look completely different," she had said to the hairdresser, who had smiled.

"Not everyone could get away with a short cut like that, but it really suits you," the woman replied.

Her pleasure at the improvement in her visual resolution, allowing her to see the fine details of each pore and hair strand, had been swiftly obliterated by the reminder of how her body had been ravaged. The lines round her eyes, the new scattering of grey hairs crept into visibility with wrenching suddenness. She repeatedly returned to her passport photo, taken in Bamako, a permanent record of how she looked, days after her rescue. She could remember being led to a chair, the flash of light, being taken to another office, sitting, waiting while some official went on and on, none of his words sinking in. They gave her the passport, then took it away from her, and she couldn't have seen it then anyway. Now, as she gazed at the stranger in the photo, gaunt cheekbones, grey skin, cloudy corneas, she couldn't decide whether to keep it or apply for a replacement.

She read the newspaper reports from back then too, hadn't thought to look for them before she could see, stared at the photograph they had used in the first articles which announced that she

had been taken. A shot from her student days, she looked so young, her cheeks rounded and flushed pink in the rush and bustle of graduation. Then, the photograph snatched at the airport when she returned. She was barely visible, surrounded by people, hunched down in a wheelchair, some skinny old woman with prominent bones.

Standing there, warm chlorine-scented air brushing her skin, she could hear the bubble of sounds from the busy pool, and for a moment she thought with longing of her early morning swims. She wasn't quite sure how or when she could fit those in again, and she missed how it felt when the pool was quiet and those who were there were equally dedicated to swimming 50 or 100 lengths before the day could start. But she wasn't sure she really wanted to go back to that in-between time, waiting for a cornea, when swimming was one of the few things she did by herself. With one functioning eye and so much more to keep her busy time sped past now and she had no need to contrive activities to fill her day.

She took off her glasses, put them carefully in the case and tucked them in the pocket on the front of the bag. They improved her vision, finished off what the corneal transplant had started, might need to be updated again when the final stitches were removed. More than that, though, they were a shield, protecting her new cornea from dust in the wind, providing a barrier from people with inquisitive eyes who peered too closely at the cornea that was still opaque. But everyone here knew her, and she didn't need sharp focus for the pool.

She ran a hand through her cropped hair. Adam had asked if she was going to grow it again, after saying all the right complimentary things about her new cut. Life with Adam seemed like a lifetime ago now.

"I'm moving out," she had said, one cold, grey Saturday morning. It came out, harsh and blunt, just like she had wanted to avoid. She had been psyching herself up to say it for a week or more, since the surgery, since she knew her sight was returning.

He stood there in the bedroom, his face blank. She could see the lines around his eyes, the start of grey hairs that hadn't been there a year ago mingling with brown. There were shadows in the thin skin under his eyes too and she didn't want to look at him, didn't want to feel so guilty.

"You don't need to," he said. "I mean, I'm fine with all this, Nour. You don't have to." And the second time he said it, it sounded almost like he was pleading, and her eyes stung but she felt a spark of anger too at the way he said 'all this', summing up the chaos that she had brought to his life, that had been forced on hers.

“I do have to,” she said. “God, this is hard. Look, I’ve found a flat.” She had thought it would be easier to find the flat first then tell him so there was no debate, so he’d know she was serious, so she couldn’t back out. But it wasn’t working out that way, and remorse threatened to swamp her like a tidal wave. “I’m sorry,” she tried, but sorry didn’t convey “I wish you’d never met me, wish I’d never mentioned Mali to you,” because if she had gone on her own she might still have been kidnapped but might have felt less like he had to do everything for her now. Perhaps there would have been less guilt, binding him to her, driving her from him.

“Look, can we sit down and talk about this?”

She nodded, her lip between her teeth. She owed him that, owed him much more but right now she had nothing to give.

They moved into the kitchen. She sat down, but he picked up the kettle and went to the sink. He put his hand on the tap, then said, “Is this about the baby? Because really, it’s fine.” He didn’t look at her as he asked, his gaze fixed on the gold and brown leaves blowing across the garden.

She couldn’t stop the tears coming as she said, “It’s not fine. Not at all. And it’s not about the pregnancy, because I know you don’t blame me for that, and I’m trying very hard not to blame myself. What he did was rape.” She stopped, losing her train of thought for a moment, took a breath.

Adam turned the tap on and she listened to the flow of water as it battered against the metal kettle. All she could see was his back, his shoulders tense in the old grey sweatshirt he wore on weekends.

She tried again. “I can’t be grateful to you for doing the right thing for the rest of our lives.”

Adam put the kettle down, flicked the switch, still didn’t sit but leant against the counter. “I love you, Nour. You want to keep the baby and that’s fine. I said when you came back that you didn’t need to work. And it might be nice if we could buy a house somewhere a bit further out with a bigger garden, but the flat will do for now. And my career is on track and we can save up...”

“Stop! That’s just it. It’s all mapped out in your head and somehow you can block out that I’m having the baby of a Tuareg war lord. And I don’t think I can go and live in suburbia and pretend that everything is normal and go to baby groups with yummy mummies called Jasmine who have only ever been to Africa on safari.” She exhaled. “And that’s without me trying to work out who I am now and what I’m going to do with the rest of my life.”

“I know it feels really raw now,” Adam said, “but give it time. Give us time.”

“I need time,” she said, “, but I need time on my own.”

And she had had time, not as much time as she had needed or wanted because perhaps the amount of time it would take to process what had happened was infinite. And Adam had carried on being the good guy he had been throughout. He had helped her pack the few possessions she had in the flat, had borrowed his dad’s old Volvo, helped her empty the storage unit. He’d insisted on helping her buy a bed, and persuaded Mark to help him get it into the lift and down the narrow corridor to the flat. She had drawn the line when Adam suggested going to Mothercare, though. “I’m not due for months,” she’d said, deflecting, and she nodded when he offered to take her nearer the time. After that, she tried to leave a few days before replying when he called, and she kept the calls brief. It was better for her, better for him if he wasn’t tied to bringing up some other man’s child. And she hoped that he would find a nice straightforward woman and they could raise a family in suburbia without the baggage she had somehow acquired. And the nights where she lay awake, feeling the baby move inside her, listening to the couple next door fighting then having noisy make-up sex, and wondering what it would have been like if she had let Adam keep on taking care of everything grew less frequent. She still felt bad that she had let him take her in when she needed, had moved on as soon as she could.

It had been easy to unpack the few possessions she had acquired into the two rooms of the new flat, and she wondered about the power of seeing something to make you want it. Shopping had become functional rather than a temptation and she resolved to keep it that way. She hadn’t been able to afford to buy anything new for the flat, had claimed benefits for the first time ever, and that was an insight into another life. She felt like a different person as she explained on the phone to too many government agencies that she’d lost her sight and how she couldn’t work as an ophthalmologist, not now, possibly not ever. Too many sessions with the counsellor had conversations which looped around in circles as she tried to work out what she should do with her life.

“Perhaps it’s about learning to live with the uncertainty for now,” the counsellor had suggested in response to Nour’s frustration.

Nour nodded, but all the way back on the bus, as she climbed the seven stories to the flat because the lift was slow when it wasn’t broken, as she sat inside listening to the sounds of people all around her, she had thought about how easy it was to say yet how hard it was to do.

But it wasn't like life was bad. She liked the sounds of people upstairs, downstairs, left and right, reassuring reminders of where she was. The flat faced south, and she watched the sun rise over Crystal Palace on mornings when she was awake at dawn. The other good thing about winter was that dawn was later and her sleep was slowly extending. But most mornings she was awake early enough to sit by the windowsill where the avocado plant was still slowly growing, her hands wrapped around a mug of ginger tea as London came to life.

That was then, when life was small, neat, and well organised, like the books on shelves that she had reclaimed from the storage unit. Reading still tired her eyes, one eye doing the work of two. She tended to save her eyes for working on the computer Sandra had set her up with. The fundraising campaign was coming on well enough that she had approached the Institute of Tropical Ophthalmology in Bamako as well as eye hospitals in Dakar and Johannesburg because the need wasn't only in Mali. It was easier to arrange for people to travel to countries with better security. She had liaised with the hospitals to devise a training programme and was wrangling with how to recruit health workers to learn about eye surgery.

Her phone bill had been a worry until she had worked out how to make calls over the internet. She wasn't only liaising with hospitals, much of which could be done by email, but she was putting feelers out to see if she could trace Amastan. As she had thought, finding one boy in all of Mali wasn't easy, but she had been determined not to let that drop.

The swimming class would start in a few minutes, so she dragged herself back to the present, pushed down her trousers and pulled off her pants. She didn't have much time to make calls now, but she resolved to phone the embassy again this afternoon. She folded her trousers, put them in her backpack and ran her hands across her midriff. The scar was raised and red still, but it was only a few months since the birth. She hadn't wanted a caesarean, but Carl and the obstetrician had both agreed that it was better not to take any risks when her cornea was still held in place by stitches. Carl had seen her more regularly once they knew about the pregnancy, alongside a barrage of antenatal checks on her own health and scans for the baby.

Carl had become more than her consultant. He put her in touch with the eye clinic liaison officer, a short, smiley Scottish woman called Sheena who had asked her about working in the low vision clinic, offering help to people who had a new diagnosis of sight loss, and she had said, maybe, she would think about it after the baby arrived. Although she wanted to stand alongside anyone who was as lost as she had been when her sight first faded, she was unsure if she could do that now, not yet. Carl himself had asked if she wanted to sit in on surgery and she had said yes, coming into the department one day a week until her belly started to get in the way and her back ached. Carl was

confident that her vision would be good enough for her to return to surgery, but Nour was unsure, wasn't going to commit to a job until she had the second operation, until she felt her vision was binocular and sharp. But she did need to think about work and earning an income, and the thing she was best qualified to do was eye surgery.

She pulled on her swimming costume. She hadn't been allowed to swim for a few weeks after the transplant. Then there had been a few glorious months after she had returned to Egypt and swam in the sea when, growing belly and all, she had been allowed back into the pool. She might have been coming to terms with the changes in her appearance after Mali, but it had still shocked her how swiftly her body changed and grew once she knew she was pregnant, like it had been keeping a secret which could now be laid bare. Her appetite had shocked her too as she devoured meat and cake, barely finding time to cook and nap before she was hungry again. It was only in the pool that she felt like herself, only there that she could move like before. Her belly grew, her breasts grew too. She was forced to ask Samia for advice on maternity wear. Samia took it all in her stride, shared her expertise, lent her maternity clothes, told her about maternity underwear and much more, and Nour found herself swept into a new world of pregnancy and babies. The time she had to spare, she often spent down in Tooting, holding baby Ilizabith while Samia talked in a way she had never done before, Samia the expert and she the novice. She was grateful to meet Samia's friends, perhaps less grateful to hear their birth stories, to discover the trials of broken nights and breastfeeding.

Nour tugged at the maternity swimming costume until it sat right. Her breasts were large, blue veined and swelled with a surge of milk. She looked down at Sam, lying in his buggy. He had been fed before they left the flat, and all she needed to do was change him into his swim nappy. She hadn't been sure how she would feel about him, excitement at the baby that fluttered and wriggled inside her mixed with thoughts of how and where he was conceived. She had worried about the damage she might have done during those early weeks and months when she didn't know she was pregnant, didn't eat, certainly didn't take vitamins or follow any pregnancy advice. More than that, she wondered if every time she saw the baby she would be reminded of Yimlul.

Adam had seemed to take it for granted that they would raise the baby together, and that was just one more reason she needed to move out, so she could make her own decision. Once she had, she told her family about the pregnancy. Samia was delighted, her father had looked worried behind a smile. Michael took her aside later that day and asked straight out if she was sure she wanted to keep it. She looked him in the eye and nodded.

Her concerns she had somehow damaged the baby were submerged as he was handed to her, smeared with blood and vernix, nuzzling at her skin within seconds. She still worried about his development, but Samia told her every mum worried, and he had passed all his checks. She still thought about Yimlul, mainly in the middle of the night when she was awake to feed Sam, but rather than reminding her of him, Sam kept her mind on the present with the constant stream of feeding and changing and feeding taking all her attention.

Nour scooped him up into her arms, held him against her skin as she slipped his babygro and vest down. She had to lay him down to change his nappy and he grizzled a little, but she managed to finish before the small whimpers turned to cries. With one hand, she put the backpack into the buggy, opened the lock on the door, and tugged the buggy out of the family cubicle.

Samia was in the pool already and waved one hand. She was in the shallow end, Ilizabith splashing her hands on the water. Izaiah loved being at school, and Samia had booked Gabe into the nursery at the pool for the duration of the class.

After, there would be coffee with Samia and Liz and Colleen, then she would go back to the flat where Sam would sleep for a little while. It wasn't easy doing it on her own. During those early days, a blur of his tears and hers, her father had surprised her, pulling himself away from his books and becoming a regular visitor, always willing to hold the baby or create a meal from whatever she had in her fridge. He seemed to know more about cooking than she had imagined, had endless patience when all Sam wanted was to be walked up and down, and surprised Nour with stories from when she was a baby, the jobs he had worked when they first arrived in England, and tales of his childhood too. She fell back into the habit of going to church with him every weekend, needing some routine outside the one imposed by Sam's needs. She and her father talked in Arabic now, not English, and she wondered if Sam was learning it already even as they debated whether he should be baptised.

Nour walked to the edge of the water, the shallow end where she could step straight in and the water was only a few inches in depth. Sam's skin was warm against hers, his eyes alert and his attention captured for a moment by the sparkle on the water. Nour could see several women she knew from the class, women with babies of the same age, women who were single mums too, some with stories of dreadful exes, women who were on their way to becoming friends. The woman who ran the class was there with a selection of floating rubber ducks, ready to sing nursery rhymes with the mothers and babies. It was so different to what she used to do at the pool, she thought as she sat next to Samia, smiled at Ilizabith and lowered Sam until he could lie between her thighs and kick his legs. Water splashed into her face and Sam's mouth curved.

“Look!” she said to Samia. “Look, he’s smiling.”

Critical Paper – Writing Blind

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Introduction: *Sight loss, stereotypes and stories*

I started work in a care home for elderly people with sight loss, at age 16. My job was to make tea, serve meals, and guide the residents when they needed help. I received basic training, but encountered nothing to help me understand how the people I supported might feel about their situations. Some of them had been in residential care from childhood, like Peggy who barely spoke and lashed out whenever anyone startled her, or Renee who was joyful, chatty and sociable. Others had moved into the care home as older adults, no longer able to cope living independently. For instance, Suzanne was 98 and saw no point in being alive. Meanwhile, Doris had diabetes and urinary incontinence, but was happily unaware of the peardrop aroma that constantly surrounded her. Isabel, in her pastel twin sets and pearls, had her own telephone line and managed her own finances. I do not think I even realised that these people needed more than our physical support.

I continued to work in the care home while I trained as an optometrist. By 1992 I was working to help people see better and to detect eye disease at an early stage before sight loss became irreversible. I went into this career because I thought I wanted to help people; that said, even after a number of years at university, I was ill-prepared to empathise with people when I had to tell them that there were early signs of damage to their macula, the part of the retina people use for fine detail – to read, to sew, to recognise a friend's face. I do not think I recognised that this was something I lacked: I had passed my exams, both at university and the professional exams which are required while you practice under supervision. All the studying I had done had to mean that I was ready.

After five years in practice, I went to work for the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB). I was working on an eye health campaign, part of a team aiming to reduce avoidable sight loss. RNIB was and is an employer that upheld its own principles; consequently, I got to know a number of people with sight loss as colleagues and friends. I went through sight loss awareness training, I was taught guiding techniques and I learnt more about what someone can and cannot see with different types of sight loss. However, colleagues' personal experiences of sight loss did not come up during the training – perhaps due to an historic culture which valued theoretical knowledge over personal experience, perhaps because people can choose how much of their personal experiences to contribute at work. It must have been strange sometimes for the employees who were blind or partially sighted to be both campaigning to reduce sight loss while living with it themselves. One might wonder whether it is possible to believe you are valued as you are in that situation?

Throughout my early career, I feel that I failed to truly understand the emotional impact of losing sight. And yet now I am writing about that experience. What has happened in the interim to give me the confidence to convey a traumatic experience in which I have no stake? In developing my writing process, I have synthesised the experiences I have had: I have a type of migraine that causes sudden temporary sight loss; I have had to deal with long term health issues, and there was a year where I was unable to walk. I have returned to textbooks which were part of my training with fresh eyes. But beyond that personal and theoretical work, I have devoured novels and memoirs written by people with sight loss. Initially I thought that this paper might simply be an analysis of books about sight loss, but I swiftly realised that this was an impossible task, certainly within the 30,000 words I had available. Writing about a traumatic experience – for example, sight loss, disability, illness, the death of a loved one – is one way that people process trauma, and it is something that many people who have experience of sight loss have done. I stopped counting how many memoirs of blindness had been published when I got to 53, but I did not stop reading.

In 2013, I drafted a short story about an English teacher who was losing his sight, written in the form of a medical record, as part of a module on experimental writing within my MA in Critical and Creative Writing. That project was only a few thousand words for a term paper, but I knew there was a full length book in it. Since then, I have been reading literature and theory on sight loss. This immersion in literature and theory has contributed both to my growing understanding of the issues faced by people going through sight loss, and to what I have written in *Blindsided*.

Blindness has been used and misused as a literary metaphor and plot device for thousands of years. In the next few pages, I will share a small selection of key texts from Greek mythology to the modern day in order to show how sight loss is integrated within different texts. Greek myths can be seen as the repository of the founding myths of blinding and sight that western culture has drawn on ever since. For instance, Tiresias was a blind prophet of Apollo, famous for clairvoyance and for being transformed into a woman, in Thebes. He was blinded as a punishment after he stumbled upon the goddess Athena while she was bathing.¹ His mother tried and failed to bargain for his sight to be restored; instead, Athena gave Tiresias the gift of understanding birdsong.

Interpreting the Tiresias myth, Georgina Kleege discusses the role of the blind seer and feels that Athena's offer was not a true gift: "Blind Tiresias knows the truth, but he is seldom applauded

¹ We can ask whether this stumble was truly accidental or a result of an unconscious desire, a blind sexual drive to see Athena naked.

when he reports it, and so he leads a life apart.”², ³ Tiresias’ story was part of the inspiration for Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*; more recently, poet and spoken word artist Kate Tempest has written about Tiresias in *Hold Your Own*.⁴, ⁵

Similarly, readers might also be familiar with the myth of Oedipus: after being abandoned at birth, Oedipus kills a stranger who turned out to be his birth father, Laius, and marries his mother, Jocasta. On discovering the details of Oedipus’ life, Jocasta hangs herself. Oedipus then blinds himself, as a self-punishment for his lack of insight, and in doing so demonstrates that he had developed the insight he previously lacked. ⁶ This is one of the earliest examples of the unclear boundary between seeing and not-seeing, between metaphorical blindness and insight. I aim to show both in this introduction, in this paper as a whole, and in the accompanying novel that the relationship between ‘blind’ and ‘sighted’ is more complex and unstable than is sometimes assumed in literature and theory. Many parts of academia privilege the objective observer, the world is set up for the sighted over/ against the blind, and in that vein, Paul de Man observes in relation to anthropological studies, “it becomes less and less clear who is doing the observing and who is being observed.” ⁷ The author may believe him- or herself to be a dispassionate observer, but his or her presence changes things. In writing a narrative, authors shape how it is perceived later, by others who were not there. Additionally, those being observed may have an entirely different view on events than those observing. Bearing this in mind, while reading this paper we need to acknowledge the position of the academic as observer in relation to power and postcolonial theory which I touch on later in this introduction. Beyond that, we need to consider the limitations of the link between seeing and knowing.⁸,⁹ We need to admit our own blindness, our own lack of insight, and as I explain later, how one day we may all be blind.

In another highly-pertinent literary example, Shakespeare links blindness to insight in the play, *King Lear*: sighted, Lear fails to see his daughter Cordelia for who she truly is: offended by her challenge to the way he is exercising power, he fails to try to understand it. The root of Lear’s

² ‘Tiresias’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [online], <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tiresias> [accessed 23 November 2019].

³ Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 28.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (Ware: Wordsworth editions, 1995),

⁵ Kate Tempest, *Hold Your Own* (London: Picador, 2014).

⁶ ‘Oedipus’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [online], <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oedipus-Greek-mythology> [accessed 23 November 2019].

⁷ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight, Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971)

⁸ Kleege p.46.

⁹ David Bolt, *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2013) p.18

problems is his lack of good judgement, despite his role as all-powerful, all-seeing King. The Earl of Gloucester, a powerful lord in his court, is similarly blind when it comes to telling the difference between his sons. Eventually, in an act of graphic on-stage violence, Gloucester's eyeballs are plucked out. He is a pawn in a political act, and while he has been unable to see the truth about his children, in the moment where he loses his sight, he sees the truth. Gloucester's journey parallels Lear's, as he must come to terms with his own powerlessness.¹⁰

All in all, these myths and literary works are not helpful in developing a better understanding of people with sight loss, but they can give readers an important pointer towards the shifting nature of blindness in literature: if sight loss is used as a metaphor in a text, sight does not always equal knowledge, and the point where a character loses their sight may be the point where key truths become clear to them. One may wonder why blindness and insight are so consistently inverted in this way. Beyond the human need to find purpose in difficulty, the clue might be in 'in-sight' – that is, loss of sight in the external world becomes an entry-point into personal insight. Myths and stories become a way that people can make sense of real life issues as we look for symbolism and patterns.

Argentinian writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges wrote an essay on blindness, based on his own experience of progressive inherited sight loss. He examines his own blindness and that of other book lovers, writers, and poets. Initially, he recalls the terror of sight loss, but much of his piece focusses on how the loss of one world leads to the discovery of another:

Blindness is a gift. I have exhausted you with the gifts it has given me. It gave me Anglo-Saxon, it gave me some Scandinavian, it gave me a knowledge of a medieval literature I didn't know, it gave me the writing of various books, good or bad, but which justified the moment in which they were written. Moreover, blind-ness has made me feel surrounded by the kindness of others.¹¹

Borges portrays blindness as a way of life, another style of living, more in line with modern theories of disability.¹² Like many people who write about their experiences, he sees loss of sight as a trade-off: since losing his sight, he has developed something better, something more. There is purpose in the loss. His essay puts across the story of his sight loss but also his move from writing prose to poetry. Borges' essay moves across genres, combining personal experience with his research into the experiences of others, with creativity and poetry running throughout, and I take this theme into my own writing as I bring my background in science into literature.¹³

¹⁰ William Shakespeare *King Lear* in *The Arden Shakespeare* (Bloomsbury: London, 1997)

¹¹ Eliot Weinberger ed, *Jorge Luis Borges, Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Viking 1999) p.474.

¹² Guy Dewsbury, Karen Clarke, Dave Randall, Mark Rouncefield & Ian Sommerville 'The anti-social model of disability', *Disability & Society*, 19.2(2004), pp145-158, DOI: 10.1080/0968759042000181776 [accessed 22 July 2020]

¹³ Eliot Weinberger ed, *Jorge Luis Borges, Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Viking 1999) p.474

Sight loss is present in modern fiction, including John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids*, where there is a global epidemic of blindness caused by an invading plant, and Jose Saramago's 1995 book, *Blindness*.^{14,15} This is the story of an unexplained pandemic of blindness afflicting nearly everyone in an unnamed city, and the social breakdown that follows. Writing about a blind society offers the author the opportunity to strip away some of the things that maintain civil society: the question 'what would happen if we could not see' is even more pertinent to the modern-day reader living in a culture dominated by screens. In this book, the character 'the doctor's wife', her very name rendering her a subordinate possession, retains her sight, forcing us to consider what it is to be other in a way that is in direct contrast to the usual situation.¹⁶

In contrast, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* takes the focus away from a blind society to a blind individual.¹⁷ The novel presents life in World War II Paris through the eyes of a girl, Marie-Laure, who has been blind since the age of six. The story is compelling, and Doerr has obviously considered Marie-Laure's experiences, but his portrayal of blindness, and how this aligns to Marie-Laure's lack of agency, does not live up to some readers' expectations. In fact, his portrayal of sight loss occludes and marginalises the experience it is, falling prey to the stereotype of the blind woman without agency. Indeed, Doerr's paradigm has been challenged by reviewers who have experienced sight loss.¹⁸ Writing for the US National Federation of the Blind, Molly Faerber says, "I can't help but find it disappointing that Doerr did not push himself to incorporate details that might lend his work more credibility and this character greater truth".¹⁹

Having said that, Doerr is obviously interested in life without sight: the title story in a book of short stories, *The Shell Collector*, examines the experience of a blind man who has travelled the world collecting shells, becoming intensely knowledgeable about the subject. Doerr writes, "The shell collector was wading, feeling for shells with his toes."²⁰ After the shell collector has lived in relative isolation for five years, people start to come to him for the potential healing power of a venomous creature found in a cone shell. The protagonist (who is unnamed) has had an interesting

¹⁴ John Wyndham *The Day of the Triffids* (London: Penguin, 2008)

¹⁵ Jose Saramago *Blindness* (London: Vintage Classics, 2013)

¹⁶ See also HG Wells's *The Country of the Blind* (The Strand Magazine, 1904) where an explorer, Nuñez, stumbles into a remote valley where all who live there are blind and view his obsession with seeing as a strange and unhealthy problem

¹⁷ Anthony Doerr *All the light we cannot see* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015)

¹⁸ Sheri Wells-Jenson 'Anthony Don't: On Blindness and the Portrayal of Marie-Laure in 'All The Light We Cannot See'' *Interpoint*, 22 March 2016 <https://lighthouse-sf.org/2016/03/22/anthony-dont-on-blindness-and-the-portrayal-of-marie-laure-in-all-the-light-we-cannot-see/> [accessed 23 November 2019].

¹⁹ Molly Faerber 'Review: All the Light We Cannot See' National Federation of the Blind, *Future Reflections*, Winter 2015 <https://www.nfb.org/all-light-we-cannot-see> [accessed 23 November 2019].

²⁰ Anthony Doerr *The Shell Collector* (London: Fourth Estate, 2016) p.38

and independent life, married, and had a son. However, during the course of the story, he almost loses everything: his privacy, his senses, his life. The story could have happened with a sighted protagonist, but the intensity of the descriptions seems deeply linked to the way the shell collector experiences life. The shell collector hears the water taxi scraping across the reef and imagines, “its hull grinding the calices of finger corals and the tiny tubes of pipe organ corals, tearing the flowers and fern shapes of soft corals, and damaging shells too: punching holes in olives and murexes and spiny whelks.”²¹

One may ask whether authors consider blind characters, and tropes of blindness, as incidental or fundamental to their narratives; these paradigms may be nearly impossible to unravel in a completed story. Both Bolt and Kleege consider the role of sight loss in characterisation; I examine their insights in Chapter 2.²² Something which is rarely given full value is that blindness is not a static thing: for most people, it is an ongoing process, with a rollercoaster of emotions that accompany it – denial, anger, grief, loss and acceptance. Stories about sight loss usually end with some sort of resolution: in contrast, for people experiencing sight loss, there often is no neat ending. Despite that lack of resolution, small changes and professional support, better lighting, a change of spectacles, and a closer working distance can change a tragedy into a story that the person can live with. In the context of literature, detail learned from lived experience can move fiction from stereotype - from a position where the person with sight loss is a two-dimensional metaphor - a little closer to authenticity.

Seeing Red by Lina Meruane, a Chilean novelist, essayist and journalist traces the struggle of a young writer with diabetic eye disease, a condition which leaves her blind for a period of time while she awaits further medical intervention.²³ Described by reviewers as autofiction or ‘between fiction and memoir’, this tale is clearly and firmly rooted in reality, and it convey sight loss beautifully and powerfully gives one of the best written experiences of sight loss that I have come across, with vibrant language and insightful analysis. Lina Meruane explains her motivation in writing the book and clarifies the distinction between fiction and her own experiences:

As the event of losing sight, temporarily, had occurred to me some ten years previous to my writing of the novel, my interest in telling this story was not to bear witness of the event. I was not interested in the genre of memoir, and my personal story is only there in the bits that were useful to the novel. I had become interested in reflecting on how other people relate - or refuse to relate - to the sightless, on how other senses are lost when sight is interrupted, on how everything one remembers remains utterly visual, and how memory operates in a blindness of sorts (we are never looking at what we are remembering, therefore, all writers write as blind people!) I particularly wanted to examine how blind people are perceived in our

²² Bolt p.35

²³ Lina Meruane, ed. Megan McDowell *Seeing Red* (Dallas: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2016)

culture --society thinks of the disabled as *unable*, and *dependent*, but in fact people who lose something are quite strong and learn to use everything around them, including others. I asked myself how far this use might go, and where use turned into abuse. This is the real theme of my novel, *power*.²⁴

Issues of power and autonomy, clearly visible in Meruane's work, also run through any dialogues about disability and sight loss. These concerns of autonomy lead me to investigate the areas of crossover between writing about blindness and postcolonial theory.²⁵ In chapters 2 and 3, where I analyse writing about sight loss, written by people who have experienced sight loss, I will adopt a postcolonial stance, and try to look from the perspective of the minority, through the eyes of those who are seen as other. This postcolonial paradigm is mirrored in my novel, *Blindsided*, where readers follow the story of a woman who loses her sight, her identity and her power, and so is forced to explore herself as other. This theme also appears in *Seeing Red* where Meruane writes into her experience of sight loss, moving from memoir to novel in the process of writing, writing from the perspective of the disempowered.

Beyond sight loss, both Meruane's work and *Blindsided* also examine the multiple layers of modern postcolonial identities. Protagonist Lina is Palestinian-Chilean in the US, while *Blindsided's* Nour is a British Egyptian who has grown up in London and loses her sight in Mali. These multi-layered, multi-cultural, multi-lingual identities enable a perspective whereby readers can consider what it means to identify as other, what it means to live a hybridised split existence. Nour is forced to examine the way she is perceived by different people, as well as her internal view of herself. Postcolonial theory will, I hope, shed light on how we can see things differently, how we can give equal weight to those who have been marginalised.

Postcolonialism embeds theory in real-world experience and values a different kind of knowledge compared to that traditionally ranked most highly within the academy. Chapter 2 emphasizes the act of synthesizing personal experience with academic work; that chapter will disclose how three academics seek to change the terms of the intellectual encounter to one where 'insurgent knowledges' are of equal value to theory.²⁶ Some of the strongest works on sight loss are rooted in reality – such as Meruane's, Borges', and Georgina Kleege's work referenced in Chapter 2 -

²⁴ Personal correspondence between Lina Meruane and Antonia Chitty, 2017

²⁵ Telling a story is also a way of exerting power, as exemplified by Sheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights*. The power of narrative is discussed further in Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984)

²⁶ For a discussion of Foucault's conception of the knowledge-power nexus see Michael Rectenwald, 'Postmodernism, the Academic Left, and the Crisis of Capitalism' *Journal of Communist Theory and Practice* 11 March 2013 <http://insurgentnotes.com/tag/michel-foucault/> [accessed 6 December 2019].

creating a counter discourse to those authors whose two-dimensional 'blind' characters are purely there to make a plot point.

As Robert Young writes, postcolonial theory is “[n]ot so much about static ideas or practices, as about the relations between ideas and practices,” which makes it the ideal theoretical background for a practice-based creative writing thesis.²⁷ By writing a novel, I want to challenge readers’ thoughts and preconceptions about sight loss, identity, and how we help others, particularly in the context of aid and disability. This is significant for me because writing this book has made me challenge my own ideas. Just like a classic protagonist, the novel needs to be a change agent. Embodying postcolonialism, *Blindsided* aims to threaten privilege, power, and preconceived ideas, questioning the order of the world through struggle.

Another important strand of postcoloniality is exploring oppositional systems and hybridity. Analysing Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Nigerian critic and novelist Chinua Achebe argues that the book displays “the desire - one might indeed say the need - in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.”²⁸ Being turned into an object, becoming subject to a deriding gaze, feeling that one is other, or less than the norm: one may wonder whether this is the experience of someone who lives in a colonised nation, someone who has lost their sight, or both. As one example of hybridity, *Blindsided*’s narrative is interested in the complex, layered realities of life in different parts of Mali, in Banjul and in Alexandria, just as much as in London, rather than using Africa as shorthand for some exotic other. In the same way, the characterisation of a protagonist with sight loss needs to be fully rounded rather than simply a two-dimensional sidekick: by studying the works of writers who have experienced sight loss, I aim to disrupt binary oppositions and uncover the need for academics to view sight loss as a continuum. All human beings are somewhere on a scale of sight which fails over time, as our crystalline lenses harden and our near focus diminishes. This is true even before one considers the impact of sight threatening eye conditions: in time, cataracts will cloud all our vision, should we live long enough. The potential imminence of sight loss is something which the protagonist in *Seeing Red* has lived with since childhood, something which several of the academic writers in Chapter 2 experience, and something which Nour discovers in her time in Mali. The need to be seen as someone who sees differently, rather than as blind or other, resonates with postcolonial theory.

²⁷ Robert JC Young *Postcolonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p.7

²⁸ Chinua Achebe, ‘An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*’ *The Massachusetts Review*, 57. 1, (2016), pp.14-27. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/mar.2016.0003](https://doi.org/10.1353/mar.2016.0003) [accessed 14 December 2019]

By writing this novel and paper, and by presuming to underpin it with postcolonial theory, I recognize my need to internalize Indian scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's central concern in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* She asks whether, by positioning themselves as critic, as writer, "the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow."²⁹ I need to ask whether, by writing this novel, this paper, I am silencing others, however much I want to act as a voice for the voiceless. Can my efforts to write from the point of view of the colonised, to write outside my tribe, be truly effective? That is, can I write beyond my educated white privilege, reshape my experiences, and meld them with reading and research to become something else? In doing this, I need to hold up postcolonial hybridity against the double-layered nature of the writer as observer, the writer as the person with their own experience, the writer/protagonist as foreigner and stranger. I need to interrogate my own assumptions as I write; I have to acknowledge that my insight into sight loss will always be incomplete.

Furthermore, as I write, I must also address this issue of cultural appropriation. Sociologically speaking, one can define cultural appropriation as a form of colonialism where members of a dominant culture copy and use outside their original context elements of a minority culture. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), which first included it in 2017, cultural appropriation is "the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society."³⁰ This phenomenon has grown to a situation where writers are questioned for writing outside their own culture. Speaking at the 2019 Hay Festival, Booker prize-winning author Bernadine Evaristo spoke against the ideas of cultural appropriation, stating that authors should not be prevented from writing "beyond your own culture."³¹ Indeed, her most recent novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, puts the reader in the mind of protagonists who are men, women, straight, queer, those who reject an assigned gender, black, and white. Similarly, in an essay, "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction," Zadie Smith explains her own fascination with writing others: "And for years now, in the pages of novels, 'I' have been both adult and child, male and female, black, brown, and white, gay and straight, funny and tragic, liberal and conservative, religious and godless,

²⁹ Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' In Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press 1988)

³⁰ OED Online. December 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://0-www-oed-com.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/view/Entry/45742?redirectedFrom=cultural+appropriation> [accessed 12 January 2020].

³¹ Unattributed. 'Bernadine Evaristo claims cultural appropriation a 'total nonsense' *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 December 2019 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/12/02/bernadine-evaristo-claims-cultural-appropriation-total-nonsense/> [accessed 27 July 2020].

not to mention alive and dead.” As an author, I too am attempting to slide into another’s skin, to stand alongside them as close as a shadow.

Smith suggests that the very word-choice of “cultural appropriation” sets up assumptions:

What would our debates about fiction look like, I sometimes wonder, if our preferred verbal container for the phenomenon of writing about others was not ‘cultural appropriation’ but rather ‘interpersonal voyeurism’ or ‘profound-other-fascination’ or even ‘cross-epidermal reanimation?’³²

Smith writes against the idea of only writing about people like us, that “only an intimate authorial autobiographical connection with a character can be the rightful basis of a fiction.” If authors did indeed stay in their own lane, then books would be limited to fiction about single cultures, populated by people with uniform beliefs. This would render much modern fiction impossible to write. By contrast, Smith addresses the important issue of writing based on personal experience, calling it “safer ground,” an experience that can be displayed but not shared.³³ In the context of this paper, personal experience is key to some of the most powerful and insightful writing about sight loss, but experience and autobiography does not exist to the exclusion of fiction.³⁴ In the same way, like any author, I hope to take my experiences of living in London, volunteering in the Gambia, visiting Egypt, and my time working with people with sight loss, and blend those experiences with what I have learnt while reading works by people with sight loss. I have attempted to combine this into something which has a value greater than the sum of its parts. I want to avoid using sight loss as a plot device or a blind person as a foil for a sighted protagonist. I am wary of appropriating sight loss for easy narrative and symbolic ends. Thus, in this novel and paper, I aim to write in a way that acknowledges phenomenological texture and bodily reality; I want to navigate the fine line that allows *Blindsided* to be an act of imaginative empathy.

Fiction can be a way of understanding others. Moreover, fiction about sight loss can take readers into an unfamiliar bodily experience. Zadie Smith tells authors to “be motivated by love and intimate knowledge instead of prejudice and phobia.” How do we acquire this intimate knowledge? It can come from personal experience, but if one reads much of the literature cited in this paper, authors develop their insight by reading, listening and considering others’ experiences alongside their own. Smith adds, “Our social and personal lives are a process of continual fictionalization, as we internalize the other-we-are-not, dramatize them, imagine them, speak for them and through

³² Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction’ *New York Review of Books*, 24 October 2019 <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/> [accessed 31 December 2019].

³³ Ibid

³⁴ I will later explore in more depth Lina Meruane’s *Seeing Red* which started as memoir but morphed into fiction.

them.”³⁵ This is where I hope that all my reading, both of postcolonial theory and of literature about sight loss, will combine into an addition to our knowledge.

It is clear from the multitude of books which I have read - both memoir and fiction, those which I have mentioned in this paper and those which I have not - that blindness is not univocal. Rather, it is polysemous. Every book we read, every film or play we watch, gives us a different experience of blindness, just as every person who loses his or her sight will experience it differently. A stereotype is “a preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person, situation, etc.; an attitude based on such a preconception. Also, a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type.”³⁶ It is easy to think of stereotypes of blindness. As a medical professional, as a human being, in reading diverse novels and essays on the topic, I can aim to achieve a better understanding of people’s vastly different experiences of sight loss. I will be returning to *Seeing Red* later in this paper; for now, Lina Meruane says, “My book is not a thesis and thus, I did not write this book with the idea of teaching any reader anything specific... I only hope different readers take away different ideas and reflections about the loss of sight and the uses and abuses of love and medicine.”

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ ‘Stereotype’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <https://0-www-oed-com.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/view/Entry/189956?rskey=xsFhzP&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> [accessed 18 August 2020].

Chapter 1 *Blindsided, a reflection*

“The story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences. Its (in)finity subverts every notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one... The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess.”³⁷

This chapter assesses the critical background to *Blindsided*, examining how the book reflects the violence of colonisation, and how the book is driven by postcolonial theory. An overarching theme for both *Blindsided* and this paper is the importance of individual experience to give context to theories, the importance of fiction as a way to convey experience, and the way that fiction offers the gift of greater understanding of those who the reader may have considered other.

Death, trauma, and otherness run through this chapter and through *Blindsided*. From the way doctors learn to consider patients as other, to the way some different ethnic groups view each other or the way some men view women, this chapter explores how it feels to be seen as other, how it feels when you understand that is how others see you. It also examines unprocessed trauma in the face of sight loss and the loss of self-identity.

In the second part of this chapter, I examine how borders and boundaries are necessary for control and power. This is another theme that permeates the novel, where power-imbalances drive the plot. One relevant aspect of this involves the delivery of aid and how gratitude can be a double-edged emotion. This leads to the necessity of moving beyond binaries, to new continua where there

³⁷ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1981) p.2.

is a continuum of seeing, where borders are re-evaluated and people who are different are no longer viewed as other.³⁸

Writing violence, writing death

“The naked truth of decolonisation evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists.”³⁹

A murderous struggle drives the plot of *Blindsided*, as Islamic insurgents aim to seize the north of Mali. The insurgents, who believe that their land is still colonised, use violence to get what they want. Throughout the section of the book set in Mali, ophthalmologist Nour is faced with the personal and more widespread consequences of the violent struggle between the government and a group of Islamic radicals who are trying to carve out a space where they can impose their beliefs, living life in their Islamic utopia.

This story is based on true events, on a struggle that continues to this day. The Mali War started in January 2012 when several insurgent groups began a campaign against the Malian government for autonomy for northern Mali. It is impossible to really understand what happened in the Mali War without being there. It is impossible to know what it feels like to be Tuareg when one is not. News reports, eyewitnesses, and books give one only a small window into the experience. It is a difficult area to report on simply due to its size and inaccessibility: no one person could truly understand everything that had happened. And by necessity *Blindsided* condenses the struggle: it is seen from Nour’s personal and implicitly western perspective.

If we try to look through another’s eyes, we can only experience some part of what they see. Fiction plays a role in the development of empathy by absorbing facts and presenting them through

³⁸ For an interesting discussion of the evolution of post-colonial theory and the concept of the other, see Afaf Ahmed Hasah Al-Saidi, ‘Post-colonialism Literature, the concept of self and the other in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians: An analytical approach*’ *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 5.1 (2014), pp. 95-105.

³⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001) p. 28.

the eyes of a protagonist. The reader gains understanding in a way that they may not from a stream of reportage. The need to understand individual experience as much as overarching theories recurs in later chapters of this project: it is fiction, and the way that it conveys much more than its basis in fact, that allows us to enter the mind of another, to enter a space of conflict which we could not otherwise visit. It is fiction that drives the engines of human empathy.

Nour goes to Mali confident that she is the seeing subject, and that she can provide altruistic help: “I can’t put the Mali project off. People are depending on me.”⁴⁰ She starts working in a camp delivering eye surgery: issues with the delivery of aid will be addressed later in this chapter. As a Londoner, Nour is unaccustomed to violent conflict, and when she is faced with this war it is sudden, relentless and horrifying. Despite being a doctor, she is not familiar with the bloody face of violent death. The patients who would consult Nour as an ophthalmologist would have sight-threatening but not life-threatening conditions. Furthermore, many doctors develop an unacknowledged coping strategy for dealing with disease and death by considering the patient as ‘other’ and disease as something to which they as a doctor are immune.⁴¹

The first turning point in *Blindsided* occurs when insurgents attack the camp where Nour is working. Camp guard Oumar is fatally wounded, Nour’s partner Adam is knocked to the ground and lies there, apparently dead while Nour is forced to perform surgery. She cuts into the eye of one of the insurgent leaders to remove a traumatic cataract. Once the operation is complete, the rebels seize Nour and leave. These violent actions drive this story forward, impelling Nour down a new and unexpected path. She is taken to the insurgents’ camp in the north of Mali in order to ensure that the surgery she has performed on their leader Yimlul has been successful. Once it is clear that it has worked she is threatened with a violent death herself. Yimlul feels a sense of obligation to her, and saves her life by pointing out that she could be useful in her role as a surgeon. Yimlul’s indebtedness

⁴⁰ Antonia Chitty, *Blindsided*, p. 4.

⁴¹ David Nott, *War Doctor* (London: Picador) p. 37.

is a key factor in his later actions as well as in this decision; it resonates with the sense of obligation felt by a post-colonial nation, fuelling his anger and violent acts.

Nour is set to work treating men who are injured in battle, a role for which she is ill-prepared. This situation challenges her beliefs about death, as she is faced with wounds inflicted by violence to a far greater extent than in her brief time as a junior doctor in a London emergency department. In this coerced position, Nour must carry out operations which are nothing at all like the eye surgery she is used to. Her expectations are destroyed, as she is forced to deal with traumatic injuries:

She had never seen the effect of trauma on skin, the shock of splintered bone, never smelled the stink of the human body sliced open, the cooked meat smell of burns and the stench of perforated bowels, and she wished for surgical gloves, wished she could call on someone senior who knew what they were doing, wished she could say, 'I don't know how to do this.' She had forgotten this blood, these guts, but now she couldn't forget. There were bodies in her dreams.⁴²

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* speaks strongly to the themes in *Blindsided*. It focuses on the necessary role of violence in decolonisation. Fanon felt that the revolution would be led by peasants and social outcasts. The mix of the men in the insurgent group, reflects both this and the complex interaction Fanon saw between class and race. The group is driven against the postcolonial West African bourgeoisie as much as it is for the spread of Islamism. By working for this group, Nour initially deals with the bodies of strangers, but she gets to know her captors. Eventually she is forced to watch as Iken, one of the men assigned to guard her over several months, dies. "Then one day it was Iken who was carried back, bleeding. He died, no need to shoot him, died writhing beneath her hands, crying for help."⁴³

Death runs rampant throughout the novel. Nour is taken from the eye camp, leaving Adam possibly unconscious, possibly dead. This occupies her mind for a while, but it becomes something she can't cope with: "After those first few weeks when she would have given anything to know if he

⁴² Chitty, p. 43.

⁴³ Chitty, p. 62.

was dead or alive, she had stopped thinking about him. She hadn't considered if he might have survived, returned to London, to work, to build a new life, couldn't imagine it at all."

Under the onslaught of violence and death, Nour loses much of her ability to imagine what is going on outside her own situation and cannot process the violence she sees. Nour's experience resonates with Cathy Caruth's explanations of trauma: "... the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time..."⁴⁴

In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness.⁴⁵

Nour's mourning for Adam fails under this assault and becomes a foreign body in her psyche, a 'psychic no-man's-land or blind-zone' which causes new difference within Nour, piling on top of the buried trauma she experienced from her escape from Egypt as a child.⁴⁶ From the age of six as she grew up in London, Nour worked hard to fit in, to avoid being other. Blind-zones, seeing without knowing, reverberate through Nour's experience as I will later discuss, as she is raped, and as she loses her sight. Beyond this, the onslaught of violence attacks Nour's constructed identity. In a similar vein, Fanon warned of difficulties facing African nations once independence was won: Nour lived through a small part of these in her childhood as Muslims persecuted her Coptic Christian family but she was sheltered from it by her youth, and grew up to largely identify as a Londoner. In *Blindsided* she experiences for herself the ongoing battle for land, for cultural and religious domination in the northern Sahara. This forces her to explore her heritage, to peel back the layers of her identity as British, as a doctor, and to uncover what little she remembers about where she came from.

⁴⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995) p.4

⁴⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996) pp.91-92

⁴⁶ Maria Yassa, 'Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok: The Inner Crypt' *Scandinavian Psychoanalytical Review* 25.2 (2002)

All the time she sat with the men she had the feeling she was no longer Nour. She had come from Egypt via England because of men like these. The men around her had travelled from places like Algeria and Libya. Some, like her, had been forced to leave their homes because of what they believed. Some of them had been born in Mali, been mercenaries in North Africa before returning south, but that didn't mean anything because their nomadic heritage cared little for borders, and maybe she should care less that this wasn't part of her life plan. Maybe she should care less that these men were Muslims and she was a Christian.⁴⁷

She sees the differences between herself and the others but starts to recognise the similarities too. Similarly, Fanon was himself regarded as other, alien, inferior, frightening, dangerous; thus, his writing reflects his experiences as a man and as a doctor. "If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger in his own environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalisation."⁴⁸ And as we discover later, Nour's experiences bear a striking resemblance to Fanon's, for she is unable to solve the eye health issues she thought she was there to address, and uncovers a whole new set of issues to consider.

In London, in medical school, Nour had created a self that was accepted. The occasions where she was not accepted remain stark in her mind in Mali, even when it might seem that her current circumstances would outweigh them. For instance,

Adam's parents hadn't really understood when she wanted to go to church with them, didn't seem to really believe that she could be a Christian too, certainly didn't understand that was why her parents had moved to England. She wondered if they would have been happier if she had worn a hijab and talked about Allah, because that would have been a solid reason to tell Adam she wasn't suitable. As it was, they hadn't been able to fault her profession or her education or her beliefs, and they couldn't openly criticise her class or race, so it had to be more subtle.⁴⁹

At this later point, kidnapped, forced into an entirely new community, Nour evaluates which of the things that she thought defined her matter, and which ones do not. She has built her identity on being a British doctor, and while the insurgents do not view her nationality as a positive, her surgical skills were the reason she was kidnapped, and are the reason she is kept alive:

Wararni narrowed his eyes and assessed her. He shook his head then turned away.
'Deal with her.'

⁴⁷ Chitty, p. 46.

⁴⁸ Homi Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon' in *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. xi.

⁴⁹ Chitty, p. 49.

'She could be useful.'

'She's a risk.'

Nour's nails cut into her palms as she strained to understand their rapid words, sweat making her skin soft and damp.

'What if we need her again, if there are problems with my eye, if someone else needs surgery?'

Wararni was silent.

'She could treat the injured,' Yimlul said, looking at Nour. She nodded, hopeful that if she agreed she might live.⁵⁰

Forced to make a promise she cannot keep, her internal conflict grows. Although her skills have put her in peril, have saved her life, in other ways her education means little to the insurgents. Because she is a woman and a westerner, she is inferior. More than that, she is a risk as her presence could attract African Union forces. The skills she acquired to live and succeed as a doctor in London, even as a doctor on the project in Mali, do not protect her in the Sahara. Yimlul proposes another way to protect her, however, a way that challenges her identity as someone who controls her own destiny and who is used to believing that she enters relationships as an equal. In Mali, with the insurgents, in a patriarchal system held up by weapons, physical strength and the capacity to commit violent acts, she has lost her power: "You would have died before now without me, when you tried to escape. Wararni doesn't want you here. It's another risk having a western woman. You would be safer if you were properly mine."⁵¹

Fanon's words at the start of this chapter speak strongly to Nour's story as she tries to reconcile her backgrounds, her own beliefs about what she could achieve in Mali, her desire to help with the reality of a violent struggle and the violent opposition between insurgents and Government forces. The differences within her resurge and simmer as she is faced by the differences between her and the men she is with, and between them and their opponents. In line with Fanon's systemic negation of the person, Nour gradually loses her sense of being invincible, of being in control, as her experiences unravel the confidence she had developed through her education and training. When

⁵⁰ Chitty, p.39.

⁵¹ Chitty, p.63.

faced with men with gut wounds, she does not know enough to help them - she wants to admit her fallibility - but there is no consultant to whom she can pass the patient. Finally, she stops trying to solve all the problems brought to her; she realises the limits forced upon her by her situation and accepts them.

In amongst all the men, one day someone brought in a woman, bleeding and oozing from her cervix where she had tried to abort her baby. Nour struggled to focus, knew that she was no gynaecologist, knew she couldn't save her from the infection that was dissolving her body from the inside out. She shook her head and turned away.⁵²

In this moment, though, one can see that Nour does not simply accept her limits as a doctor: she also loses the belief that, if she tries hard enough, everything is possible. She fails to help a woman who has committed a violent act on her own body, caused by an act of violence on her body by an unknown man. Nour accepts that some things are beyond her, beyond her control. Furthermore, as she later loses her sight, is rescued, and returned to the UK, Nour loses her confidence and her profession, and becomes a patient and recipient of care.

The next part of the chapter examines boundaries, aid and colonisation, and how Nour moves through trauma to discover a new, changed self.

“Decolonisation never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally.”⁵³

Writing borders, writing blind

Nour's life is changed by sight loss. Even when she regains some sight, she is not the same. Her body demonstrates the legacy of her experiences: “Her wrists were circled too, with scars that would fade from sight but not in her mind.”⁵⁴

⁵² Chitty, p. 62.

⁵³ Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001) p. 28.

⁵⁴ Chitty, p.183.

Enforced borders are a part of colonisation: if one reads a map of Mali, one can discern the arbitrariness of the straight line cutting through the Sahara. The insurgent group in *Blindsided* includes many Tuareg people, a nomadic race that has struggled since colonial and postcolonial bureaucracy imposed borders on their domain. The Tuareg people have been forced to settle in areas where it is hard to survive, and are under attack from different ethnic and religious groups. Borders in the Sahara are often impossible to demarcate and hard to police. Although the climate is hard, its atmosphere of relative lawlessness makes it the ideal place for the insurgents. Colonisation, a history where land is seized by a show of force, implies that lands can be taken and retaken, and people can too.

Nour crosses borders and boundaries throughout the book. In childhood, as a result of one group trying to impose their religion on another, she travels from Egypt to the UK where her Egyptian identity becomes lost and she feels like a Londoner. She chooses to cross borders when she goes into Mali to deliver aid. When kidnapped, she is forced to cross boundaries between the supposedly safe part of the country and the rebel-held north. The insurgent group races across borders between regions and countries when their stronghold is breached, taking Nour with them. While she is with the insurgents, she dances along a perilous boundary with Yimlul, unsure whether she can become truly part of his group by becoming his wife. She is aware that if she accepts his offer she is voluntarily giving up her final remnants of power, a line she is unwilling to cross. When he rapes her, he breaches her body; by doing so, he also breaks through any final trace of belief that her knowledge, power, or identity will protect her. For Nour, it is the moment where she is “forced to acknowledge her social status as a sex object”, when she becomes an object rather than the seeing subject.⁵⁵ In that instant, for Yimlul, Nour is both desired and also part of the colonisers. Yimlul acts as Fanon writes, “that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden

⁵⁵ Jenny Sharpe, ‘Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency,’ in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 223.

quarters.”⁵⁶ Yimlul colonises Nour’s body, leaving indelible marks, in the same way that he wants to take control of land, with the anger that he has against those who have colonised it.

Does Yimlul’s rape of Nour successfully contend with “the discourse of power capable of reducing anticolonial struggle to the pathological lust of dark-skinned men for white women” as Jenny Sharpe writes when examining the possible rape in *A Passage to India*?⁵⁷ Moreover, how does this sit in a post-colonial context? Of all the men in the camp, Yimlul has the most education, has lived in England, and most importantly speaks to Nour as a person. Thus, she identifies most closely with him. They have both crossed geographic and linguistic boundaries and begun to explore what this means for their identity.

Yimlul walks a line of desire and control in his relationship with Nour. She is in his power from the moment that his eye regains vision and she is no longer needed as a surgeon. Nonetheless, he wants and needs to control her, to possess her, a drive tempered by gratitude and a bond with her as the person who has saved his sight. He sees her as someone who has the power to grant vision; thus, he takes risks for her, but gratitude is a double-edged emotion, fuelling both attraction and resentment. With this complex set of motives, he gives Nour positive attention and brings her gifts of medical supplies, but beats her when she tries to escape. He manipulates her awareness that her life is under his control: she battles against giving into what he wants until he takes her agency as sexual being without her consent.

Debt and dependency drive Yimlul’s actions, not just against Nour but also in his cadre’s struggle to take land and impose religion. He takes on the motivation of a nation, and demonstrates the problematic outcome of being put in a position where one is expected to display gratitude. His actions emerge after years of colonisation where there is no way to assuage the feeling of having received something for which one cannot make the usual exchange of thanks. This takes place in the

⁵⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 31.

⁵⁷ Jenny Sharpe, ‘Unspeakable Limits of Rape,’ in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, p. 228.

context that the colonised are positioned as having nothing to offer, while at the same time the colonisers hide what they are taking from the land and its people. In aid camps like the one where Nour was working, foreign aid organisations deliver healthcare in a stark setting where choice is absent. In a similar way, blindness at a relatively early age is a hard-hitting reality that circumscribes many people's ability to earn money and to feed themselves and their families. In such a situation, a feeling of gratitude followed by indebtedness is almost inevitable.

In *Blindsided*, Nour works with a team to offer cataract and other eye surgery, giving her patients the gift of sight. Modern day cataract surgery involves removing an opacified crystalline lens from inside the eye and replacing it with a plastic version. In less than an hour, someone can go from blind to sighted. Generally, no payment is asked for in an aid camp: however, the recipient can attempt to annul the gift by offering thanks, but this balance depends on seeing the person who provided the surgery after the event, speaking a language that both can understand, and feeling that words of thanks are sufficient in exchange for the gift of sight.

I propose that this situation of surgery as charitable act perpetuates a feeling of indebtedness and consequent inadequacy. The gift of sight can become a burden on the individual, as well as a cumulative burden on a nation which knows that its people are losing sight unnecessarily when it does not have the resources to prevent or treat eye disease. This cumulative burden is augmented by the traditional structure of aid programmes, based on a colonial attitude whereby the colonising nation has all to give and the colonised nation is left feeling it has nothing to offer in return. This toxic arrangement manipulates the true situation because the coloniser often benefits from access to labour and raw materials from which it then reaps the profits. In the novel the charity works on this outmoded model: through her experiences in Mali, Nour realises that her initial concerns about being unable to meet her patients' need cannot be redressed by one person, or by one charity providing care: instead, individuals and charities need to listen to the people in each

country and region, discover what they need, and supply the support required to create systematic change, as in international charity Sightsavers' strategy for eye health.⁵⁸

In a post-colonial situation, it is vital to recognise that a gift is not always a gift, and help is not always what people need. Aid delivery requires a postcolonial change in approach from a paradigm wherein organisations travel to a country to supply services and then leave, to one which considers what people in the country need and want, and how to help them develop infrastructure and skills which can be passed on to others.⁵⁹ What is more, the colonial legacy must be considered in the context of a nationwide sense of indebtedness. This indebtedness is not merely fuelled by aid projects' delivery of healthcare but by the whole way that colonisation treated exchanges between coloniser and colonised. While no one can argue against the value of restoring sight to an individual, *Blindsided* aims to enable readers to take a broader view of the need for universal access to health care, and in particular the need for governments to be supported to develop this infrastructure.

Let us return to the borders at the heart of this section: boundaries and borders have two sides. Fanon writes, "The colonial world is a world cut in two."⁶⁰ Two parts sets up an oppositional binary, a fundamental of colonisation which still exists in countries struggling with post-coloniality. I aim to encapsulate this within *Blindsided*. Nour starts off with the idealistic belief that there is no opposition, but in the process of crossing boundaries, she loses her beliefs, her identity. She thinks she is the subject, but within the insurgents' camp she becomes not just a "signifier for otherness", but she herself is put into the position of the other.⁶¹ She is forced to face multiple oppositions: in

⁵⁸Governments will ensure that quality eye care is universally available to all people as an integral part of wider health systems. Sightsavers sees this aspiration being met by a combination of: Governments providing these services themselves and/or; Governments fostering the conducive political, legislative, policy and economic environment which will allow other organisations to develop and sustain these services in a manner which is accessible to all members of the community including the poor, socially marginalised, and disabled. Sightsavers will work with and advocate with governments and all relevant stakeholders to support and strengthen health systems and provide policy support and guidance to make these objectives achievable Sightsavers' Eye Health Strategy 2013 – 2018 p.4 retrieved from www.sightsavers.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/21357_EyeHealth_Strat_Web.pdf [accessed 4 February 2019].

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 29.

⁶¹Jenny Sharpe, 'Unspeakable Limits of Rape,' in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, p. 226.

her life with the insurgents there is opposition between races and between genders, where she is most often a minority of one. Furthermore, the insurgents' entire purpose is based on opposition to the ruling government, to the principles which allow people to choose their own religious beliefs.

Difference is an essential element of political control of one over another; thus, these oppositional binaries are necessary for those who want to be in power. Power shifts dramatically within *Blindsided*. Nour starts off with a firm belief that she has power as a doctor, as a giver of aid; her kidnapping strips her of this sense of agency. She is given recognition in the camp for her skills, at times treated like one of the group - like a man - but this power is precarious and can be taken from her at any time. Moreover, this fragile power is torn from her when she is tied up, raped, and loses her sight. In response to this act of exposure, Nour cuts her hair off, in a symbolic and futile attempt to retake control of her body and identity. The men in the camp do not notice her hair; furthermore, soon after she loses the ability to see.

On her return to London, Nour is forced across a boundary for which she is unprepared, as she is moved from doctor to patient within the hospital system. "'I'm not ill,' she said, despite the continuing shivering. She started to fumble with the cuff of the blood pressure machine. 'I don't need a hospital.'"⁶²

In this central section of the book, when she is living with impaired vision, Nour discovers that even her body is not hers; she no longer has that power of choice. No longer seen as a doctor, she is excluded from her own case conference while Adam is invited:

'...he did have the case conference, and everyone seemed to be in agreement, and you've got some of the top ophthalmologists there.'

'And you all talked about me?'

'Anonymously, of course. It was kind of him to let me sit in.'

⁶² Chitty, p.85.

It rankled that they had discussed her in her absence, that they let Adam sit in, that no-one had thought to ask her. Right now, her qualifications counted for nothing.⁶³

Nour takes the first steps to set up boundaries of her own, to move on from the place where she has no control. Rather than letting Adam manage her life, she cooks herself a meal, taking charge of what she consumes. She refuses sex with Adam, reclaiming her body as her own.

And she didn't have to say yes ...She had a choice.

'I'm not ready for that, Adam,' she said, and her voice came out clear and firm, didn't betray any of the doubts she felt inside. "I don't know when I will be. And," she paused, "if that's a problem, maybe I should move out.'⁶⁴

By refusing Adam, she is also refusing to be saved, refusing to play a part in what Spivak describes as white men saving brown women from brown men. In her refusal to be rescued, she reclaims power: she is the one who can save herself, just as a nation needs to rebuild itself after colonisation. Nour changes her perspective on what she went out to Mali to do as she begins to understand the chasm between the mechanical act of surgery to restore her sight, and the psychological work of rebuilding her identity. Adam cannot do this for her; rather, she finds that she needs to do it by herself.

At the start of the book, Nour believes that she empathises with her patients, but this belief is ripped to shreds when she loses her sight and realises how little she understood. Readers can see the divide between people who are sighted and people who are blind can be viewed as a binary opposition. For a while Nour believes her life is worth less, or even worthless, without sight. Her power has rested in her ability to see others, to examine them and treat the cause of their sight loss. Without sight, she feels her life is meaningless until, with time and support, she finds a way to regain some of her identity, to rebuild a new one.

Perception discloses two states of being - sighted and blind - but moving beyond the binary, Nour discovers that sight loss, blindness, does not mean total darkness:

'How much can you see?'

⁶³ Chitty, p.136.

⁶⁴ Chitty, p.164.

She stopped, took her hand from his arm waved her hand in front of her face. 'Hand movements, maybe counting fingers in the left eye on a good day.'⁶⁵

She could see the window, a glare of evening light still shining in which obliterated all the detail from the room.⁶⁶

This is something she knew before, but academic knowledge is not the same as lived experience. For instance, consider Nour's new understanding of night-time

She had thought, if she had considered it at all, that night time might be easier for the blind. No glare, no advantage in having sight. But she hadn't perceived the value of small clues for the sighted: the night time shimmer on a hard edge, the reflections of moonlight and streetlights and the tiny glimmer that came from the light on the stove and the fridge and the DVD player. All gone, now. Night was properly dark in a way that the day never was. She was blind, sure, but day was a constant dance with shards of light slanting into her vision, making her wince and stumble. Blind didn't mean black, not during the day. She saw edges and shadows and sometimes they lied, like when she spent the day hidden under the bed because there was someone in the hallway, just because Adam had hooked a jacket over the lounge door. Dark on light on light on dark, shadows lied, and friends were no longer friends.⁶⁷

Her new paradigm of night-time is not the only revelation Nour experiences. As Nour's beliefs and understanding shift, she also re-examines her understanding of death, the ultimate other. Nour's acceptance of death is challenged not only by life with the insurgents but also when she needs a corneal transplant and realises that the restoration of her sight is based on someone else's death. Corneas can be 'banked' - removed, processed, and frozen until needed - but there is still a gap between demand and supply, still a wait for surgery, still the requirement for someone to have died. "The donor was dead already, could have been dead some time because corneas weren't like other organs, could be frozen for months if needed."⁶⁸

Accepting a part of someone else's body into your own body challenges identity and self-knowledge. It can be likened to Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection, the human reaction of horror when there is a loss of the distinction between self and other, between subject and object, causing a

⁶⁵ Chitty, p.91.

⁶⁶ Chitty, p.101.

⁶⁷ Chitty, p. 114.

⁶⁸ Chitty, p. 174.

threatened breakdown in meaning, and pushing one to “the border of my condition as a living being.”⁶⁹

Nour had already experienced human abjection when men died under her hands, the boundary between inside and outside the body ripped through by knife or gun. Similarly, by accepting a corneal transplant she also has to voluntarily accept that her body will be cut open, pieces removed and replaced with something other. The abject has to do with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."⁷⁰

As the story develops, Nour signifies the struggle between binarism and continuum. At times she is a go-between, a mediator, perceived as other by all. Once she has been asked to help in the insurgents' camp, she is no longer entirely a hostage, nor one of the insurgents. During the first part of the novel, Nour becomes powerless: she loses liberty of movement, choice of food, work, and leisure. She even loses the choice to have sex, and finally has her vision taken from her. She becomes a victim of a colonial system, of a group of people with a certain slant on Islamic beliefs and customs, a victim of patriarchy and male violence. She loses agency and autonomy and becomes an object to be rescued. Moreover, back in London, in a location where she first found her power and self-knowledge as an adult, Nour struggles to move from a position of being in-between to a clearly-defined stance. She is still not quite doctor, yet more than patient. Finally, Nour herself becomes composite, her sight only functioning due to a donor cornea from another's corpse.

In the last two chapters of the book, Nour is living with the consequences of her experiences in Mali and of the transplant. While she can see again - while her eye appears healed - she knows that she is no longer the same, that there are new lines, new borders in her body.

⁶⁹ Julia Kristeva *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* trans Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press 1982) p3.

⁷⁰ *ibid* p.4.

“But the coals still burned inside her because her cornea wasn’t hers anymore and if an ophthalmologist were to examine her eyes with a slit lamp the fine line dividing alien flesh from her own was all too clear.”⁷¹

By the end of the book Nour feels like a different person from where she began. Physically she has changed, and geographically she has travelled thousands of miles. She has found a new home and has discovered what life is like without the privilege of being a doctor. Her shift in identity reflects the postcolonial situation in the Sahara, where identity, system, and order have been disrupted, as different groups vie for power and do not respect borders, positions, or rules. The rules Nour herself knew, or thought she knew, did not apply in her situation in West Africa; neither do they apply on her return to London, a place where she had hoped to feel at home. Her body, its lines and scars, reflect the personal and geopolitical disruption she has experienced.

Her experiences force readers to ask, is the binary analytic wrong, unavoidable, reductive, or divisive? In later chapters, I will assess David Bolt’s rebuttal of the binary logic of “sighted” versus “blind.” For now, in the context of postcolonialism, which also resonates with issues of ability and disability, if those who are powerless seize power there will still be inequality. Divisions between race and gender, between the sighted and the blind, between the haves and the have-nots, only serve to perpetuate a colonial structure, regardless of who is in charge.

Nour’s body continues to change in the last chapters of the book. She is forced both to accept an alien cornea, and to accept that Yimlul has changed her body forever. This acceptance begins when she finds out that she is pregnant. Once again, her boundaries are eroded as the shape of her body changes. Because she is, in effect, creating a third person, for Nour the binary of male and female will never be the same again. It is in this context that she must make a decision whether to keep the baby, to opt for abortion or for adoption.

⁷¹ Chitty, p.183.

By this point Nour has changed in her mindset, not simply her body. She has lost sight, regained sight, and sees things differently. She is not fully blind, but neither has her sight been fully restored. She is still feeling her way forward, still patient, not quite doctor. Her confidence in who she is has been reshaped. Consequently, the decision she makes about whether to continue with the pregnancy is not the same as the one she might have made if she had found herself pregnant at the start of the book when her career and the need to give help were foremost in her mind.

In deciding to continue with the pregnancy, Nour accepts that she is no longer the same person; her goals are not the same as they used to be, and she is no longer responsible for saving others' sight. The child symbolises something new in Nour's life, a different future she can choose to accept. The child may also represent a vision for what may occur in Mali beyond the scope of the novel, once the violent struggle results in new life. Nour has returned to being the protagonist of her own story, but once she gives birth to the baby, the child becomes its own protagonist. It will write its own story in the same way that those living after colonisation in Mali wish to do.

Chapter 2 *The blind critiquing the blind*

“Do you feel that your own people and country are somehow always positioned outside the mainstream? Have you ever felt that the moment you said the word ‘I’ that ‘I’ was someone else, not you? That in some obscure way, you were not the subject of your own sentence? Do you ever feel that whenever you speak, you have already in some sense been spoken for? Or that when you hear others speaking, that you are only ever going to be the object of their speech?”⁷²

In this chapter I aim to create context which will reflect back on the previous chapter and illuminate the rest of the paper. I do this in the context of Robert Young’s quote, above which sheds light on both the postcolonial experience, and that of people with sight loss. People have written about sight loss for thousands of years, and there are various stereotypes surrounding characters who have a visual impairment. Whether a book, play or film considers a character as a blind seer, or sight loss as punishment, and whether the condition comes with or without connotations of castration, the way people with sight loss are portrayed tends towards a stereotype, as highlighted in the introduction. In this chapter, I draw together some key works assessing both these stereotypes and also the implications these portrayals have for people with visual impairments in real life. There is less focus on colonial theory in this chapter: its initial purpose is to explore the portrayal of sight loss in contemporary literature and culture, and where relevant I link experiences of people with sight loss to those of people living under colonisation.

The three key texts I focus on in this chapter are all written by academics who have experienced sight loss; in the second part of the chapter, I examine how they do or do not interweave their own experiences into academic writing. I do this with caution, remembering Bennett and Royle’s words: “...the relationship between life and work is highly complex and highly mediated, and a key to authorial life is by no means necessarily a key to the literary text.”⁷³ I aim to avoid using the author’s personal anecdotes as a magnifying glass for their intentions.^{74, 75} The words an author puts on a page do more than convey the meaning of a sentence or a paragraph. The way the author writes, their choice of word or phrase, what they include or omit creates further meaning, the conscious mind subject to its unconscious workings. Writing about sight loss in an

⁷² Robert JC Young *Postcolonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p.1.

⁷³ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2009) p.26.

⁷⁴ WK Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ in *Authorship from Plato to the Postmodern: a Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1995)

⁷⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author* in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang 1977)

academic text when you have personal experience of sight loss comes with challenges. We see these challenges faced by Director of the Centre for Culture & Disability Studies David Bolt in his work *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-Reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing*. Professor of theology John Hull recorded his thoughts onto tape in the years after finally losing his remaining vision; he later edited his reflections, to produce the book *Notes on Blindness*. He turns his experiences into stories with a beginning, a middle and an end, reflecting on events a few hours or days later. Memoir is, I would like to suggest, in many ways the fictionalisation of real-life experience. And professor of English Georgina Kleege consciously uses her own experiences while examining sight loss in culture and the phenomenology of blindness, creating a new type of academic writing. By holding these three authors' works up to the light and examining them closely, I aim to uncover something new about writing blindness, about the boundaries among memoir, fiction, and non-fiction writing, and what an author goes through when they include their own experiences of sight loss in their writing. By taking control of the narrative about people with sight loss, these authors become living embodiments of postcolonialism.

Who am I when I can't see / writing blindness, writing me

Writing about sight loss is nothing new, as I discovered during my initial research. From Oedipus and Tiresias's blindings, loss of sight has formed a basis for story for thousands of years. Sight loss can be written as fiction, as the crutch on which narratives "lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight."⁷⁶ Sight loss can be retold as lived experience or memoir. All too often, dating from the Greek myths, it is used as a metaphor, cautionary tale, or threat. In *Sight Unseen*, Georgina Kleege takes a different approach, entwining her lived experience with a critical approach to blindness in culture and an academic assessment of the phenomenology of sight loss.

Kleege's personal experience is the backbone for *Sight Unseen*. She defines her own blindness, defines 'legally blind', and explains that only around 10 per cent of those who are legally blind see nothing. We have the facts, but they are seen through Kleege's own gaze. Kleege dislikes the word impairment, as it, "implies impermanence, and encumbrance that could disappear, but my condition has no cure or treatment." She also doesn't identify with 'low vision' and she continues, "I crave the simplicity of a single, unmodified adjective. Blind."⁷⁷ Her perspective is that for her, sight loss is finite, done, unchanging. She mentions those who tell her, "you are not really blind", referring

⁷⁶David T Mitchell and Sharon L Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2014) p.49 accessed via <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/goldsmiths/detail.action?docID=Created> [accessed 17 April 2019].

⁷⁷Kleege, p.14.

to her peripheral vision, denying her chosen nominal identity. At the same time, she highlights the stigma of being blind, and asks, “So why should I want to label myself in this way?” She outlines how she avoided identifying with being blind from the age of eleven, and says, “I have no memory of losing my sight.” She writes, “the word [blind] bears such a burden of negative connotations and dreaded associations, it can hardly be said to have any neutral, merely descriptive meaning. *Blind* means darkness, dependence, destitution, despair.” Kleege problematises the simplistic identification of blindness with negative emotion and experience.

David Bolt examines sight loss as it appears in more than 40 twentieth-century short stories, novellas, novels and plays in his book *The Metanarrative of Blindness*. He explains why it is critical for all writers to examine how we represent disability, and in particular sight loss, in literature, and how this impacts on the lives of people living with visual impairment:

Readers are implicitly directed to a place in the cultural imagination where the metanarrative of blindness resides. The array of notions is often bizarre but may nonetheless make sense of the text in question. The scenario is in itself problematic but becomes infinitely more so when the same metanarrative is invoked socially, in an endeavour to understand those of us who have visual impairments. It is as though in some minds, in some groups, in some social settings, people become displaced in favour of characters.⁷⁸

Literature (and film, news reports, or social media) shapes the way that people think about those with visual impairments. People with sight loss, often identified as ‘the blind man’ or ‘the blind woman’, lose their individuality and are viewed as a one-dimensional character driven by their lack of sight. This misrepresentation gives all authors an extended duty in their writing about people with sight loss, indeed about anyone with a disability. I will examine this phenomenon in more depth later in this chapter.

In her chapter about blindness and its portrayal in movies, Kleege highlights how film makers often select the narrowest of gazes when portraying characters with sight loss. One cannot have a character who happens to be blind: their sight loss must be their central characteristic. The person with sight loss is rarely the hero, more often a sidekick, at worst an object placed to make a point, highlight a metaphor or otherwise move the plot on for the main character. She writes, “the blind man is never the protagonist... the viewer is never called on to identify with or admire the blind man. Rather, the blind man exists to instruct or illuminate some male companion or friend. The sighted man, like the viewer, watches the blind man in various situations, scrutinises every aspect of his personality, and comes away with some enriching insight, while the blind man remains more or less

⁷⁸ Bolt, *Metanarrative of Blindness*, p.15.

unchanged.”⁷⁹ Kleege’s examples are from film: in literature we can consider Coetzee’s blind girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Kleege describes her as, “an instructive spectacle,” which I expand on later.⁸⁰ While this paper mainly focusses on literature, Kleege’s summation of characters in movies can be held up against the characterisation of people with visual impairments in fiction; these incomplete characterizations are what Kleege, Hull and Bolt are writing against.

The woman in a movie has often been an object for the hero to desire, to observe, and this can happen to the blind man too. Asexual, symbolic of castration, the hero reassures us the blind man is something other – and this resonates with the way colonisers viewed the peoples of the colonised world. The blind woman is often pure object. David Bolt examines the sexualisation of eye symbolism and imagery in relation to the cultural construction of blindness, which he finds problematic: “as eyes become the fundamental focus on the look, stare, and/or gaze, there is a tacit wink from the normate position that both implicates and excludes people who have visual impairments.” He links this to masculine/feminine, ocularcentric/ophthalmocentric⁸¹, and independent/dependent binaries which, he writes, combine, “in a multifaceted symbolic castration that is central to the metanarrative of blindness.” Bolt’s book aims to disrupt these binary oppositions in a way that resonates with postcolonialism, with Robert Young’s words at the start of this chapter.

Returning to the stereotypes of people with visual impairment, the person with sight loss is sometimes endowed with additional skills to compensate in some immeasurable and unlikely way for their sight loss, something that Kleege, Bolt and Hull refer to but in entirely different ways. Bolt is uncomfortable when he occasionally hears something before others, both wanting to accept the plaudit of having super-hearing, while simultaneously rejecting the stereotype. Similarly, John Hull explores his own experience of ‘echo location’, where he can sometimes detect an obstacle that he cannot see:

“I have moments of this much discussed blind experience ever since I lost the sight of my left eye in my seventeenth or eighteenth year. It took the form of a sudden, vivid awareness of an object on my blind side, within a few inches of my head. Stepping out to cross the road I would recoil from something immediately on my left. Glancing round, there would be something like a parked van with ladders extending from the roof which I had not noticed. I have since discovered that this phenomenon is now generally called echo location.”

⁷⁹ Kleege, p.46.

⁸⁰ Kleege, pp.80-1.

⁸¹ Bolt coins the neologism ophthalmocentrism to describe fixations on the instrument of vision, aligning it with exhibitionism, being the object of the look, stare, gaze, while ocularcentrism aligns with scopophilia, the one who looks, stares, gazes.

Hull explains how this sensation developed further once he lost all sight in both eyes, how it is most acute in a quiet environment, and not noticeable at all when he is “travelling on somebody’s elbow.”⁸² Both Bolt and Hull have provided examples of real life experiences which could lead to the perception of the person with sight loss having enhanced senses.

In contrast to Hull and Bolt, Kleege takes issue with the blind seer as a stock character. She writes, “His abilities are less acquired skills than divine gifts, offered to compensate for this sight loss.”⁸³ This adds to the stereotype of people with sight loss in both film and literature, and how the trope of the blind seer continues, centuries after its conception. It is important to consider whether people with sight loss experience enhancement of other senses or if this is a cultural construct reinforced by people’s desire for meaning and the way in which we conjecture coincidence as evidence. For instance, when I worked at the Royal National Institute of Blind People in the 1990s, this was presented as a myth during training. However, reinforcing John Hull’s experience, research confirms that ‘blind’ people can navigate obstacles better than sighted people who are blindfolded, although numbers were small and the participants, who had been blind since birth or early childhood, would have the benefit of years of practice and experience compared to the blindfolded cohort.⁸⁴ ⁸⁵ True or not, presenting characters with sight loss as having enhanced senses needs to be done with care to ensure that neither is this their only noticeable characteristic, nor that they are purely there to drive the plot along, their supersense providing the hero with some advantage or acting to resolve an impasse in the plot.

Kleege sums up the presentation of people with sight loss in films as, “a pretty sorry lot; they are timid, morose, cranky, resentful, socially awkward, and prone to despair,”⁸⁶ but she finds more depth of perception in literature. She starts analysing sight loss as metaphor, as punishment by questioning Oedipus’s act of self-mutilation, then moving on to highlight stories inspired by Oedipus’s tale, such as *Jane Eyre*. Blindness is seen as divine retribution for Mr Rochester. In Rudyard Kipling’s novel *The Light That Failed*, Kleege sees the protagonist’s loss of sight as punishment for political rather than sexual sin, with prescient “implications about the evils of culture’s exploitation of another.”⁸⁷ Looking at these “old stories of blindness,” Kleege says, “They make me weary and

⁸² John M Hull, *Notes on Blindness* (London: Wellcome Collection 2017) pp.13-16.

⁸³ Kleege, p.46.

⁸⁴ AJ Kolarik, AC Scarfe, BCJ Moore, S Pardhan, Blindness enhances auditory obstacle circumvention: Assessing echolocation, sensory substitution, and visual-based navigation. *PLoS ONE* 12.4 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0175750>

⁸⁵ AJ Kolarik, S Cirstea, & S Pardhan, Evidence for enhanced discrimination of virtual auditory distance among blind listeners using level and direct-to-reverberant cues *Exp Brain Res* 224: 623 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00221-012-3340-0>

⁸⁶ Kleege, p.45.

⁸⁷ Kleege, p.70.

afraid. They take Oedipus at his word, and start from the assumption that blindness is both an outwards sign of hidden sin and a punishment worse than death. They show no life after blindness, offer no home to the blind, except that the condition might prove impermanent or that death might come quick.”⁸⁸

More recently in literature, Kleege finds a wave of books where “authors begin to entertain the notion that blindness may be something else, a character-testing physical hardship without moral implications.”⁸⁹ She cites Henry Green’s *Blindness* as a novel where the protagonist comes to terms with a new life without sight, and HG Wells’ *The Country of the Blind* as a story that “startles readers out of complacency by subverting their expectations that blind people in the real world are in fact helpless, passive, and dependent.”⁹⁰ Written almost sixty years later than Wells’ novel, J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* portrays a woman who is blinded by “the Empire’s crack interrogator” who forces her to stare at the prongs of a white-hot metal fork until her retinal cells are damaged. This book is noteworthy because it directly links sight loss with colonisation. Kleege explains that the woman “serves as an instructive spectacle, ocular proof of the Empire’s power to alter a person’s fundamental being without leaving exterior marks.”⁹¹

This is a valuable point worth lingering on for a moment: although Kleege has described the physical disfigurements associated with sight loss, the majority of causes of sight loss remain unseen to human inspection. Without a clever set of lenses, people cannot view damage to retinal cells. Diabetic retinopathy, leaky blood vessels at the back of the eye, is similarly invisible as are changes to the optic nerve head caused by glaucoma. Cataract is only visible when light is directed at a certain angle. These leading causes of sight loss can codevelop insidiously; even the person themselves may be unaware of initial changes that occur inside the eye, before their sight is damaged. Such stealthy changes will, untreated, change someone’s life forever.

Kleege goes on to explore how the girl’s blindness is similar to her own. The act of reading *Waiting for the Barbarians* gives her the words she needed to explain her own experience; thus, literature influences real life. She highlights that the girl does not call herself blind: it is the Magistrate, the book’s protagonist, who names her so. Evaluating the power dynamics between the girl and the magistrate, Kleege writes, “She is alien to him in every way, being not only Barbarian and female but also blind. Her otherness at once attracts and repels him. He repeatedly tries to imagine her visual experience.” She adds, “He is concerned with what the girl represents, but the girl herself

⁸⁸ Kleege, p.73.

⁸⁹ Kleege, p.74.

⁹⁰ Kleege, p.80.

⁹¹ Kleege, pp.80-1.

eludes him. She remains a cipher, a vacancy, a blank.”⁹² Nonetheless, Kleege detects that the girl’s remaining peripheral vision symbolizes the way the Barbarians have been left with the periphery, that they define the edge of the empire. By creating that edge of blindness, the barbarians are defined by the colonisers as ‘other’. In returning the girl to her people the Magistrate takes a journey both literal and metaphorical, but he can only go so far. He struggles with the physical challenges of the travels where the girl does not. They never reach her home, instead meeting a group of Barbarians at some distance. When the Magistrate tries to communicate the girl’s blindness he fails; his language fails him, and the girl rejects his attempts. As Kleege writes, “He uses ‘blind’ to mean ‘helpless victim of oppression’ and ‘object of pity’.” Seizing her own agency, the girl returns to her people, changed, but still herself.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the girl has no name, something which is common to blind characters in literature. This matters, and John Hull offers one perspective on why: “For me, knowing someone hangs upon knowing the name... Around the name I would build up the story of that person. The name is the verbal cue around which that particular story hangs.”⁹³ Without a name, someone lacks identity; they become less of a character, more of a trope, reflecting the two-dimensional sidekicks Kleege decries. Bolt examines this same phenomenon, looking at the trend in literature for characters to be reduced even further to ‘the blind man’ or ‘the blind girl’ when an author fails “to ascribe proper nouns”.⁹⁴ He describes the use of an adjective as part of the character’s name as “spoiled nominal identity” leading to “blindness [being] overtly posited as a key characteristic.”⁹⁵

One specific example of this literary phenomenon occurs in DH Lawrence’s short story, also called *The Blind Man*. In this story, Bertie Reid visits his Cousin Isabel and her husband Maurice, who has been blinded in WW1. Bolt explains that the phrase ‘the blind man’ is used to demonstrate social friction, to exemplify the dis-ease felt by sighted Maurice in Bertie’s presence, evoking a sense of distance. Additionally, in his survey of literature, Bolt notes that “female blind characters are underrepresented” despite the fact that “visual impairment is more prevalent among women”.⁹⁶ Removing someone’s name is a colonial trick too: names that are too hard to say, too heathen, are removed and replaced with names bestowed by the coloniser. This is a way of removing power as well as increasing distance and is reflected in literature where colonised people are represented in a two dimensional way, unnamed, stereotyped, just as the Magistrate sees the blind girl in *Waiting for*

⁹² Kleege, pp.82-3.

⁹³ Hull, p.80.

⁹⁴ Bolt, p.35.

⁹⁵ Bolt, p.36.

⁹⁶ Bolt, pp.49-50.

the Barbarians. In yet another instance, in Raymond Carver's 'Cathedral', readers encounter a character introduced as the blind man. Indeed, these are the first words of the story: "The blind man, an old friend of my wife's", an effective double-distancing, a double othering. Only after five pages do readers discover that the blind man is called Robert, and the protagonist continues to call him the blind man after that. Although the protagonist spends much of the story describing the blind man's appearances and actions, the blind man remains static, and we learn more about the protagonist than about him.⁹⁷

Removing a person's name disturbs the balance of power: hiding someone's physical appearance can do the same thing. While some causes of sight loss are invisible, people who have been born with eye disease or develop it early in life may display physical traits in the way they move or hold their head. Their eyes may be small, their corneas cloudy. Georgina Kleege writes about these visible signs of sight loss: "An astonishing amount of the literature on the 'training' and 'rehabilitation' of the blind deals with appearance, the visible manifestations of blindness. Eliminate 'blindisms;' the experts say, the physical traits to which the blind are allegedly prone – the wobbly neck, uneven posture, shuffling gait, unblinking gaze. Discoloured or bulging eyes should be covered with patches or dark glasses, empty sockets filled with prostheses."⁹⁸ Alongside removing someone's name altogether, or giving them a label, 'the blind woman' or 'Blind Jack', this advice to eliminate blindisms is not done for the benefit of the person with sight loss. It is aimed at addressing the distance and dis-ease that Bolt describes between people with disabilities and those without, by getting the person with sight loss to change. Who is this for? Not the person who cannot see, but for those who observe, a way of reducing their discomfort at those who are different. Removing a name, erasing physical evidence of blindness, adapting someone's identity to fit in with expectations: all these strategies are aimed diminishing the dis-ease of the beholder while simultaneously eroding the identity of the person who is under scrutiny.

Another issue with the presentation of sight loss relates to the level of vision those who are blind are perceived to have. In much of literature, "The blind are without eyesight, divided, presumably, from the sighted by a curtain of blank blackness that is theirs alone."⁹⁹ This mode of presentation of sight loss is both inaccurate, and it others people with sight loss, forming a clear boundary between those who see light and the blind. While John Hull's memoirs take place in the years after he has lost the last remaining vestiges of vision, Georgina Kleege explains her central visual loss, and Jorge Luis Borges, who experienced sight loss later in life, writes that he, "does not

⁹⁷ Raymond Carver, *Cathedral: Stories* (London: Collins, 1984)

⁹⁸ Kleege, p.19.

⁹⁹ Julia Miele Rodas, 'On Blindness', *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 3.2 (2009) pp.117.

see black”, that his sleep is disturbed by, “the greenish or bluish mist, vaguely luminous, which is the world of the blind,” and that, “the world of the blind is not the night that people imagine.”¹⁰⁰ For most people, sight loss comes on gradually, perhaps imperceptibly at first. When sight loss is classified in the UK, both visual field and visual acuity are taken into account, and people with sight loss are able, but not required, to register as severely sight impaired (formerly known as blind) or as sight impaired (previously ‘partially sighted’).¹⁰¹

These statistics demonstrate both the diverse range of vision which is encompassed by blindness: very few people will fall into the category ‘nil perception of light’, which is what is often characterised as ‘blind’ in literature. As Julia Miele Rodas puts it, blindness “is not the dark blank that so many imagine, but is rather a continuum or a variety, with such myriad gradations and such a jumbled diversity of seeing and not-seeing that it becomes virtually impossible to put a finger on one point and to declare, ‘There! That person is sighted, and that one is blind.’”¹⁰² Readers can start to perceive the failings of literature, both ancient and more recent, in the way that people with sight loss have been presented. There is not truly a binary of sighted or blind, a characterisation which increases the representation of people with sight loss as different, as other.

Indeed, physical sight can be a function of privilege: visual impairment can be due to disempowerment and poverty. Refractive error – long sightedness, short-sightedness or astigmatism – is something that many in the global North take for granted can be ameliorated by the provision of a pair of spectacles. However, there is a growing awareness that in many parts of the world, people

¹⁰⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, *Blindness*, (New York: Viking 1999) p.474.

¹⁰¹ To be certified as **severely sight impaired (blind)**, your sight has to fall into one of the following categories, while wearing any glasses or contact lenses that you may need:

- Visual acuity of less than 3 / 60 with a full visual field.
- Visual acuity between 3 / 60 and 6 / 60 with a severe reduction of field of vision, such as tunnel vision.
- Visual acuity of 6 / 60 or above but with a very reduced field of vision, especially if a lot of sight is missing in the lower part of the field.

To be certified as sight impaired (partially sighted) your sight has to fall into one of the following categories, while wearing any glasses or contact lenses that you may need:

- Visual acuity of 3 / 60 to 6 / 60 with a full field of vision.
- Visual acuity of up to 6 / 24 with a moderate reduction of field of vision or with a central part of vision that is cloudy or blurry.

Visual acuity of 6 / 18 or even better if a large part of your field of vision, for example a whole half of your vision, is missing or a lot of your peripheral vision is missing. Royal National Institute of Blind People, ‘The criteria for certification’ <https://www.rnib.org.uk/eye-health/registering-your-sight-loss/criteria-certification> [accessed 11 May 2019].

¹⁰² Julia Miele Rodas, ‘On Blindness’ p.117.

are left functionally blind due to lack of assessment and appliances.¹⁰³ Beyond this, lack of access to simple and straightforward cataract surgery can curtail a person's ability to earn, and even with surgery lack of spectacles can prevent the person from being able to focus on any detailed close work. The power to purchase spectacles, to travel to somewhere that supplies them, the privilege of living in a country where we take this for granted, is rarely addressed when considering sight and sight loss. Whatever part of the world they live in, people have varying levels of vision: there are those with sight loss that is not severe enough to be categorised as sight impaired, those who have a visual loss in one eye, those who claim to be 'blind' without their glasses, but this is rarely considered when a visually impaired character is included in a work of literature. Thus, is no surprise that people with sight loss have taken pen in hand, put finger to keyboard, or picked up a Dictaphone to write their own story.

Writing with authority

“‘Well I’ll see you around.’
 ‘Nice to see you again.’
 ‘I see what you mean.’
 When I use expressions like this, some of my sighted friends are surprised.”¹⁰⁴

John Hull refers more than once to the way our language is permeated by visual words, by the use of ‘see you’ when we mean ‘meet you’, by the exchange of ‘seeing’ for understanding. He writes, “In expressions like these, attitudes, intentions, demands and references to knowledge and understanding are all suggested by the use of visual metaphors. There is an intimate connection between seeing and knowing. Blindness leads to ignorance.”¹⁰⁵,¹⁰⁶ This is a theme which runs through works on sight, sight loss and language by the authors I focus on. Similarly, David Bolt writes, “blindness is used as a vehicle, the tenor of the meaning being the lack of knowledge. That is to say, the seeing-knowing metaphor is profound because embedded in its foundation is the idea that not seeing is synonymous with not knowing.”¹⁰⁷ The link between seeing and knowing has serious implications for an academic with visual impairment, challenging Bolt’s very identity, challenging him to demonstrate that knowledge without vision is possible, that their life knowledge

¹⁰³ International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, ‘Millions are functionally blind for the lack of access to spectacles’ <https://www.iapb.org/knowledge/what-is-avoidable-blindness/refractive-error/> [accessed 19 May 2019].

¹⁰⁴ Hull, pp.16-7.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ For further illumination on the visible as knowledge see Jacques Derrida *Memoirs of the Blind*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹⁰⁷ Bolt, p. 18.

is not part of Foucault's subjugated knowledge.¹⁰⁸ In contrast, Hull wears this challenge to knowledge more lightly, perhaps reflecting his long career in academia.

Continuing the focus on the way language can exclude those without vision, in her paper "On Blindness," Julie Miele Rodas writes, "Blind and sighted are acculturated into the same symbolic order, the same language, that depends heavily on sight-connotating signs to describe non-visual experience (you see?) ... For this reason, though a blind person may exist in a culture of perception and cognition that differs radically from that of a sighted person, this sharing of language means that, on some level, blind people are necessarily members of and participants in sighted culture and experience."¹⁰⁹ There is a further challenge here, which Georgina Kleege takes up when she writes on the visual media of film and art, pushing the boundaries of the topics on which people with sight loss are allowed to be thought leaders. David Bolt describes, "the notion that seeing is synonymous with knowing, that visual perception is necessarily the normal way of gathering knowledge."¹¹⁰ All three of the authors I focus on aim to demonstrate their knowledge gained without the benefit of sight. I would like to suggest that their writing on sight loss offers greater insight due to their lack of sight - a power that is related to the interweaving of experience with academic evaluation - along with an erosion of the boundaries around traditional academic writing.

Martin Jay is the author of a substantial work on the discourse surrounding vision, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. He starts the book by examining just how deeply vision is embedded in language, and touches on the link between knowledge and power: "nor can a Frenchman fail to hear the *voir* in both *savoir* and *pouvoir*."¹¹¹ *Savoir* and *pouvoir*; the first means to know, the second, derived from *potere*, Latin for "power," to be able to. Vision is embedded in the French language in both knowledge and power, and I believe this is part of what drives the academic writers I focus on here. In this part of this chapter I would like to suggest that Kleege, Bolt and Hull try to change the stereotyped narrative around sight loss, to take control, to gain power. By taking an academic view on sight loss in society and literature, Kleege and Bolt aim to give themselves observer status. By becoming an academic, a researcher, a writer with observer status, one is given a license to scrutinise and evaluate, to give a commentary, to stand back and judge. The observer has power, the writer more so. I would like to suggest that becoming an author, an academic, is a (subconscious) way of setting oneself apart. Author is

¹⁰⁸ Michael Dudley, 'Knowledge Ill-Inhabited: The Subjugation of Post-Stratfordian Scholarship in Academic Libraries.' *The Oxfordian* XVII (2015).

¹⁰⁹ Julia Miele Rodas, 'On Blindness', p.116.

¹¹⁰ Bolt, p.18.

¹¹¹ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth century French thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994) p.2.

embedded within authority, one who controls the action, who is miles from the stereotype of the passive blind man or woman, groping, led by the hand, asking for alms. With authority comes prestige, privilege, dignity, and gravitas.

Kleege, Bolt and Hull develop authority in different ways. Hull is an academic, but the book *Notes on Blindness*, originally published as *Touching the Rock*, is pure memoir, derived from tapes he recorded over a period of three years after he lost his remaining vestiges of sight. A Professor of Religious Education at the University of Birmingham, Hull wrote books on religion and education for twenty years before publishing his first book to address his experience of sight loss, and he continued to write on religion before intertwining religion and sight loss in *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible*. By contrast, Bolt takes a different approach: he founded the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, which he then followed by writing *The Metanarrative of Blindness*, a book which offers a few personal anecdotes but remains firmly in the domain of academic publishing. Bolt embeds the text in a niche between literary and disability studies occupied by only a handful of authors, where he is an innovator, an authority. Georgina Kleege does something different to either Hull or Bolt, successfully bringing her personal perspective into her academic writing in her three nonfiction books, *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller*, *Sight Unseen*, which I focus on in this chapter, and her latest publication, *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings To Art*.

Each of the three authors, Hull, Kleege and Bolt, use 'I' to varying purpose and extent in their writing. Bennett and Royle comment, "the 'I' is in many ways by definition not in control of itself, since it is determined in many ways by what it cannot control, in other words, by the unconscious."¹¹² Similarly, I want to consider the authors' uses of "I." This is significant because, in scientific academia, there has been an unwritten rule against bringing the personal into academic writing: in all academic writing the use of I is considered, and only used where the personal adds something more, an explicit acknowledgement that the researcher has a presence. Moreover, I believe there is a resonance between I and eye, something worth considering in the context of Martin Jay's beautifully composed introductory paragraph at the start of *Downcast Eyes*, illustrating the pervasive nature of visual metaphor within language.¹¹³

Hull has no issues with using the word I: after all, his work *Notes on Blindness* is a memoir, based on his personal musings into a tape recorder. He says: "I have been a registered blind person for nearly three years. In the past few months, the final traces of light sensation have faded. Now I

¹¹² Bennett and Royle, p.24.

¹¹³ See Appendix 1.

am totally blind. I cannot tell day from night. I can stare into the sun without seeing the faintest flicker of sunshine.”¹¹⁴ These illuminating lines from the start of his book set the scene. He does describe blindness as darkness, but he explains that this has been a process rather than something he was born with. He describes himself as a ‘registered blind person’, perhaps a clumsy phrase, but one which resonates with Kleege’s claim to be ‘legally blind’, something she says when she meets a new class. Registered, legally, both indicate that blindness has been recognised by officialdom, authenticated by an external authority. Although you cannot see my sight loss, it has been legitimated. What’s more, Hull uses the illustration of staring into the sun to indicate his total loss of vision. Have you ever been warned against staring at the sun? For Hull it no longer holds any fears.

Georgina Kleege introduces her book in a similarly bold way. She starts: “Writing this book made me blind”, then clarifies: “Today I am likely to identify myself as blind; five or six years ago I would have been more likely to use less precise phrases, such as ‘visually impaired’ or ‘partially sighted’.”¹¹⁵ This sets the reader firmly on a path where they can expect to be guided through a world of blindness by a resident, gaining insights that they might not otherwise be privy to. In Georgina Kleege’s personal story she writes about her disempowering experience of being diagnosed with sight loss as a child.¹¹⁶ In a close reading of this text it becomes evident that Kleege’s use of pronouns shifts from start to end. In the first, long, paragraph she tells her story: “I was pronounced legally blind ... I was unaware of what I was not seeing ... I was faking I complied.” Her use of I gives rhythm to her words until a sudden shift: “my doctor names my disorder ‘macular degeneration’ ... And that was all.” From then on, we lose the I, to be replaced by he: “he did not feel ... He did not send ... He said that ... He did not tell ... He did not even explain ... He said nothing.” This anonymous he, the ophthalmologist, seizes the narrative from a distance of fifty years. He takes over Kleege’s voice, becoming a resonance of absence and loss in what she writes. The one I which appears in that section is a negative too: “I did not find out what my macula was for several years.”¹¹⁷ When Kleege’s I resumes, it is baffled, bewildered: “I did not understand ... I was confused ... disappointed ... I left.”

After another paragraph, the tone of the narrative then shifts away from the personal. Kleege outlines the story of a banker who has a problem with his eyes. She tells his tale briefly, how

¹¹⁴ Hull, p.1.

¹¹⁵ Kleege, p.1.

¹¹⁶ See Appendix 2 for a version published online which also appears as part of the first chapter of *Sight Unseen*

¹¹⁷ The macula is the central part of the eye, essential for reading fine detail and small text. Telling someone they have macula degeneration without explaining what the macula is may still happen, but it expresses a subconscious or conscious belief on the doctor’s part that the patient will not understand, does not need to know why they can’t see. They must simply accept their fate.

the banker had '*un probleme*' but never used the words *aveugle*, nor *malvoyant*. This paragraph ends as she writes, "I recognized ..." Her "I" returns,. Recognise: to resume possession of, to acknowledge, accept, appreciate, admit the truth of, to perceive clearly: there are so many layers in Kleege's recognition, knowing again her story in his story.

Kleege's tale shifts again and she slips away from the personal "I," the distancing "he," to a "they" that pushes the blind even further from herself than she did as a child. When describing how people conceal their sight loss she writes, "They compose their faces ... they do not ask directions ... they pat their pockets for reading glasses they do not own." They? Or she? Or I? Kleege's deliberate distancing resonates with truths learned from experience. We do not know if it is her own, if it is from observation, but it is definitely from life. She writes, "Eliminate 'blindisms' the experts say." Her strong feelings about advice on appearing sighted when blind ring out through the pseudo-objective tone of this paragraph: "Discoloured or bulging eyes should be covered". At this stage, though, she has moved from the person with experience to the authoritative voice. She is our guide through sight loss, through the world of the blind.

Developing a distance, building her status as an observer, Kleege uses her concluding paragraphs to remain objective rather than personal, with an academic analysis of the word blind, a description of a blind beggar, a great distance from her own life as an academic. Her closing lines: "The blind beggar stands alone. As long as we can manage, we keep our distance, both because he makes such a displeasing spectacle and because we know the consequences of claiming identity with him." Kleege's writing successfully augments that distance as she writes herself from eleven year old child, a patient in a world where she is not given the words to understand the condition causing her sight loss, to the language of academia, as she shows us an academic analysis of being blind, a learned analysis which is only partly successful in leaving the blind child back in the last century.

Somewhat dissimilarly to Kleege, in *The Metanarrative of Blindness*, David Bolt starts with 'An Embodied Introduction' where he introduces his own story, not so much of sight loss but of how he came to have an academic career and write the book. He was encouraged to study to become a piano tuner, an experience which reflects Kleege's writing about the stereotypical careers for people with sight loss, but he swiftly decided this was not for him.¹¹⁸ He took an access course in the social sciences which required him to also take a humanities subject, and hence stumbled into literary studies which ended up as the subject of his degree. At the start of this passage some of the phrases Bolt uses truly show his uncertainty: "I had been registered, ... I guess, ... I had neither, ... I found myself." In Bolt's description of his progress through a doctorate and developing an interest in

¹¹⁸ Kleege, p.45.

literary disability studies he begins to demonstrate a sense of control over his situation: “I was struck ... I began to address ... I noticed ... I founded... I started writing ... I began to make more progress.” Unlike Kleege, Bolt avoids verbs that demonstrate lack of control and power. However, he does mention the “absence of an informed approach to the literary representation of disability,” and how he “felt somewhat isolated in the humanities.” I would like to suggest that while Kleege writes of the loss and absence in her personal story, Bolt translates this same experience into his academic career, consciously controlling his use of I.¹¹⁹

Bolt’s words demonstrate conflict about including or excluding his own experiences in his book in a way that neither Kleege’s nor Hull’s do. He writes, “But for the sake of readers from outside of the discipline of disability studies, who may be unaccustomed to such applications of experiential knowledge, perhaps I should say that though rife [in this chapter] anecdotes are confined to the footnotes in the chapters that follow.”¹²⁰ Interestingly, when one examines the footnotes, anecdotes are barely present, with one note to the introduction and two to chapter one, then nothing.¹²¹ In *An Embodied Introduction* Bolt mentions an occasion where he is misidentified as a student rather than a tutor, something which undermines his project to gain authority. He links this experience, and other occasions where he has been mistaken for a student, to the “ubiquitous confusion between seeing and knowing,” which I explore earlier in this chapter.¹²² Bolt also describes an occasion where he is in a resource centre for people with visual impairments and assumptions are made about his ability or inability to browse. His third anecdote where he is meeting a friend for a drink starts by demonstrating control and agency, “I encountered... I had arranged ... I decided ...” but subtly the way he writes shifts when someone tries to hand him a note, assuming he is collecting for ‘the blind’: “I was waiting ... I explained ... I was just waiting ...”. Bolt explains, “in the mind of this kind stranger, I was reduced to the characteristic of visual impairment and, by extension, keyed to a metanarrative in which the blind beggar and sighted donor have become stock characters.” He shifts his use of language as a cultural construct is forced upon him.¹²³ In the fourth and final anecdote of the introductory chapter, Bolt reports his inner responses when he hears or smells something before others, expressing conflict at momentarily embracing the stereotype of enhanced senses.

¹¹⁹ Bolt, pp.2-3.

¹²⁰ Bolt, p.1.

¹²¹ Indeed, if you look at whether I have managed to include my own personal experiences in this academic paper you will see I have followed a similar pattern to David Bolt. This paper starts out by outlining my personal quest, but I do not use personal experiences in the main body of this work. The novel, however, could not be written without my own experiences.

¹²² Bolt, pp.2-3.

¹²³ Bolt, p.11.

The conflict Bolt feels has a clear effect on the book he has written. Despite his intentions to merely sideline his experience into footnotes, at some unknown point during the writing or editing process, Bolt has erased his own experiences from the book. While this may be appropriate for an academic approach, one may wonder whether it was his initial intention. He starts the book by quoting Stuart Murray: “the anecdote emerges as a tool every bit as useful as the studied analytical insight.”¹²⁴ Kleege builds distances and observer status gradually: by contrast, Bolt ditches any value to his personal experience by chapter two. Returning to John Hull, I conjecture that he is secure in his academic authority as an established author of academic texts on religion and education, and he may have initially recorded his memoirs without thought of publication.¹²⁵

All I can see as a reader is the words in front of me. I cannot see the author, I cannot unravel the author’s intent. If I asked Georgina Kleege or David Bolt to explain what they mean by the words they wrote, they might well give an explanation of their current thoughts on the matter. I can, however, examine closely the words on the page, and hold one work against the next. Bennett and Royle write, “Rather than say that the author is in control of the language he or she uses, we might consider the idea that the language is as much in control of the author.”¹²⁶ They also assert that “language speaks us as much as we speak language.” Thus, this project seeks to understand what emerges when writing about sight loss, built on a skeleton of words and phrases, constructed memories and experiences which each author recounts on the page.¹²⁷ By a close reading of selected works by three authors, and by comparing the similarities and differences in their writing, I flesh out my thoughts as a reader and critic. The memories shared by each author will have been modified by an editor; moreover, they will have been edited in retelling, because stories of life changing moments are rarely told just once.

I know through my own work that a book is written, rewritten. Phrases are culled and redrafted. The story readers see on the page is coherent and polished in a way the original experience never was. Each author will have carefully chosen anecdotes which augment the story they want to tell, the theories they want to develop. Their personal stories would, I suggest, indicate that the time has passed when the strict divide between literary theory and personal narrative existed. The boundaries which divide academic writing from experience and memoir have started to erode. Now, I believe, we learn more from an approach where both stories and theories are

¹²⁴ Stuart Murray *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008) p.19.

¹²⁵ In a personal footnote, the proof-reader for this thesis was very keen to eliminate my own use of I on as many occasions as possible. They only succeeded in part.

¹²⁶ Bennett and Royle, p.22.

¹²⁷ Bennett and Royle, p.23.

communicated together. What is more, with the growing confidence of authors such as Kleege who fully integrate personal experience and academic commentary, there is a new cadre of teachers and leaders in academia, teaching students the value of their own experience. Although Hull is dead, Kleege and Bolt are both ‘the blind leading the blind’, reclaiming this scriptural phrase so that those of us who are new to the field of writing about sight loss can be led with confidence by those who truly understand this field and are shaping it to rank personal identity as something which can augment theory, not something which needs to be buried.

In writing their books, Kleege, Bolt and Hull each deal with an issue in the way they know, using their strengths and skills as writers and academics to reshape the perception of sight loss in literature, in culture, and in real life. They do it in different ways: Hull’s memoirs may have initially been personal notes, but after his death and the development of the film *Notes on Blindness*, his experiences of coming to terms with total loss of sight reached far more people than he might initially have imagined. His real experiences counterbalance books where sight loss is used as a metaphor or worse, a punishment. Similarly, Bolt seeks to change the academic discourse on the literary representation of disability and blindness, to find peers in the field, brought together by the journal he founded, to reduce the feeling of isolation he felt while writing his doctoral thesis. Kleege integrates accessible academic analysis with her own experiences most successfully, creating a book that is not just educational but also a compelling read for people interested in art, film, and literature. She moves characters with sight loss from the periphery to centre field, from sidekick to protagonist. All three authors ensure that people with visual impairments are visible, that they are the subject of their works, not simply objects to be examined.

Bolt writes,

“... disability may be understood as a malleable identity that links other identities, and because we are all visually limited, a continuum may be identified between those of us who have a high visual acuity and those of us who do not perceive by visual means. This postmodern, indeed dismodern perspective recognises that complex, temporary, and variable eye conditions problematize the distinction between those of us who are and those of us who are not identified as having visual impairments; it marks a departure from notions of the sighted and the blind that, as binary oppositions, are embedded in the Modernist project of the twentieth century.”^{128, 129}

If readers are to learn anything from these authors’ works, from this paper, from *Blindsided*, it is that we cannot distance ourselves from the child we were and are. That child appears between the words that authors write as academics, as adults, as people with power and control.

¹²⁸ Bolt, p.35.

¹²⁹ Dismodernism is a definition used in disability studies, in relation to subjects that exist in an interdependent position, completed only within a network of other material and social bodies. It acknowledges that we are all incomplete, and was originally coined by Lennard Davis

Furthermore, we cannot distance ourselves from what we fear, or simply treat other people with sight loss as 'the blind'. Our sight shifts as we age. Everyone who lives past forty experiences presbyopia, when the crystalline lens in the eye stiffens, can no longer flex to allow us to focus on what we are reading close up. 'I just need reading glasses', we say, oblivious to the fact that cataracts will come to all those who live long enough, that if we did not live in an age of surgery, it could blind us all.

Chapter 3 Seeing Red: *blindness, borders and identity*

While chapter 2 focussed on academic texts written by people with sight loss, along with one memoir by an academic, this chapter moves towards fiction. *Seeing Red* is the story of Lina, a young journalist and doctoral student who loses her sight. It is written by Lina Meruane, a professor of World and Latin American Literature and Creative Writing, a novelist, essayist and cultural journalist. Meruane's book uses her experience of sight loss but she describes it as fiction: it has been reviewed as "blurring the lines between fiction and memoir."¹³⁰, ¹³¹, ¹³²

Identity in relation to where people are, where they come from, plays a large part in *Seeing Red*. Lina's childhood was split between New York and Santiago. At the start of the book she loses her sight and moves apartments with her partner Ignacio. Later she finds it necessary to return to her childhood home in Santiago instead of following plans made before losing her sight. This return to her parents' house, the journey and her status once home, challenge her identity. Her experience of sight loss exposes the double consciousness which she has embodied since childhood. Binaries are given a relative value where one assumes primacy over the other. White/black is the obvious example in a postcolonial context. We can also consider centre/margin and, relevant to *Seeing Red*, doctor/patient and sighted/blind. This oppositionality demands a violent hierarchy because it forces people to identify self and other, pushing them into categories. Those who are in between - in this context, those who are partially sighted, losing sight, or hoping to regain sight - become lost and oppressed.

In this chapter, I pursue these themes which drive *Seeing Red* and resonate similarly in *Blindsided*. I also examine issues surrounding the identity of Lina, the protagonist in *Seeing Red*, particularly in relation to the many binaries, doubles and oppositions which occur in the book. I will also explore what occurs in transitional places, when crossing boundaries. Inevitably I find myself examining the relationship between Lina the author and Lina the protagonist as the book dances a blurred boundary between fiction and memoir. And, given both Linas' identity as a writer, I

¹³⁰ Unattributed 'Review: Seeing Red' *Publishers Weekly* <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-941920-24-4> [accessed 5 October 2019].

¹³¹ She "was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes at the age of six, and went through a three-month period of total blindness while doing her doctorate at NYU. Ellen Jones 'Review: Seeing Red by Lina Meruane' *Make*, February 16, 2016 <https://www.makemag.com/review-seeing-red/> [accessed 20 July 2019].

¹³² My supervisor Erica Wagner highlighted *Seeing Red* to me towards the start of my PhD, after I had completed the first draft of *Blindsided*. I immediately found many areas where the two books touched on the same subjects.

investigate how, in telling her story, Lina re-establishes and redefines her identity which has been eroded by sight loss and by the people closest to her.

Who is Lina Meruane?

“I was brought up as a Chilean. The early twentieth-century migrations in general, coming from Europe and the Middle East into Latin America, all assimilated really quickly. The feeling at the time was that they had to leave everything behind and become new citizens of these nations and take the opportunity to provide a better life for their children. So actually my father did not learn Arabic – he could understand some words – and my generation has already lost it. But the Palestinian community in Chile is the largest outside the Arab world, so there is a sense of belonging to that place and at the same time being completely Chilean. I grew up that way; my Palestinian background was just one part of the mix. But when I leave Chile, my Palestinianness starts resonating more ...”¹³³

Double layers run through *Seeing Red* – the double of the English and Spanish languages which Meruane speaks, the fact that I am reading the book in translation, the way that the protagonist has the same name as the author, while within the book fictional Lina shifts from Lina to her childhood name Lucina. I read the text and wonder if I am seeing double. Is this fiction or autobiography? Is it as I would like to suggest, something of both, aligned with the concealed meaning in *heimlich*. As Alison Routledge writes, “Freud’s famous example of the uncanny where he shows that the meaning of homely and its opposite fold into each other is a very rich one for thinking about a postcolonial nation where home and homelessness, belonging and unbelonging have become newly uncertain.”¹³⁴ This rich seam of thought not only has value for thinking about postcolonial identity, but in reflecting on Lina’s seeing and unseeing identities, on the doubling she finds as she travels, and on the unhomeliness and new uncertainties which she faces as her sight fails.

“So are you or aren’t you Lina Meruane?” Ignacio asks early on in *Seeing Red*, a question which readers may also ask as they try to understand the relationship between Lina the author and Lina the protagonist in this book that claims to be fiction despite its clear similarities to Meruane’s lived reality. Fictional Lina replies to Ignacio: “Sometimes I am, I said, when my eyes let me; lately I’m less and less her and I go back to Lucina.” Lucina is Lina’s birthname. The conversation continues: “he chose not to believe my insinuation that I suffered from a defect that could leave me blind. Blind, I said, without dramatics, without losing my smile while we had a long drink, while the distance between us got ever shorter.” Lina/Lucina’s name is, for her, wrapped up in her identification as someone who could go blind, just as it tangles her growing relationship with Ignacio, while he denies the possibility of blindness. The relationship between Ignacio and Lina shifts

¹³³ Mark Reynolds, ‘Lina Meruane: Blood in the eye’ *Bookanista* <http://bookanista.com/lina-meruane/> [accessed 20 July 2019].

¹³⁴ Alison Ravenscroft, *The Post Colonial Eye* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge 2016) p.47.

throughout the book. His denial of her sight loss is problematic: he denies a part of her identity which they must both face when a retinal haemorrhage occurs at the back of Lina's eyes late one night at a party.

Lucina is a Roman goddess of childbirth, the name being derived from the Latin *lux, lucis*, "light"¹³⁵. Lucina leaps across cultures to connect with Nour, the protagonist in *Blindsided* whose name means light in Arabic. I chose Nour's name as one that her parents might have selected to allow her to blend into Egyptian Arabic culture while still reflecting their Coptic Christian faith; similarly, in another book about vision, Lina Meruane's choice to use her own name for her protagonist raises other questions. What is she shining light on, and what is she helping to be delivered into the world? There is no clear and immediate answer to these questions, nor to how much autobiography is within this fiction, but throughout this chapter I hope to shuffle closer towards an understanding of Meruane's multiple layers of postcolonial identity and how they are deeply woven into *Seeing Red*.

"Lina, Lucina, Ignacio burst out, relieved or exhausted and confused, Lucina, getting tangled up among my names, Lina, with his back tight and his neck complaining: get up. Lekz is waiting for you."¹³⁶ The sentence twists so the reader is unsure who is who. This tangle of Lina/Lucina with Ignacio resonates with their physical entanglement which deepens with her sight loss as she holds onto him to navigate her way in the doctor's office. It is not initially clear why she sometimes thinks of herself as Lina, sometimes as Lucina, but her journey home to Chile sheds light on the matter. When she gets on the plane Lina injects herself with insulin then hopes to sleep, but instead she starts to shake. She wonders if she is having a seizure, but,

"it wasn't a seizure, it was an electrical discharge that arose intermittently from my nerve centre. This is just what I need, I thought, separating from myself and grabbing hold of Lucina, the Lucina who was me as I moved closer to Chile, and I grabbed her, like that, by the shoulders, and I started to shake her violently and to tell her, that is, tell myself: not now, Lucina, not a stupid panic attack, don't put on a little show now."¹³⁷

Adult Lina is talking to her child self, Lucina, as she tries to count away her panic attack: "I remembered as if I were back there, that was how I used to count when I was seven years old in the school I went to when I returned to Chile. In New Jersey I'd forgotten all my Spanish. Later, in Santiago, I'd forgotten English. Now I'm forgetting myself, I thought."¹³⁸ This dialogue between selves occurs as she prepares to fly south, as she retraces her steps as a child into her divided

¹³⁵ Lucina, *Etymonline* https://www.etymonline.com/word/Lucina#etymonline_v_43808 [accessed 15 July 2020].

¹³⁶ Meruane, p.29.

¹³⁷ Meruane, p.42.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

childhood. Like Nour, Lina sees her identity as split - growing up in one country, then another, speaking two languages, identifying as one person, then having to become another. As she makes the return journey, in the transitional space of the airplane, Lina's panic attack is a violent self-assault as one identity tries to exert itself over the other. The stress of the journey, doubled by her sightlessness, leads to a "loss of the ability to assimilate various aspects of one's identity" as her two identities wrangle and cross over and she is forced to forget her adult self.¹³⁹

When she arrives in Chile, Lina hears someone calling her childhood name: "Someone was bawling the *Lucina* that the calendar of saints records only as an etymological error, like Lucila or Lucita or Lucia, or even Luz, which is so close to Luzbel, the demon of light." Not only is it clear that in Chile she is now Lucina, we also learn the origin of her name: her mother thought she heard her say the name Lucina as she was being born.¹⁴⁰ What is more, we learn that this name does not exist in the Catholic calendar of saints. As perceived by her culture, her religion, Lucina is something that does not really exist. Although sight loss is a factor in her eroding identity, it started at birth.

When her father appears at the airport the first word he says is 'daughter', then, "Lucina, daughter. He says it in a voice of hope and sorrow, and I know the hopeful tone is for daughter and the sorrow is for Lucina."¹⁴¹ Lina looks on Lucina as part of her childhood, part of her that is vanished, diminished and this loss may be echoed in her father's sorrow when she returns. He runs the words together so Lucina-daughter becomes a single word, symbolising the single identity that she has in the eyes of her parents, their subconscious denial of her adult Lina-self.

Later, as she is anaesthetised prior to an operation to restore her sight, Lina describes how, "The finger is no longer there. My hand isn't there and neither is my arm. I'm not me anymore. Lucina vanished, her being is suspended somewhere in the hospital. What is left of her now is pure biology: a heart that beats and beats, a lung that inflates, an anaesthetised brain incapable of dreaming, while the hair goes on growing, slowly, beneath the cap."¹⁴² She refers to herself as Lucina, the passive child identity which dominates in the hospital environment. Furthermore, even as the Lucina identity resurfaces, it is dissolved by the medical establishment. I will return to medicine's assault on identity later on; in this section of the novel, which takes place towards the end of the book, Lina has to gamble, to give up her identity, her power, for all of her hopes of being able to see again and to resume writing rest on this operation.

¹³⁹ Muhammad Awais Rehan, et al. 'A Strange Case of Dissociative Identity Disorder: Are There Any Triggers?' *Cureus* 10.7 (2018), doi:10.7759/cureus.2957 [accessed 17 July 2020].

¹⁴⁰ Meruane, p.45.

¹⁴¹ Meruane, p.48.

¹⁴² Meruane, p.118.

Why is Lina's name so important? As discussed in chapter two, a person's story can hang upon their name. Homi Bhabha writes, "No name is yours until you speak it ... and you enter the territory of the right to narrate."¹⁴³ Without a name, a book has no author, and the author has no power. A name is a foundation-stone for identity, and Lina's foundation as Lucina is unstable, rejected. She has chosen to build her identity as Lina, redoubling her efforts by becoming an author. Moving on from the country her parents chose, she develops her identity as a Hispanic person in New York, emphasised by differences from the *gringos* in the apartment below.¹⁴⁴

In resonance with Lina's tale, with her layered identity, Bhabha continues, "In another's country that is also your own, your person divides, and in following the forked path you encounter yourself in a double movement ...once as a stranger and then as a friend."¹⁴⁵ By writing *Seeing Red*, Lina the author takes control of the narrative around her own period of sight loss. In framing herself as author and protagonist she gives readers a double encounter. She allows herself to tell her own story and reencounter it as a stranger too.

Back in fiction, Lina started life as Lucina, speaking her name as she was born. In adult life she shortened her name, becoming someone different, something new, as she moves countries and establishes her own identity as a journalist and student, separate from her parents. At the end of the book, while the doctor tells Lina that she will lose her sight eventually, he doodles round "my ever shorter name."¹⁴⁶ Lina's name, her identity, is eroded by the medical process, by the person who is there to care for her and protect her sight. In the moment when he tells her he can do no more, his pen continues to erase who she is.

Lina's names and her sight are inextricably linked throughout *Seeing Red*. Returning to the beginning of Lina's episode of sight loss, she writes, "a firecracker went off in my head." Diabetes, if not controlled properly, can lead to the growth of new, thin, fragile blood vessels at the back of the eye. Meruane continues, "it was no fire I was seeing, it was blood spilling out inside my eye. The most shockingly beautiful blood I have ever seen. The most outrageous. The most terrifying. The blood gushed, but only I could see it."¹⁴⁷ *Seeing Red* is originally titled *Sangre en el ojo*, blood in the eye, a phrase with a double meaning in Spanish where beyond the literal, it also implies a desire for revenge. It becomes clear in the following paragraphs that this was not Lina's first retinal bleed: she

¹⁴³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1994) p.XXV.

¹⁴⁴ Meruane, p.3.

¹⁴⁵ Bhabha, *Location of Culture* p.XXV.

¹⁴⁶ Meruane, p.157.

¹⁴⁷ Meruane, p.4.

writes that she has been advised to quit smoking, and to avoid coughing, lifting heavy objects, diving or even leaning over.

In her transitional flight back home, Lina not only shifts her name, but also is labelled as blind for the first time. Turbulence causes Lina to fall against a woman. She grabs her, mistaking her for a seat back. The woman complains Lina would be able to see if she took her sunglasses off, understands when Lina lifts her sunglasses that she is blind:

“Blind? There was no need to explain to her that I wasn’t entirely blind, that I could distinguish contrasts. That I knew the flight attendant had opened a window and it encased me in its rectangle of light, and that someone else had closed it again, that the light beams of a movie were shining intermittently. I was a blind woman capable of detecting flashes of light, and, from afar, also the compassion of other that came after surprise. Blind? The compassion made me crawl with hate. Blind! She said again.”¹⁴⁸

In this paragraph Lina explains how, like most people with sight loss, she has some vision. Despite this, she is labelled blind. She uses ‘Blind?’ ‘Blind?’ And then ‘Blind!’ as the woman works out Lina cannot see, as Lina practices this new identity. The woman tells Lina to sit, first in Spanish, then in English, but Lina is paralysed by the woman’s knowledge and consequent pity. Lina then sits, and tightens her seatbelt, “to the point of asphyxiation”, a denial of life and a physical symbol of the constraints she feels as she is labelled Blind.¹⁴⁹

Lina’s blindness shifts throughout the book. It is initially described not as loss of vision, but as seeing blood. While early sections of the book focus on what she cannot see, as the story develops Lina the protagonist describes how things look with her “double and wobbly vision,” and beyond that she describes things she cannot see.¹⁵⁰ In the assessment immediately after her surgery, when all she can see is white, she closes her eyes and says, “I sensed my mother standing up from her chair when she heard me, Ignacio uncrossing a leg. How Lekz ran his hand through his mane of hair...”¹⁵¹ After the surgery, Lina the protagonist and Lina the author merge. By becoming author, Lina knows the past, present and future. She can see all, even that which fictional Lina cannot see. This double Lina takes on the omniscient power of the author even when sightless. In doing this, the author demonstrates not just that there is a continuum of sight far more than any opposition between sighted and blind, but also that in this place of transition and changing identity there is new knowing, new power. In writing the book many years after the event, she is learning, has learnt, something new.

¹⁴⁸ Meruane, p.44.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Meruane, p.148.

¹⁵¹ Meruane, p.127.

Returning to the newly blind Lina, readers can see that her home is no longer home and she battles her surroundings: “Thwacks against half closed doors, all of their edges blunt. A nose mashed against a shelf. Scratched fingers, broken nails, twisted ankles almost sprained.”¹⁵² There is poetry in this recitation of trips and tangles, which reflects Lina’s new uncertainty. “It changed shape, the house, the rooms castled, the furniture swapped placed to confuse me.” The *heimlich* apartment has, without changing at all, suddenly become *unheimlich*. Sightless, Lina finds that her home hides secrets from her. While *heimlich* can mean comfortable, friendly, familiar, it has a second definition, which can imply something which is concealed, secret or withheld from sight. As Freud writes, “*Heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.”¹⁵³ In the context of this paper, it is interesting to consider the second definition, withheld from sight, and, in Freud’s interpretation, something which is concealed from the self. Lina’s layered identity, her inner child, becomes clearer as she loses the ability to see.

In bed with Ignacio, Lina explicitly links the eye to the penis, her nipples, his belly button. Ignacio resists her attempts to entice him to have sex as she licks and sucks these substitute eyes. His resistance is due to the doctor’s warning that exertion might cause further haemorrhage. I resist writing about this for fear of being sucked into a Freudian literary analysis, but Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* is explicitly psychoanalytic in its interests, centring on how colonialism ‘enters the skin’ of its subjects. Moving beyond my resistance, there is something worth pursuing as in both *Seeing Red* and *Blindsided* issues of identity are wrapped up with issues of home, and both protagonists experience a degree of double vision in relation to who they are.¹⁵⁴ The postcolonial other is uncanny, *unheimlich*, not at home.¹⁵⁵ Unsighted, Nour and Lina both become other. By ceasing to be a doctor Nour becomes a patient, Lina has been a recipient of care since her childhood as Lucina. Both women lose the ability to do their chosen work. Both find themselves in an unfamiliar situation as Lina and Ignacio move to a new, shared apartment, as Nour takes refuge in Adam’s home on her return to London. For both, this new residence is a home that is no longer home as they struggle with the physical dislocation caused by loss of sight. Sight loss leads both women to experience both physical and psychological “disempowerment and dislocation”: as well as moving locations they are both forced out of the identity they were comfortable with, identities that were double layered

¹⁵² Meruane, p.19.

¹⁵³ Sigmund Freud *The Standard Edition vol XVII* (London: Vintage Classics 2001) p.226.

¹⁵⁴ Meruane, p.78.

¹⁵⁵ Afaf Ahmed Hasah Al-Saidi, ‘Post-colonialism Literature, the Concept of Self and the Other in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians: An Analytical Approach*’ *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 5.1 (2014) pp.95-105.

already as an immigrant and a child of immigrants.¹⁵⁶ Each is forced to discover the other within their own self.

In both *Blindsided* and *Seeing Red*, the protagonists explore the trope of the blind person counting steps. Lina's counting, memorising the distance between the rooms, leads to Ignacio becoming angry: "Stop wandering around, we'll end up breaking all our bones."¹⁵⁷ He wants her to sit still, and this moment gives us an initial insight into how he wants to control her, disempower her. His desire for control becomes clearer later on, but for now the moment passes: "Lina, he sighed, immersed in a sudden sadness or shyness. Lina, now even softer, holding my chin, his slimy eyes everywhere: you're blind, you're blind and dangerous." Lina bites back with her response: "Yes, but I'm only an apprentice blind woman and I have very little ambition in the trade, and yes, almost blind and dangerous. But I'm not going to just sit in a chair and wait for it to pass. Ignacio would have preferred me to sit and meditate...".¹⁵⁸ Something in this passage reflects yet rejects Kleege's exploration of the identity of the blind woman in literature and film as an object: "blind women are nothing but need – they need help with everything from every one, and at every turn."¹⁵⁹ Nour takes longer to reach this stage of refusing to sit and wait it out, she spends more time under the duvet, more time denying her blindness. However Lina has been considering her personal risk of sight loss since childhood.

Nour is presented with a *fait accompli* when she moves into Adam's flat: she cannot see what is in there, and has to ask him to tell her. In contrast, Ignacio asks Lina to come to the furniture store with him: "I wouldn't be able to choose anything by myself, you have to come, he insists, and I accept because never have I had more free time." Is it a good thing that he perceives that she will be able to make a useful contribution to the selection of furniture, or is he denying who she is now? Lina accepts the task, choosing furniture, and finds the irony in having time to do it when she cannot see what she is choosing.¹⁶⁰ In the furniture store, Ignacio talks to the assistant: "...I can hear him saying, breathless, more light, we have to have enough light, that's the most important thing, right?" as if light bulbs will solve Lina's sight problems. "And yes, yes, sure, light, bulbs and lamps, and screens, all that I answer, breathless myself, already up to my neck with him in a store full of lamps."¹⁶¹, their search for lamps a metaphor, their search to furnish a home a way of filling the gaps in their relationship now Lina cannot see. Purchasing lamps becomes a debate about whether they

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Meruane, p.20.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Kleege, p.51.

¹⁶⁰ Meruane, p.22.

¹⁶¹ Meruane, pp.23-4.

need one or two, Ignacio remembering their budget. Lina pushes for two lamps, “So we don’t have a one-eyed living room, I add. Always two, just in case.”¹⁶² We have two eyes so we can benefit from binocular vision but also so that we also have a spare. This resonates with Freud’s theory of the double, reminds us that Lina is discovering within herself an aspect of self that she has been running from since the childhood doctor’s appointments where the risk of blindness was first raised. The older shop assistant recommends two lights. Hoping that only Lina will understand him, Ignacio grumbles in Spanish that it is because the assistant has one white eye. Immediately interested, Lina discovers the man has had a stroke which damaged his eye, and they talk about the benefits of having a spare. The old man rationalises his loss: “Losing this eye was the price I paid, he says without regret: the price of staying alive.”¹⁶³ He considers one eye a trade-off for his life at a time when Lina is considering life without sight as no life at all.

Lina in transition

In other ways, throughout both novels, physical dislocation acts as an analogy for the dislocation of the self which is experienced during sight loss. In *Blindsided*, Nour is forced to move when kidnapped, falls into living with Adam when she comes home, fights to find herself a home as soon as she has some sight, some control. Similarly, in *Seeing Red*, Lina moves house within a day or so of losing her sight, packing while ‘half blind’.¹⁶⁴ This move takes place in a transitional period when she has lost her sight but before she can be seen by an ophthalmologist. Lina accepts the wait, acts as a disempowered recipient of care. While movers pack most of the items into their van, Ignacio gives Lina some more fragile items in a shopping cart: a TV, the laptops, some glasses. In another denial of her sight loss, he asks her to walk it to the new apartment a few blocks away. Lina follows strangers, crossing the road when they cross, descends into the subway station, walks down a long corridor until she comes out again in their new neighbourhood. This subterranean transition reflects strangely on the interaction between Lina and Ignacio as they transition into a permanent relationship in a new apartment. Against probability, Lina manages the perils of solo sightless travel to the new place which lacks many essentials. The apartment has no electricity, and they have no candles; they are equal and both, for that moment, blind.

When Lina finally gets to see her ophthalmologist, Lekz, she is told to wait and see if the blood clouding her vision reabsorbs which alters her plans. Ignacio was due to give a talk in Buenos Aires, and Lina was going to go to her family in Santiago. They had planned to meet and continue to Bolivia but Lekz advises against that part of the visit: “the high pressure and the lack of oxygen

¹⁶² Meruane, p.24.

¹⁶³ Meruane, p.25.

¹⁶⁴ Meruane, p.14.

would not only lead to altitude sickness, it could also burst my veins.” Lina says, “But it hadn’t been necessary to reach the heights of La Paz, all it took was a ninth floor with a view of the hollow left by the twin Manhattan towers. The red I saw, first in one eye, then the other, had settled the question of that trip.”¹⁶⁵ Meruane’s book was written after 9/11: within it, however the Twin Towers are still standing, an uncanny foreshadowing of future absence.

In an interview about *Seeing Red*, Lina Meruane says:

“I had only just arrived in New York when 9/11 happened, but it echoed in a different way too. It really made me aware that I was a foreigner in the United States. I have a Palestinian background, so I was both a Latin American migrant also sort of half-Palestinian. I was watching TV 24 hours, and over and over again you would see Yasser Arafat expressing his shock side-by-side with a group of Palestinian children celebrating. Always the same five seconds – they were probably celebrating a soccer match or something – but the hypothesis that it was the Palestinians who had done it was being shown on TV alongside the towers falling.”¹⁶⁶

Lina, *Seeing Red*’s protagonist, sees the gap between the towers, not the towers themselves. And the dual references to the two towers, two eyes, brings us back to Freud’s definition of uncanny. Lina here has two paths, two selves, the sighted Lina who would have gone to Argentina and Bolivia, the new, blind Lina who will travel to Santiago. Lina’s location becomes controlled by her loss of sight: the borders she can cross are controlled by blindness. However, as Heidegger writes, “A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.”¹⁶⁷ Lina’s story continues, along a different path.

Lina, the blind woman

On arrival in the airport in Chile, Lina adopts a blind stereotype and runs her fingers over her father’s face: “...trying to trace his face into my palm. I touch him like the professional blind woman I’m becoming.”¹⁶⁸ This double layered pair of sentences describe what is happening in the moment, and describe what is happening to Lina throughout the book as she becomes a blind woman. Her use of the word professional indicates her awareness of the trope she is testing out on herself.

Becoming the blind woman affects Lina’s relationship with Ignacio. Practically she needs more help from him, while emotionally, there is a new tension between them. It is interesting that in this case the blind woman is not the victim as per Kleege’s tropes, nor is she the object. Ignacio’s

¹⁶⁵ Meruane, p.34.

¹⁶⁶ Lina Meruane: Blood in the eye by Mark Reynolds <http://bookanista.com/lina-meruane/> [accessed 20 July 2019].

¹⁶⁷ Martin Heidegger translated by Albert Hofstadter, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking, from Poetry, Language, Thought*, (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971). http://www.wwf.gr/images/pdfs/pe/katoikein/Filosofia_Building%20Dwelling%20Thinking.pdf [accessed 11 October 2019].

¹⁶⁸ Meruane, p.48.

friends see her as the one with control, the one telling the story, directing the narrative.^{169, 170} Lina proposes a break in her relationship with Ignacio. This is described through Lina's voice, but in a distancing move, the words she writes she ascribes to Ignacio's friends.¹⁷¹ Although they attribute power to her, Lina is not named, she has become 'the blind woman'. She can no longer use her own words, but relies on those of others, on their perceptions of her relationship. The brackets which enclose the sections of *Seeing Red* that explore Lina and Ignacio's relationship denote information which is not essential to the main point. In losing her sight her relationship with Ignacio, her views, her words, have become inessential and her identity continues to fade.¹⁷²

Lina and Ignacio are in the taxi on their way to the airport at the start of her journey to Chile when Lina has a revelation: "what I saw in that moment, in terror, with true consternation, was that I was about to lose everything Ignacio gave me. I would no longer have his arms to guide me, his legs to direct me, his voice to warn me. I wouldn't have his sight to make up for the absence of my own, I would be left even more blind."¹⁷³ Only the proposed loss of all this assistance truly brings it home to Lina how much she has been relying on Ignacio's body to supply her physical needs, how his senses fill in the gaps in her own. She becomes intensely aware of her own lack, and describes the separation, like, a wound, a laceration while Ignacio performs the last actions of paying for the cab, taking her bag, showing her visa at the passport check. And then he announces that a wheelchair has arrived.

"What wheelchair. I started to laugh, but don't laugh, Ignacio told me, I'm serious about the chair. A chair. A *wheelchair*? Why did you ask for that? I have two legs. Ignacio put his arms round me while I fought him, elbows flapping, but he put his arms firmly around me and soon he was a straitjacket ... a straitjacket that not only squeezed me until I cracked, it covered me in kisses: my temple, my nose, my ear. The straitjacket talked in my ear in a barely audible voice and convinced me it was better for an airport employee to take me through immigration and go with me to the gate. That way I wouldn't have to hold anyone's hand."¹⁷⁴

Readers may find this paragraph – a problematic and dense passage – difficult. There is a lot in the paragraph, which is the most problematic moment in the entire book for me. It is the culmination of her objectification as a blind woman. In preparation to cross a border, Lina is forced

¹⁶⁹ Kleege, p.48.

¹⁷⁰ Meruane, p.36.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Meruane, p.38.

¹⁷³ Meruane, p.39.

¹⁷⁴ Meruane, p.40.

to accept her status as object to be moved by others. This acceptance of her state is forced on her by the person she is most intimate with. Ignacio uses physical force, which she likens to a straightjacket. The passage brings out the underlying conflict in their relationship, the power he has over Lina as a blind woman: his behaviour becomes that of an abuser, a violent coloniser. The wheelchair has not been discussed prior to the moment it arrives. This decision is imposed on her: she is straightjacketed until she acquiesces. More than a chair on wheels, the wheelchair symbolises Lina's disempowerment. She has lost her sight, an impairment forced on her by her body, restricting her freedom and movement and changing her identity. Now, she is further disabled by her lover, as he forced her into the wheelchair, restricting her freedom, denying her ability to choose her own movements and adding further barriers to her mobility: in the chair she is limited to routes with ramps or lifts.

Lina has completed her transition from person to patient¹⁷⁵, and to object: regardless of whether she can see or not the porter pulls the chair rather than pushes it so she travels backwards. She has no option to use her residual vision to see where she is going and is merely an object to be transported.

Forced into the wheelchair, Lina aspires to invisibility. She also hopes that it will give her a newfound mobility, stealth rather than unsighted clumsiness. Unsurprisingly to anyone who has ever used a wheelchair, she cannot, does not vanish in the way she wants. Her position in the chair becomes conspicuous.¹⁷⁶ I want to explore a little further the phenomenon of being observed, being seen, comparing an experience which Franz Fanon writes about with one that Lina experiences. Fanon writes:

“‘Look, a Negro!’ It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

‘Look, a Negro!’ It was true, it amused me. ‘Look, a Negro!’ The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement. ‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened.’ Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.”¹⁷⁷

Lina/Lucina is at the hospital recovering from surgery to one of her eyes when she finds herself being watched by a girl and her mother. The mother speaks to the girl: “Don’t look at her, she’s looking at you, she repeated, though without the slightest modesty she brazenly ran her own

¹⁷⁵ If you look at the definition of patient, it is one who endures, suffers, a recipient of care. ‘Patient’ in *Oxford English Dictionary* [online] <https://0-www-oed-com.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/view/Entry/138820?rskey=EhJcD9&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> [Accessed 17 July 2020].

¹⁷⁶ Meruane, p.46.

¹⁷⁷ Fanon, pp.111-2.

eyes over me: both of hers staring at my lack of one. It's not polite, she explained, though still blasting me with her gaze."¹⁷⁸ The words she uses convey the hostile force she feels from their gaze, she is run over by it, blasted: both experiences leave one injured, damaged, dead. Their gaze is an attack, it is brazen. The gaze is an active othering, where the seeing subject is dominant, and the person viewed is reduced to an object. Stephen Frosh writes, "The black subject, subjected to the racist gaze, sees itself in the white mirror that removes the possibility of self-assertion and mastery and instead creates further fragmentation. The black subject is positioned as an object ('I was an object in the midst of other objects') and does not appropriate the fantasy of integrated subjectivity. What has happened is that the black subject has been fixed by an external gaze."¹⁷⁹ The object-person is only there to be looked upon, to be feared, rejected. In a way that recalls Frosh's and Fanon's analyses, the mother in *Seeing Red* who exhorts her child not to look at Lina while staring herself wants to distance herself and her child from Lina's one-eyedness. She wants to reassure herself that they are not like Lina, that if they look away, they are avoiding blindness, yet she cannot remove her gaze. For Lina, just as for Fanon, they cannot see their own selves other than as an object of fear and revulsion: the gazes of mothers and children define and destroy their identity.

Lina has been visiting eye doctors since being diagnosed with diabetes as a child:

"I've been thinking since the first time I went, against my will, into an eye doctor's waiting room. Since then I've done nothing but think about the future and how I'll never see it. Think about that twisted and recalcitrant doctor saying I was carrying a time bomb inside me, ticking faster and faster. He reported all the medical details to my mother, I went on, as if I wasn't sitting right there beside her and getting splashed by all the sticky, acidic saliva he was spouting. The doctor never looked at me, both the thick lenses of his eyeglasses are burned into my memory, and the clogged corneas crisscrossed with thin lines, those miserable, miniature eyes that from this doctor's very depths had foreseen this moment."¹⁸⁰

Ignacio denies these decades of consideration of blindness when he fails to believe she might lose her sight. Lina's experiences at the doctors resonate with Kleege's early experience with an eye doctor as mentioned in chapter two. The doctor talks to Lina's mother, denies her presence, and fails to even see her through his own myopic eyes. Lina is haunted by her early experiences with the eye doctor: "his eyes made me more afraid than the future of my own, because they are eyes that have followed me and are still coming after me; even in dreams..."¹⁸¹

On losing her sight Lina's visits to the ophthalmologist become more urgent, more necessary, and simultaneously more difficult. In the immediate aftermath of the haemorrhages, she

¹⁷⁸ Meruane, p.151.

¹⁷⁹ Stephen Frosh, Psychoanalysis, colonialism, racism, *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 33.3 (2013) pp.141-154.

¹⁸⁰ Meruane, p.20.

¹⁸¹ Meruane, p.21.

seeks an appointment with her specialist, waits for his call, reminding us of the passive position of patient. She is told to wait for the doctor's return from a conference, then her wait is doubled when the promised Friday appointment doesn't materialise. Lina is doubly disempowered here, by Ignacio taking the call and relaying information to her, by the collusion between the doctor and secretary to delay her appointment even further.¹⁸²

When she finally gets to see him, Lina and Lekz perform familiar moves while he examines her eyes. Thanks to the clear cornea, the doctor can normally see inside Lina, can view parts of her she cannot view herself. She has allowed him the intimacies of seeing inside her, and has allowed him to burn her, something no-one would allow in normal circumstances outside the medical setting.¹⁸³, ¹⁸⁴ The power of the doctor is such that when they explain that they will destroy part of your body, you allow them. Yes, this is based on 'knowledge' that a doctor is duty bound to act in the interest of their patient. It is backed up by a belief that the effectiveness of medical interventions is supported by research, something that is sometimes true. Other interventions occur because they have been seen to have worked in the past. However, as Lina discovers, doctors are fallible, reliable treatments such as the laser intervention she has had for diabetic retinopathy are not always effective, and not effective for all time. Lina makes the same moves as she has always done, Lekz plays his part, but they are both faced with a new challenge to their relationship now that her blood vessels have haemorrhaged and she can no longer see.

Lekz now takes his time, "bypassing the routine, eluding the exam, taking an interest in the detailed account of that night, the party and the days that followed: what I had seen and what I could no longer distinguish." Lekz's shift acknowledges that something new is required in their relationship, and anticipates the failure of his skills. They are both faced with the same challenge: as Lina's vitreous is clouded with blood she cannot see out and Lekz cannot see the source of the leaking blood vessels. Lekz loses power. "What do you see, doctor? What are you seeing?" Lina is forced to ask for an insight into her own body, challenging her agency. "But the doctor only let out perplexed sighs. He was seeing the same thing I was, I realized. The same bloody nothings I saw."¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Meruane, p.22.

¹⁸³ Meruane, p.31.

¹⁸⁴ Ophthalmologists treat diabetic retinopathy, the proliferation of small, fragile blood vessels at the back of the eye, by burning the source of the vessels with a laser. This causes small blind spots, but is done with the aim of preventing the friable blood vessels from leaking: as Lina discovers, a leaking blood vessel can cause temporary sight loss. More seriously, diabetic retinopathy can cause scarring and contraction which pulls on the retina leading to permanent sight loss.

¹⁸⁵ Meruane, p.32.

In this moment the power dynamic shifts, Lekz becomes Lina's equal: neither of them can see what matters.

Time passes, and Lina returns to Chile to wait for the blood to be reabsorbed. Her father is a cardiologist, and she writes,

“he doesn't know anything about ailing retinas. I know he'll ask for my test results out of habit; still sitting in my wheelchair, I prepare myself to tell him I didn't bring them, I didn't bring anything, Dad, I tell him. None of them? he asks, and I say no, not the angiography or the optical tomography or the fundus of the eye. I left hundreds of brutal images behind. I left the perimetry behind because it was depressing.”¹⁸⁶

Lina takes control of this conversation through negation: despite a paragraph packed with jargon this is one consultation she is not going to have. Her father is not her ophthalmologist nor anyone else's, and so she retains her power, denying him knowledge. Lina continues, “I've never wanted you to be my doctor, it is enough for you to be my father,” which illuminates her refusal, which explains why she reverts to childish non-compliance, echoes something unsatisfactory about her childhood relationship with her father-doctor. Lina has detected sorrow in her father's voice when he sees her on arrival, but this is no longer just for her loss of sight, but also for his own loss of agency. The power he held through his medical knowledge is diminishing, changed by the passage of time. He has nothing now to offer her as a doctor: their relationship must be purely father-daughter.

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Over the month's wait prescribed by her doctor, Lina's vision does not improve enough for her to see adequately and she is called in for surgery in a room “stuffed full of eye doctors of varying shapes and sizes, all distorted and a little double.”¹⁸⁸ These eye doctors appear alien and other, yet Lina has to trust them with her sight, with her whole being as she is anaesthetised. A collective violation, her body is entered by the anaesthetic chemicals, by the doctors' instruments: her being is encroached upon by the men who have gathered to watch, to manhandle the blind woman. In her anaesthetised haze she hears them speak: “Someone else uses the phrase hormone aided growth. If she were a man this wouldn't have happened.”¹⁸⁹ They talk about her as if she is not there, and perhaps for them she is not, she is nothing more than a ‘skeleton covered in muscle and fat’. You

¹⁸⁶ Meruane, p.49.

¹⁸⁷ Meruane, p.50.

¹⁸⁸ Meruane, p.149.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

might have thought sight loss was non-gender specific, that diabetes did not discriminate, yet Lina/Lucina feels she is penalised for being a woman and losing her sight.¹⁹⁰

After the surgery, Lina enters the doctor's office to discover the future for her eyes, her sight, herself: "You'll be blind in no time. Stop."¹⁹¹ Following this gunshot of a verdict, Lina raises the issue of an eye transplant: "We only have a transplant left, doctor, you owe it to me," she says. That said, science has not yet developed a successful retinal transplant. Lina still hopes, demanding the solution she needs. "It's only been tried on animals," the doctor replies while he doodles round Lina's diminishing name. Reduced by her experience of sight loss, stripped of her person, seen as other, Lina tells him she is only "an animal who wants to stop being one".¹⁹²

Lina the writer

In terms of *Seeing Red*, the title of this section, Lina the writer, has dual meaning: it could refer to Lina the protagonist or Lina the author of *Seeing Red*: they are both writers. Lina the author explains in an interview how she began to write a memoir which swiftly became something else:

"maybe twenty pages in I realised that my writing was taking me into fiction, that I wasn't so interested in what had happened, but in the questions that had come up later. Ten, maybe twelve years had elapsed and in the meantime I had read a lot and thought a lot and talked to a lot of people, so the focus of my interest had changed. I realised writing allowed me to explore not only the literal experience of going blind, but the relationships surrounding this character and questions of love and unconditionality, and also the very interesting ways that we talk visually about our life, and how visual language is. Also the way I tend to write uses a lot of free association, so one word will bring me to something else and take me further away from the real. So I allowed myself to do that. I think fiction allows one to take reality and then take it somewhere else, places that are more interesting."¹⁹³

This paragraph illuminates *Seeing Red*. Authorial life does not give a key to a text – but what does life-experience give the writer and consequently the reader? A writer writes from their own experiences and those they gather from others. What we imagine is, at its very root, grounded in what we know and have experienced. The acts of creativity, putting words on paper, takes us 'away from the real'. Even a news report written moments after something has happened is separate from the event itself. As Coetzee writes, it is necessary that any author "believes sincerely in the truth of what one is writing at the same time that one knows it is not the truth."¹⁹⁴ The fictional Lina's

¹⁹⁰ Clinical research shows diabetic eye disease is not necessarily influenced by gender GY Ozawa, MA Bearse Jr, AJ Adams Male-female differences in diabetic retinopathy? *In Current Eye Research* 40.2 (2015) pp.234-46 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25545999> [accessed 10 October 2019].

¹⁹¹ Meruane, p.156.

¹⁹² Meruane, p.157.

¹⁹³ Mark Reynolds *Lina Meruane: Blood in the eye* <http://bookanista.com/lina-meruane/> [accessed 20 July 2019].

¹⁹⁴ J. M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz *The Good Story: exchanges on truth, fiction and psychotherapy* (New York: Vintage 2016) p.76.

experiences in *Seeing Red* reflect on her self, and her identity as a writer. Offering up another key to *Seeing Red*, she explains, “how I’d started in journalism, but then they kicked me out for falsifying the objective truth of the facts, and I moved on to fiction, one hundred per cent pure.”¹⁹⁵ Here Lina flags a truth behind *Seeing Red*: the novel is not the journalist’s ‘objective truth’, but still is something pure.

It is not until mid-way through the book that Lina the protagonist first addresses herself as writer, and observes how her sight loss has affected her writing and her identity: “Weren’t you the writer?” the doctor, Lekz, asks during one consultation. Lina thinks: “about the word writer next to a verb in the past tense, the past of the books I’d written and wasn’t sure I would go on writing.”¹⁹⁶ Instead of writing, Lina anaesthetises herself with a stream of audiobooks until called to account by her poet friend Raquel. Since moving apartments Lina has lost the draft of her novel, and she says, “My memory was another blackout.” Lina uses black, dark, and blackout to consign her writing self to the past. “You can’t give up,” Raquel insists. “it’s not giving up. It’s an interruption, a temporary impossibility.” “Did you forget yourself too?” And Lina struggles to remember not just the plot or the location of the pages she has written, but “the identity my blood has drowned.” She frames this as some sort of self-immolation: her identity as writer destroyed by her own blood, interior action against her own psyche. In the throes of blindness Lina is unsure that she will be the same person and suggests she will have to start the novel again, indicating how words and plot are inextricably bound with the author, even in fiction. Lina continues, “I couldn’t even be sure it would be easy to go back to writing the same way once I was me again, if that ever happened.” ‘Once I was me again’: unsighted, Lina is not herself.

Her disintegration continues after continuing pressure to return home for medical care. Following a stream of phone calls with reverse charges, Lina cracks:

“And I was paying for that affront with a new technical glitch in my anatomy. They insinuated that returning to Chile to be with my parents was the right thing to do. They half said it while the timer ran on my international bill, and they finally said it while I visualized my body being sucked into an abyss, my skeleton covered in its muscle and fat falling vertiginously toward Chile, my skin stretched ever tighter, my hair electrified, all my parts attracted by the law of national gravity as I turned into an amorphous substance that, when it fell, would flatten the rest of my numerous family.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Meruane, p.21.

¹⁹⁶ Meruane, p.102.

¹⁹⁷ Meruane, p.36.

Reflecting Freud's death drive,¹⁹⁸ she ceases to be a person, loses her self and identity, becomes a mere mass of the elements that make up the human body, and this is driven by 'national gravity', the pull towards one's own nation, something that is brought to life by the voices of her family members down the telephone line. Lina feels like she is falling, becoming less human with every inch she falls, all with a single, shocking, final aim of annihilating her family while they try to pull her to them.

Writing is enmeshed with identity in *Seeing Red*. The fictional Lina is completing her PhD thesis and working on a novel. Lina's academic supervisor Silvina calls her, chides her for stopping writing, encourages her to dictate her novel or a diary. In the face of Lina's refusal, Silvina says, "You do realize that you're making Lina Meruane disappear? And I, unhesitating, told her that Lina Meruane would come back to life as soon as the blood was in the past and I had my sight again."¹⁹⁹ Skip twenty pages or so to the end of the book, and Lekz tells Lina that the operation has only succeeded in part: already new fragile blood vessels are growing, and further haemorrhages are likely. What does this news do to Lucina the child who has been anaesthetised into some sort of medical limbo, to Lina the writer who is vanishing?

In the face of Lina's resistance to starting to write again, Raquel points out that being a writer is not purely a function of putting pen to paper, finger to keyboard: "Because you don't write, she said, with just your eyes and hands. So for now, she added, as if giving her final order: right now, as soon as we hang up, start writing in your head."²⁰⁰ We have all plotted out stories in our minds, but beyond this, blind or not, if she considers herself a writer in her mind, she can cling on to that part of herself during the physical and psychological assault she is undergoing. Writing is a way of building one's identity: "it has been said that in autobiographical writing, a self and life are made; that autobiography is constitutive of the self and the life that it ostensibly describes... this 'self' and its telling are made in the writing act."^{201, 202} Although this quote refers to autobiography, I believe it also applies to the double layered writing within *Seeing Red*, where memoir has bled into fiction. In writing, one not only documents what has happened, but one creates something new.²⁰³ Presenting

¹⁹⁸Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, *Pelican Freud Library* vol XI (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1984).

¹⁹⁹ Meruane, p.137.

²⁰⁰ Meruane, pp.68-69.

²⁰¹ Alison Ravenscroft *Post Colonial Eye* p.91.

²⁰² Sidonie Smith *Performative, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance A/B: Auto/Biography Studies* 10.1 (1995) pp.17-33.

²⁰³ For a fuller discussion of the overlap between autobiography and fiction, see J. M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (New York: Vintage 2016).

information in the written form has an active effect. As shown by Kleege, Bolt and Hull, writing after sight loss builds and develops the author's identity. Lina Meruane says,

“I was listening to Sarah Baume at the Edinburgh Festival, and she was saying that she had worked on a personal experience which she had fictionalised to the point where she couldn't remember what had actually happened, she could only remember the written version. I had the same experience, where the real thing has sort of dissolved and now I only have the novel as some sort of reference.”²⁰⁴

At the end of *Seeing Red* Lina's sight is partially restored but the threat of permanent sight loss hangs over her. In the final scenes she leaves Lekz and threatens to return with an eye which he can transplant into her. Throughout the book she has obsessed with Ignacio's eyes, kissing them, licking them: is this the point where she will steal them? Somewhat similarly, at the close of *Blindsided*, Nour can see through one eye but not the other. Lina has the promise of further sight loss, while Nour has hope that her vision will improve, and she has her child, symbol of something new and good coming out of trauma, out of the invasion of her body and her loss of power. In both books, we live with the protagonists through a state of in-betweenness, in a period of imperfect vision. *Blindsided* tells the story of how conflict and colonisation can lead to something new, whereas *Seeing Red* focusses on that which is lost, shows that there is no going back to a former state after colonisation. We have to move forwards: change cannot be undone.

Throughout *Seeing Red*, which is written in the first person, the reader 'sees' things that Lina the protagonist could not see due to her sight loss, things which Lina the author has the power to see. As she writes in the section entitled **hours** which describes Lina's operation, “This was seen by other eyes.”²⁰⁵ Lina the author is wrapped into every word that Lina the protagonist says or thinks. By the act of writing Lina the author is able to shape the narrative around her experiences of sight loss. In positioning herself as author and protagonist she is able herself to recount her story and reencounter it as a stranger. In this uncanny doubling, Lina calls upon the promise of immortality through writing.²⁰⁶ The combined Lina/author/protagonist has all the power, control over the narrative and knows the future. Her real experience has already dissolved, has passed, and only the words on the page remain. In both books, the protagonists' lives and identities are transformed by their changing vision. Blinded, Nour sees something new. And if Lina the protagonist can continue to

²⁰⁴Mark Reynolds Lina Meruane: Blood in the eye <http://bookanista.com/lina-meruane/> [accessed 20 July 2019].

²⁰⁵ Meruane, p.118.

²⁰⁶ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle state that, “the author cannot die precisely because, as we've been suggesting, the author is – always has been and always will be – a ghost.” Andrew Bennett, Nicholas Royle *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2009) p.23.

write as Lina the author has done, this act of writing has the potential to give her back her self and help her find her new, unsighted, identity.

Conclusion

I have worked on *Blindsided* since 2013. In that time many things have changed. Personally, I completed a Master's degree in creative and critical writing and moved on to the Ph.D. I have read as much as I could, from academic work, to blogs to fiction, to memoir, all with a focus on experiences of sight loss.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, I have found immense value in reading works written by people with sight loss, which helped me to narrow the focus of my critical paper.

Each of the books I have focussed on, *Notes on Blindness*, *Seeing Red*, *Sight Unseen* and *The Metanarrative of Blindness*, bring a different perspective. The authors take blindness beyond metaphor and plot device, beyond anatomical or physiological phenomenon. These texts encompass genres and disciplines from academic to memoir to fiction, literary and disability theory. What brings them together, however, is the way that each demonstrates the enmeshing of theory with experience. Each book is stronger as a result. Each author simultaneously writes about a personal experience and at the same time develops observer status, building their own authority. Writing does not only give them control over their own experiences in the way they retell them, it also allows them to shape and change how blindness is perceived by those without personal experience. In this way, this new wave of writers is creating a new narrative of sight loss.

In this paper I have also uncovered the value in works that cross genres and academic disciplines. *Seeing Red* started as memoir then morphed into fiction. *Notes on Blindness* was first voice notes, recorded by an academic, which then became a memoir and subsequently a film. *Sight Unseen* successfully meshes literary analysis with personal experience to create a book which can be read by academics and the general reader. Finally, *The Metanarrative of Blindness* brings together disability theory and literary theory, along with a small selection of David Bolt's experiences. Human beings learn through narrative; this cross-disciplinary approach is reflected within this paper, within *Blindsided*, and in the way that the requirements for my doctorate demand a critical and creative element.²⁰⁸

This crossing of genre and of discipline demonstrates the benefits of continua over rigid boundaries. In this paper I hope that I have also demonstrated that sight loss is not one thing, and perhaps more importantly, that there is a gradual progression from sighted to blind, and that blindness is rarely absolute. The binary opposition between sighted and blind should, like many binaries, be rewritten, reimagined. Readers, authors, and critics need to move from the past where the blind man or

²⁰⁸ Project Narrative *What is Narrative Theory?* <https://projectnarrative.osu.edu/about/what-is-narrative-theory> [accessed 22 September 2020].

woman is a two-dimensional trope, a foil for the main character, perhaps there to provide an interesting plot device. Instead we need to acknowledge our hybridity: we all lose sight as we age, blindness is a possibility for us all. Beyond this, we see more than just the visual, and absence of knowledge to knowledge is, very clearly, a sliding scale too.

Another change that has taken place during the period where I have written *Blindsided* is in the narrative about race. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on Twitter was first used in July 2013.²⁰⁹ At the time, I was writing *Blindsided* with a white, male protagonist – but I had concerns. The story was there, but it lacked nuance. After some discussions, I rewrote the first draft with a female protagonist. Unlike Adam, who moved to a subsidiary role in the book, Nour came from a background of conflict. But like many of the young women and girls I grew up with in South London, her identity was far more bound up with what she would become than with where she had come from. Nour’s hybrid identity, and her gender, gave far more scope to the plot of *Blindsided*, and enabled me to better address issues of power and identity.

At the same time as I was writing, the words cultural appropriation came into more common usage. I have addressed two writers’ views on this within the critical paper because, in *Blindsided*, I have used cultural backgrounds that are mine and not mine. The book takes us from London to Mali, back to London and then to Egypt. In writing about characters who are similar to me and those who are different, I am doing what most authors do: yet I still own a degree of unease about the elements of Nour’s life that are different to what I have lived. The term cultural appropriation is generally applied to race and cultural background, but more rarely to disability: it could also apply to someone with sight writing as a character with sight loss. I want *Blindsided* to make a positive contribution to developing readers’ understanding of sight loss, but in a question that may be unanswerable, I ask whether my experiences of sight loss, of disability, are enough.

Over the time I have been writing it, *Blindsided* has changed. I have changed. If I was starting the book today it might not be the same book. It was written about a very specific period in Mali’s history. If I was writing the same book now, I would have a different perspective on Mali, and I might also make different decisions about the protagonist’s race and gender. However, I am not sure that would make for a better story. It certainly would not make a better basis for a doctoral project.

Writing is a change agent. Nour is changed by her experiences in *Blindsided*. Positioning oneself as a writer changes how one is perceived by others: something that Kleege, Bolt and Hull experience.

²⁰⁹ Monica Anderson, Skye Toor, Lee Rainie, Aaron Smith, *Activism in the Social Media Age* <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/11/an-analysis-of-blacklivesmatter-and-other-twitter-hashtags-related-to-political-or-social-issues/> [accessed 22 September 2020].

Beyond that, being an author, one deliberately sits on the periphery and observes even one's own experience. Writing something to be viewed by others affects the way authors put their real life experience on paper. By writing like this, we edit our own lives.

The way I think about vision and insight, about blindness and sight loss, about power and identity has changed as I have worked on my thesis. *Blindsided*, and the critical paper accompanying it, have been written with the aim of making a unique contribution to knowledge. Accepting my questions on my own perspective, knowledge and understanding, accepting that the world is rightly asking questions about who gets to tell which stories, I believe that the novel and critical paper do what I set out to achieve.

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Appendix 1

Even a rapid glance at the language we commonly use will demonstrate the ubiquity of visual metaphors. If we actively focus our attention on them, vigilantly keeping an eye out for those deeply embedded as well as those on the surface, we can gain an illuminating insight into the complex mirroring of perception and language. Depending, of course, on one's outlook or point of view, the prevalence of such metaphors will be accounted an obstacle or an aid to our knowledge of reality. It is, however, no idle speculation or figment of imagination to claim that if blinded to their importance, we will damage our ability to inspect the world outside and introspect the world within. And our prospects for escaping their thrall, if indeed that is even a foreseeable goal, will be greatly dimmed. In lieu of an exhaustive survey of such metaphors, whose scope is far too broad to allow an easy synopsis, this opening paragraph should suggest how ineluctable the modality of the visual actually is, at least in our linguistic practice.

Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth century French thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994) p.1

Appendix 2

"I was pronounced legally blind in 1967, when I was eleven, though my condition probably developed a year or two earlier. I have no memory of losing my sight. I imagine it took place so gradually that I was unaware of what I was not seeing. The only outward sign was that I began to read with the book very close to my eyes. Everyone assumed that I was simply nearsighted, but tests did not show this. My cornea and lenses refracted normally. Remarkably, my doctor did not pursue the matter, even though the early signs of retinal damage should have been revealed in a standard eye exam. Apparently such damage was not what he was looking for. Instead, he jumped to the conclusion that I was faking, even though I was not the sort of child who would do that. My parents and teachers were advised to nag me into holding the book away from my face. For a while I complied, keeping the book at the prescribed distance, turning pages at appropriate intervals. Then, when no one was looking, I would flip back and press my nose to the page. Eventually it became clear to everyone that this was not a phase that I was going to outgrow. Additional tests were performed. When it was all over, my doctor named my disorder 'macular degeneration,' defined my level of impairment as legally blind, and told me that there was no treatment or cure, and no chance of improvement. And that was all. Like many ophthalmologists then and perhaps now, he did not feel that it was his responsibility to recommend special education or training. He did not send me to an optometrist for whatever magnification devices might have been available then. In 1967 the boom in high-tech 'low vision' aids had not yet begun. He said that as long as I continued to perform well at school, there was no point in burdening me with cumbersome gadgetry or segregating me from my classmates. He did not tell me that I was eligible to receive recorded materials for the blind. He did not even explain legal blindness, much less the specifics of my condition - I did not find out what my macula was for several years. He said nothing about adaptation, did not speculate about what my brain had already learned to do to compensate for the incomplete images my eyes were sending. This was not his job. Since then I have heard accounts of other doctors faced with the dilemma of telling patients that there is no cure for their condition. They admit they sometimes see these patients as embarrassments, things they'd rather sweep under the carpet, out of public view. But as a child of eleven I did not understand his dilemma, and I assumed that his failure to give me more information was a measure of the insignificance of my problem. I was confused and scared, but also disappointed not to receive the glasses I expected him to prescribe. I left with no glasses, no advice, no explanations - nothing but the words macular degeneration, which I did not understand, and, more significantly, the word blind which I understood only too well.

But I did not use the word. I was not blind. Blind people saw nothing, only darkness. Blind meant the man in the subway station, standing for hours near the token booth, tin cup in hand, a mangy German shepherd lying on a bit of blanket at his feet. That was not how I saw myself. Surely there was some sort of mistake. Or else it was a lie, and as long as I did not repeat it, refrained from speaking the hateful word and claiming identity with the beggar in the subway, I could keep the lie from becoming a reality. Because if I were blind, or going blind, surely someone would do something about it. I'd read about Helen Keller. I knew what went on. Shouldn't someone be teaching me braille? At school they didn't use the word either. They moved me to the front row, stopped telling me to hold the book away from my face, and kept an eye on me. From this I understood not only that the word should not be spoken, but also that I shouldn't ask for special favors, shouldn't draw attention to my disability (a word I didn't use either), shouldn't make a spectacle of myself. I learned to read the blackboard from the motion of the teacher's hand while writing. If I suspected that I would have to read aloud in class, I'd memorize pages of text, predicting with reasonable accuracy

which paragraph would fall to me. The routines of my teachers saved me. Also, by the sixth grade, reading aloud was usually required only in French class, and then only a few sentences at a time. Outside of school, if other kids said, 'Look at that!' I determined from the tone of voice whether they saw something ugly, strange, or cute and would adjust my response accordingly. On the bus I counted streets to know my stop. In elevators I counted buttons.

The most I would admit to was a "problem with my eyes," sometimes adding, "and they won't give me glasses," indicating that it was not me but the wilfully obstructionist medical establishment, which, was to blame for my failure to see as I should.

Many years later, in Paris, I met a banker who announced to me, as he shook my hand, that he had un probleme with his eyes. He explained that this was why he couldn't look me straight in the eye. I understood that a person in his profession had to say something. For him, as for a used-car dealer or clergyman, failure to maintain a direct gaze would affect his business. I noted, too, that he did not use the words aveugle, malvoyant, nor any medical term, nor any other phrase I could translate into one of the current American ones to designate impaired sight. The imprecision of his phrase allowed for the possibility that the problem might be temporary, a side-effect of medication, an adjustment to new glasses. But the tension in his tone gave him away. He was a French banker of the old school. His suit was that particular shade of navy, and his repertoire of elegant pleasantries was extensive. Everything about him was calculated to affirm, in the most reassuring way, that he could dispatch even the most distasteful or compromising financial matter, with discretion so deft that it would seem effortless. But his own phrase, "un probleme avec mes yeux " tripped him up. In his rehearsed delivery, his haste to move the conversation along, I recognized the uncomfortable anticipation of the usual responses, the hushed surprise, the "So sorry for your loss."

Reluctance to use the word blind, even in modified form, is as common as the desire to keep one's visual problems a secret. Many people conceal their sight loss for years, even from people close to them and certainly from strangers. They compose their faces in expressions of preoccupation. They walk fast, purposefully they do not ask directions. Forced to read something, they pat their pockets for reading glasses they do not own. When they make mistakes, they feign absentmindedness, slapping their foreheads and blinking - it feels safer to pretend they're addled and forgetful than to admit they are blind. And looking sighted is so easy. For one thing, the sighted are not all that observant. And most blind people are better at appearing sighted than the sighted are at appearing blind. Compare the bug-eyed zombie stares that most actors use to represent blindness with the facial expressions of real blind people, and you'll see what I mean.

An astonishing amount of the literature on the "training" and rehabilitation" of the blind deals with appearance, the visible manifestations of blindness. Eliminate 'blindisms;' the experts say, the physical traits to which the blind are allegedly prone-the wobbly neck, uneven posture, shuffling gait, unblinking gaze. Discolored or bulging eyes should be covered with patches or dark glasses, empty sockets filled with prostheses. But the books and pamphlets go further, urging that the blind, or their sighted keepers, be extra attentive to personal grooming and choose clothes that are stylish and color-coordinated. Having nice clothes and clean fingernails may contribute to a person's self-esteem whether or not she can see these things. And certainly hints about labeling socks or applying makeup can be useful. But the advice of the experts has another message: Blindness is unsightly, a real eyesore. No one wants to look at that.

So the blind, of all levels of impairment and all stages of sight loss, find themselves encouraged to sham sight. And even if there is no overt encouragement from well-meaning family members or social workers, we know, or sense instinctively, that our charade of sight is easier than the

consequences of speaking the single word blind. Because the word bears such a burden of negative connotations and dreaded associations, it can hardly be said to have any neutral, merely descriptive meaning. Blind means darkness, dependence, destitution, despair. Blind means the beggar in the subway station. Look at him slouching there, unkempt, head bowed, stationary among the rushing crowd. Intermittently, an involuntary twitch jerks his arm upward, making the coin or two in his cup clink. Otherwise he is silent, apparently speechless. A sign around his neck reads: "I'm blind. Please help.' Because blind means "needs help' " and also "needs charity." But the people rushing by barely oblige. They barely see him. They don't stop to stare, and they certainly do not expand their vision to allow for any other image of blindness. Told that there are blind people in all walks of life - medicine, law, social work, education, the arts -they are not impressed. They see those successes as flukes, exceptions, the beggar in the subway as the rule. Those people went blind late in life, after the habits of their professions were formed, and probably, if you looked closely, after their major accomplishments were already achieved. Or else they're not "really" blind. They have just enough sight to get by. Besides, they probably had special help. If, behind every great man there is a woman, in front of every accomplished blind person there is a sighted helper, spouse, child, or parent leading the way. Helen Keller had Annie Sullivan. Milton had his daughters.

The blind beggar stands alone. As long as we can manage, we keep our distance, both because he makes such a displeasing spectacle and because we know the consequences of claiming identity with him."

Source: <http://www.disabilityculture.org/course/kleege.htm> [accessed 9 September 2018]