

Souls of Her Daughters



Torment Culture Fear Shame...

Mala Naidoo

The Storm

Serene days, close to nature, was the elixir they needed. Relaxed, no ticking clocks, stretched out breakfasts, long bushwalks and the promise of a refreshing swim washed away thoughts of work for Patience and Felicity. Tranquility made Grace vulnerable, her inner voices grew louder. Daylight promised wholesomeness, her nights grew sinister.

Cold, wet nights unnerved her, making it possible for extended hours of work. Her disturbed nights remained undisclosed, she avoided upsetting Felicity's mood and plans. Stealing away for an hour each day under the pretext of working, helped her get a quick shut-eye to sustain her energy.

Night storms lashed across the state, making her restless and melancholic. Her mounting fears and dreams forced her to acknowledge she needed professional help.

At midnight while Felicity and Patience were asleep, she slipped out into the storm. Dressed in a pair of black pants and a white t-shirt, she held her face up to the lashing wind and rain. She yelled with as much force as she could muster, 'out, out you blasted demons! I want to feel whole again!'

Within seconds, she was a drenched, bedraggled, pitiful mess... Her water-saturated hair, dripped down her face, blurring her vision. She had been silent for too long, the surging voices within cried out for release.

'Cleanse me! Cleanse this sullied, tainted body!'

She walked around in a zombie-trance, digging her feet into the mushy ground, releasing all she kept bottled up. She sobbed like a child lost in the wilderness of a night storm.

Patience awoke to the crashing sound of thunder and flashing lightning. She strolled to the kitchen for a glass of water. Another blinding flash of lightning lit up the front yard, she saw Grace huddled on the ground. She woke Felicity up to gather blankets and towels, she had to bring her sister out of the storm.

A gentle, steady hand, on her shoulder, made her tremble... Patience stood beside her, face contorted with fear and tears. She sat on the ground with Grace, cradling her head in her lap with the maternal affection of their mothers.

Felicity stayed indoors, watching from the kitchen window, waiting for the calming of this cathartic moment. Grace was a desolate figure, hanging onto Patience as she guided her back to the cottage. Felicity rummaged through the laundry cupboard and found a large heater. They sat around the heater, sipping tea in silence.

Grace sat staring without blinking, her mind blank, frozen in the moment.

Unable to bear the stillness any longer, Felicity said, 'What possessed you to go walking out in the storm tonight?'

Patience pressed Grace's hand, in a very soft voice she said, 'later Felicity, later, Grace needs to rest and keep warm. We can sit here together for now.'

Nature heightened and unleashed her trapped storm, leaving her hapless, as the people closest to her, watched on, concerned and afraid.

Grace prepared herself for Felicity's questions and assumptions on the state of her mental health. A new wave of tension gripped her, she was not ready to bare her soul. Patience knew better than to ask probing questions.

Felicity, the self-appointed meals 'advocate' for the weekend, enjoyed watching others savour her meals. She promised herself with bitter reluctance, not to push to know why Grace acted out of character last night.

'Grace, I hope you're up to cooking your delicious chicken curry tonight. I brought flat-bread and pickles along so let me know how I can help.'

Grace struggled to summon an excited voice.

'I'd love to prepare dinner tonight, I find cooking therapeutic. Shall we make it a team effort? You've been asking me, for many years now, to show you how to make a curry, so let's do that together.'

'Wonderful, I need to sharpen and vary my cooking skills, a joint venture it shall be! I brought spices along, cumin, cardamom, chilli powder and ground ginger and garlic. I know the bare essentials of a South African curry but need to master the fine art. So what am I missing?'

'Coriander, curry leaves and a pinch of garam masala add to the flavour, but a spicy curry with what you have is possible.'

'What is 'garam masala'? Can I buy it at the Indian store in Melbourne?'

'You can, but mum, god bless her, taught me to grind my own. I will send you some when I get back home. It's fresher and aromatic with greater Ayurvedic benefit.'

Patience listened, gauging that Grace was in a better frame of mind which allowed her to tease her sister again.

'Hey doc, Ayurvedic healing? No pharmaceutical drugs today?' She laughed her infectious laugh that brought the house down. She knew Grace attached great value to natural healing and only prescribed drugs in dire circumstances.

'In nature, it has to be 'nature's way,'' Grace added, letting them know they didn't have to tip-toe around her.

Around midnight, after a hearty combination of chicken curry, bread, and pickles, it was time for soulful conversation. The gods smiled down on them that night - no storm, just a windy night which sent the wind chimes on the verandah into a spiral gyration. The melodic tinny and glassy sounds soothed their frayed nerves.

Grace cleared her throat in nervous anticipation of the response she would receive from what she was about to say.

'I cannot thank you both enough for helping me through last night. I'm experiencing burn-out, I've been working with not much time off since mum's passing. Am I coping? No, but I'm happiest when I'm helping others. The decision I've come to after some soul searching, is that I need professional help, I will see Dr Deakin again - the baggage is weighing me down...' She said this in one breath, looking out the window as she spoke, ashamed that *dependable, hardworking* Grace was a failure. Her legs twitched as she took a deep breath and continued, 'you both have been patient with me, it's time I worked on myself with the help of a professional.'

'It will make a world of difference! You won't know yourself.' Patience's acknowledgment looked beyond what Grace considered her failing, all she wanted was her sister to be whole and happy again.

Felicity nodded with a troubled, analytical gaze at Grace.

'Don't block anything that has disturbed you over the years, you must take Dr Deakin into your complete trust. We both want you to feel joyful again. Take leave from work to get your life in order.'

Grace appreciated Felicity's thoughtfulness but resented her dictating tone and suggestion she should take leave from work to 'get her life in order.'

'I'll begin the sessions with Dr Deakin and see how I go, it's a busy time at work.'

Felicity could be pushy, sometimes unable to pick up the cues of resistance to her suggestions.

'You need to look after **YOU**, Grace. I can't spell it out any more.'

Patience jumped in, 'she is doing that, Felicity, by starting with seeing Dr Deakin. I'm sure Grace will know at some point if leave is necessary for her wellbeing.'

Felicity's hard life had given her a thick skin. Her tenaciousness in coping with life's challenges made her insensitive to Grace's problems. She thrived on helping others, had influence in getting Patience on the road with her campaign for the safe-houses yet she always expected more from Grace.

Patience understood the challenges Grace went through in their years in South Africa, there was a part that Grace guarded, not letting anyone in, not even her mother.

The drive back to Melbourne was a slow, relaxed drive. They had an early morning flight back to Sydney. Felicity turned on the car radio, she enjoyed belting out songs, on road trips. She flicked through radio stations settling on *smoothfm 91.5*

Grace stiffened, the song playing, was familiar; it was the song in her dream. She learned forward, diving over Felicity in her scramble to turn off the radio.

'What on earth are you doing, Grace?' Felicity yelled, 'I almost lost control of the wheel with your sudden lunge. You could have asked me to turn it off if the music was not to your taste.'

Patience touched Felicity on the shoulder to stop her rant.

Grace sat rigid, transfixed, eyes, wide and staring, not hearing a word Felicity was saying.

'Felicity, we need to stop when it's safe, I need to get Grace out the car for a while, please stop at a safe clearing or at one of the roadside filling stations.'

Felicity still shocked by what had just happened, agreed to stop. The freeway was busy with people rushing home after the long weekend. She realised the song had triggered a painful memory for Grace. She knew South Africa was a violent country and yearned to understand what had spooked Grace.

She pulled up at a clearing off the road. A table and bench sat nestled, concealed among trees. Patience guided a withdrawn, silent and tired Grace to the bench.

In lowered tones, they spoke until Grace's equilibrium returned.

Felicity's agitation and concern pushed her into doing the unthinkable. She made a call while watching Grace and Patience engaged in conversation.

'Dr Deakin, its Felicity Cassano. Not sure if you remember me. I'm an acquaintance of Dr Grace Sharvin. I am concerned about Grace. It appears she is having a breakdown. You should call her when she gets back home, I fear something awful might happen to her.'

'Thank you Ms Cassano, I appreciate your concern. Grace or her next of kin will have to contact me, I cannot call her and explain that I am acting on your referral. I hope you understand what I'm saying. We cannot let our emotions get the better of us. I know you're, acting out of concern but I suggest you leave it up to Dr Sharvin.'

Felicity watched them return to the car. She had to keep silent about her call to Dr Deakin.

Grace apologised for delaying the trip home. Silence blanketed the rest of the drive to Melbourne.

They booked in at a hotel close to the airport, to avoid dense morning traffic from Felicity's St Kilda apartment.

Felicity was irritable and edgy that she was not privy to what had troubled Grace. Curiosity pushed her to probe further, 'when are you going to explain what happened in the car?'

'This is not the right time to expect an explanation, Felicity, can we leave it there for now?' Patience felt compelled to assume guardianship over her sister once again to protect her pride and dignity.

They exchanged a cool goodbye. Patience dreaded the badgering she would get from Felicity for a detailed recount of their conversation on the bench, in the middle of nowhere.

www.malanaidoo.com

Souls of Her Daughters can be found in print and eBook versions

<https://www.amazon.com/Souls-Her-Daughters-Mala-Naidoo/dp/0648137716>

Mala Naidoo is the author of:

Across Time and Space

Vindication Across Time

Souls of her Daughters

The Rain – A Collection of Short Stories