

DAVID

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She had a shiny cherry-red frame, scooped alloy Harley handlebars and sleek metal pedals. Her wire basket-carrier was fitted with a double-handled cane lift-out. If I'd learned anything from Ahmed before we split (and Lord knew there wasn't much I'd got from him over the few years we were together), it was how to spot a good set of wheels. And this pushbike, she was fuck-off beautiful. The jumble of wheels, frames, spokes and assorted handlebars crowded around her in the window display at Ted's Cycles made me think of the bike dump round back of the Fitz commission tower.

Before we had Nile, Ahmed and I used to hang at the bike dump with the boys. I'd watch them all piecing together patchwork bikes from throw-outs we'd scabbed off kerbs or pulled out of skips. They were crazy, some of those contraptions Ahmed and them built: tiny little frames attached to oversized backward-mounted handlebars and gigantic heavy-tread wheels. Insanity in motion. Ahmed's mum was always going mental about him getting chain grease over his school clothes.

Hadn't seen Ahmed's mum since forever. Not since I fucked off with Nile and got my own council place. I knew what she would have been saying about me, though. I could hear her voice like she was standing right next to me outside the bike-shop window. *These children, born in this country, they think they can behave like the Australian children. They have no idea about the tradition and respect. In Sudan, a good wife knew how to keep her husband, and a good mother would not leave. My son and my grandson's mother – did you know they did not even get marry? Not even marry!*

I shifted my backpack on my shoulders, leaned in for a closer look. *Barkly Star*, read the shiny bronze sticker across her body. Strapped to the bike's back rack was an orange and blue baby seat: reality, barging right on fucking in.

Black clouds were on the move as I wheeled her out of the shop and onto Barkly Street – the fuck-awful

Melbourne rain about to come through. I pulled up the hood of my jumper, the one I nicked from Footscray Coles after they fired me, the winter before Nile was due. Snot-coloured, Ahmed had reckoned when I got back to the f lats with it. Jealous shit. I was always better at swiping stuff than him.

I'd had no car ever since Ahmed and me split, and Nile rode too fast on his trike for me to keep up walking beside him. I'd end up running along behind, yelling at him to wait up. Community Services were on my back then too, about weekly check-ins. Those wheels were gonna change my life, I knew it. Sure fucken thing. I spent most of my dole money buying that beauty, but the rent was already way behind. It was gonna be a fortnight of porridge and potatoes, but half the time I cooked other stuff Nile wouldn't look at it anyway.

These children, born in this country, do you think they feed their babies the aseeda for breakfast? Do they drop it on the little one's tongue to show them where is it they come from? Do you think they have learned to cook shorba soup? I tell you: no! They feeding them all kinds of rubbish. McDonald's, even. They spit on their randmothers' ways. They spit in our bowls, in our kitchens.

Wheeling the new bike up Barkly Street I noticed a woman, standing on the footpath, gawking. She was the colour of roasted coffee beans, a shade darker than me, wearing black from headscarf to shoes, carrying a string grocery bag. She cleared her throat, started on me. 'Little Sister, is that your bike?'

This young woman, she walking down Barkly Street with that red bike, brand new and for herself even though she look like she Sudanese and a grown mother too. Straight away, she remind me back of David. She remembering David to me.

Way back when things were better more good, before the trouble in my Sudan, a man in the village, Masud, who used to being mechanical engineer, he make my boys a bike. With own two hands, he builds it. I don't even knowing how he make it from scrap of metal around that place, tin cans even, but he did. And my little David, seven then, he look at that bike like he never saw a more beautiful thing. His brothers were too small to ride without adult helping, but David always on that bike. He riding it from one end of village to other one, poking his little-boy nose in about everything that going on.

Little David riding that bike so much that Masud tell him about country call France, where is very long bike race which will make you famous if you win. Long bike ride is call the Tour of France because it goes all over that country. After the day Masud told David about the famous bike race, every time David passes him on that bike Masud calls out to him. 'Here come David, on his Tour of Sudan!' he call.

My David, he would grow the biggest smile ever you saw when Masud say that.

'One day, David,' Masud say, carrying on to David to make him all proud and smiling. 'One day you will be so famous because of bike riding that they will name after you a beautiful bike.' David so dreamy he believe that might come true.

'Little Sister, is that your bike?' the woman said again.

She was my mother's age and looked like a Sudanese too, so I knew nothing I said was gonna be the right thing. Anyway, it wasn't really a question, just a kind of judgement, like when Mum found out I was knocked up; she never even looked up from her maize porridge. Mum never liked Ahmed. Liked him less than his mum liked me. Probably that was the reason we were ever together. To piss them the fuck off with all their whingeing and nagging.

I ignored the woman, made myself busy fitting my backpack into the bike basket, looked down at the weed-filled cracks in the pavement, at the shiny silver bike stand – anywhere but at her.

These children that born here in this country, they so disrespectful. They not even address us elders properly. Do not look us in the eye. Back in Sudan, you remember, we used to say Auntie and Uncle. We knew how to speak to one another with proper dignity. We would never ignore Auntie on the street.

'It is my bike, Auntie. Yes.'

The woman touched the back of the baby seat, looked me up and down. 'What will your husband think, when he sees?'

I wanted to laugh and say, 'What husband? Who even cares? My boyfriend was no good, so I left him. Now he's off with some slag down the Fitzroy Estate. But seriously, she can have him, bless the desperate thing! I've wanted a bike like this ever since I was six. So please, lady, hands off and back away from my childhood dream.'

You children, you have no respect, no manners. When you have lived long as we have, you will realise everything we said, it is for your own good. You should be show us respect, like real African children. You may have been born in this country, but do not forget where is it you came from.

I smiled sweetly. 'Oh, my husband won't mind, Auntie. After all, for better or worse, he has vowed to love me.'

The woman sucked her yellowing teeth, adjusted her headscarf, did that one-eyebrow raised thing at me. 'You don't *have* husband. Do you?'

We had been thinking about the army would come and destroy the village, since they took my husband Daud and his friend Samuel two year ago. But somehow, they leave us alone. Before, when we thought the Janjaweed must be about to come and burn our houses like they did to many others, we were always ready with bundles of food and clothes, but after years pass, we were thinking they don't care about us anymore – maybe they busy in Khartoum or near the border where there are more things to steal.

One day Amina, my friend and the daughter of Masud who build David his bike, she come running, tripping through the village screaming. 'Army! The army coming near! They just now burn the whole of Haskanita to the ground. It is the Janjaweed! We got to run!'

Everybody around us terrified, packing all what they can.

'Quickly, Asha, where your little ones?' Amina say to me. 'Where your boys are? No time to gather, you just bringing water and the boys!'

I am standing very still because is like when they come for my husband and Amina's husband and put them in the jail in Khartoum, like when last I saw my Daud.

Amina grab hold of me and put her hands on my face and hold my face to look at her face. 'Asha, already we lost Daud and Samuel – already we lose our husbands, but that is past now. Where the boys, Asha? Where your children? Or are you also wanting to losing the not-yet-men you give birth to, as well as the man you make them with?'

'Yes, I do have a husband.' Fuck her, for making a judgement on me.
These children, born in this country, they doing the sex and having babies and then not even wanting get marry. Oooh, if we did that back in Sudan, we would be cast out. The government would not give us money to raise our babies. Can you imagine us asking?

Rain was starting to fall now, and the peak-hour traffic along Barkly Street was bumper to bumper. I wheeled my bike quicker along the pavement, but Auntie kept in step with me.

'What does your mother think about the cutting of your hair off like that? Is not like a woman. So short afro. Is she alright about you wearing the jeans and riding around on the street? And where is your baby, Little Sister? The baby who going go on that bike seat? Baby will be missing you!'

They put the babies in the childcare and they let them looked after by strangers. Strangers! When the babies are not even yet out of nappies. Did you ever hear of such thing? Why they having the babies if they do not want to look after?

'It's okay, Auntie, I can handle myself. Bikes are awesome, though. If you want to, we could go up a side street where no-one will see. I'll hold the back while you have a ride. Then you can have a proper turn.'

It came out of my mouth before I had time to rethink.

'You are wicked,' Auntie choked, like she was trying to stop herself from laughing.

'You so funny, Sister. You Muslim girl?'

'No.'

She waited for my explanation.

'What religion you are, Little Sister?' she nosed again, scratching the outside elbow of her robe, shifting to one side of the footpath so an old Chinese man with a trolley could pass by us.

'None.' I shrugged, kept wheeling.

The woman's eyes opened wide. The whole of Barkly Street seemed to go quiet.

Everything around me silent. I suck the air into my mouth but I cannot talk. Amina, she push into the house and I turn around, following her. Clement and Djonni playing in the house with David. 'Boys, like I tell you would happen, the time is here, we must leave quietly, quietly,' I say. I get the water container and quickly roll up some bread and put some blanket in the bag. When we get out of the house, Masud

and Amina are waiting, but David, he say he going get his bike, he not leaving without it. Before we can catch him, he run. David run so fast towards the middle of the village where all the children play in the big fiori tree. That is where he left his bike. So fast he run away, his little legs kicking up the dirt.

'Get Asha and the boys to the edge of village. I will go back to get David,' Masud tell Amina, and he walk quickly after my boy. Masud was not young man anymore, and he did not run, but fast, fast he walk.

Amina pulling my arm. 'Don't be stupid, Asha, you got two boys with you and David safe with my father.'

The others in the village are running past quickly, quickly. Amina is pulling me to come away. Clement and Djoni, they crying. Masud disappear into the village and it swallow him up the way two minute ago it swallow little David.

One of the boys is on my back, the other on Amina's. Nothing else about that walk I am remembering, even now. When we get to edge of the village, we hide in the spot where we can see back a little bit. In the bushes. Some other people from the village there already, quiet, quiet. When we look back, the soldiers are not coming after us. The village is smoking and the soldiers busy smashing, burning. We hear a woman voice then, and she is screaming, screaming. Amina and me put our hands over Djoni and Clement ears.

After some hours, the boys fall asleep in the bushes.

Amina hold her hand over my mouth while I crying.

'Don't worry. My father keeping your David safe.'

She crying too, and we both know she is not talking about safe in our village, safe in Sudan, safe from militia, safe alive. The village is burning, and David and Masud are gone. I am praying then.

Amina praying also because her husband and now her father she has lost. Because of his love for my boy, her father is also gone.

Auntie walked along next to me, talking to herself. 'This girl! She has baby but no husband. Tsssk. She ride bike and she doesn't care even who see. She even going take the baby on it. Tsssk. No religion. No God. She cut her hair short and wear the jeans. Tsssssssk.'

The rain was getting heavier. I wanted to cut across the rail line and head up Geelong Road to Nile's occasional care, test out if this Barkly Star really did know how to shoot and shine.

'Auntie, nice meeting you,' I lied, f licking the halfway-down bike stand right up.

Auntie turned the corner beside me, grabbed my wrist tightly and whispered loudly into my ear, 'I have second husband. I very lucky. My first husband, he die back in my country. I have five children now. My husband, he is good man, but he would not like me riding. Here, nobody is watching. Quick. I can try and have a turn just this one time. You hold the bag.'

Hours, hours must be passing. We waiting for dawn light so can creep away from the bushes to another place without walking into dangerous thing. Sudden in the darkness, we hear a rattling. It is coming out of the smoke, louder, louder. Rattling, rattling. The boys still asleep but Amina and me, we are looking, looking through tree to see.

I laughed, sure that she was joking, but Auntie handed me her string grocery bag. She pulled her skirts tight around her legs to stop them getting caught in the chain, eased herself onto the bike and held on to the handlebars.

'Um . . . Auntie, have you ever ridden a bike before?'

Auntie shook her head no. The man who'd just passed us with his shopping turned curiously, stopped to watch.

'I'll hold the back for you. Are you sure you want to have a go?'

'Yes. I want to ride it, Little Sister. Thank you. I will have a try.'

It is David. Somebody hear my prayer because that noise, that rattling, rattling, it is David. He riding that bike to me fast, fast. He is pedalling, pedalling. Three men chasing a little bit after him, but he is soon leaving them in the distance. Some small piece of metal fall down off the pedal but that bike with my David on it is going faster, faster. David is almost to where we hiding, and he is laughing. My David is riding to me, smiling. The metal on that bike, it glinting, glinting in the darkness, like star or something.

Auntie was heavy – not overweight, but it was hard for me to hold her steady on the seat.

'Hold the handlebars straight,' I said. 'Move the front wheel where you want to go, and push the pedals.'

Auntie was zigzagging all over the place, as if she'd never steered anything in her life. It was a struggle to keep her on the bike.

'Steer it like a shopping trolley,' I suggested.

The bike straightened up then, and Auntie started pushing the pedals. I ran along behind, her grocery bag heavy over my shoulder.

'Slow down. Hey. *Shit*. Slow down!'

My foot caught on a crack in the pavement, and my fingers lost their grip on the bike seat. Auntie kept riding, pedalling faster, more furiously, until she was a few hundred metres away from me.

Then out David's laughing mouth come roar like a lion. Bright red roar like fire, like sunset, tomato-red roaring. David, he stop pedalling but the bike still rolling, rolling straight towards us. The roar spilling out behind the bike now, the red roar spraying from David's mouth out onto the bike, splashing onto the dirt and leaving dark patches where the dry ground drinking it in. David, he falling. The bike is falling. The men in the distance have stopped chasing, stopped coming towards us. The men in the distance look now very small. They are not men. Like David, they are boys. Two of the soldier boys are cheering and another one he is smiling and holding over his head a gun. Up and down, the boy with the gun jumping. I understand then, the Janjaweed soldier boys were racing my David, for the fun.

The bike swerved suddenly, skidded sideways. Auntie's skirt became caught up in the pedals. The bike toppled, and Auntie with it. Fuck. *Fuck*. When I reached her, she was untangling herself, shaking, crying, the scarf beneath her chin wet with tears. But the oddest thing was, with those big tears running down her face, Auntie was laughing.

'My David. He used to have the bike, back in Sudan. One day I saw him ride, ride that bike, so fast like he was f lying.'

'Oh.'

'Thank you, Little Sister. Thanking you. When I ride that bike I remembering my boy, riding towards me, laughing, how he laughing . . .'

I felt awkward, had no idea what she was talking about, but felt like I was somehow supposed to. Auntie took up her grocery bag from the ground, smoothed some dirt from her skirt, walked away slowly, down towards West Footscray Station. I stood there for a minute, staring after her. The rain had stopped. A small puddle of water had settled in the baby seat. Nile would be getting testy. It was half an hour past when I usually collected him. I threw my leg over the bike, started pedalling down the street. The Barkly Star was a dream to manoeuvre – smooth gliding, killer suspension, sharp brakes. Felt like I was hovering above the wet tar, f lying. Like there was nothing else in the world, except me and my wheels.

David. I slowly rolled her brand new name around my mouth.