

Faisal's

Tears

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Tears

by James Gardener

This book is for whenever a child cries.

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These first three stories are written for three brothers.

Faisal's Tears

Faisal grew up in Cape Town in a house on the slopes of Signal Hill looking over the Docks. He had two brothers, one older and one younger, Jamil and Arrie. Faisal's mother worked as a seamstress taking in mending, alterations and dressmaking orders from friends and neighbours. His father was a teacher at the school where Faisal and his brothers studied, made friends and played cricket.

As the boys grew up together, they would sometimes climb the slopes of Signal Hill above the house and sit looking over the city bowl, the mountain and the sea. Below them riding as if at anchor in Table Bay was the low, flat shape of Robben Island. They talked about what they wanted to do one day. Jamil always wanted to travel and his eyes were drawn to the ships in the Docks and to any planes passing overhead. Arrie wanted to play sport and he gazed long and hard at Green Point stadium, the golf course and the cricket fields below them. Faisal was never quite sure what he wanted and found himself concentrating on the tall buildings right in the centre of the city as he listened to his brothers talk.

Jamil was the first to leave home – on a bursary to study in Australia. He could hardly speak when the family saw him off at the airport and his post-cards soon began to fill the walls

of the room that Arrie and Faisal now shared.

Arrie joined Cape Town Cricket Club as a wicket keeper and quickly made enough runs to get an offer from a visiting English professional coach to spend a season with his county's second XI. His father objected at first until he had extracted a promise from Arrie that if it all went 'pear-shaped', he would sign up for a bookkeeping course in England. Faisal's mother managed to get him a ticket to Southampton on a mail ship where she had sewed officers' uniforms over the years and the whole family went down to the Docks to see him off. Faisal began to cut out occasional Lancashire cricket scorecards from the newspaper for his bedroom wall.

Faisal's own dreams continued to be hazy and softly focused. He finished up at school and took his father's advice to get a teaching qualification 'because you can always fall back on it'. One afternoon during his final year at teacher training college, he was walking home through Cape Town past the flower sellers in Adderley Street.

"Mister, you dropped your book, mister; mister should look af'er his books." An old woman clucked disapprovingly and carried on wrapping her bundles of arum lilies. Faisal turned and picked up the old black exercise book that the woman had spotted. It wasn't one of his books at all. There were plenty of scratches and scars on the cover but no name nor writing of any kind.

Nervously, he opened it up to the first page. In thick pencil handwriting there was the title, 'Laila forgets her please and thank-you's' and the first paragraph of what looked to Faisal

like a children's story. He glanced at the inside hard cover where somebody had stamped one of those 'This book belongs to: ' school stamps. On the blank line was written in ink in a different handwriting, 'The children of South Africa' and then underneath the stamped line, running away line by line to the bottom of the cover, 'Africa', 'The World', 'Our Galaxy', 'The Universe', 'Outer Space'.

Faisal snapped the book shut and held it close to his chest. A dried flower fluttered out and landed at his feet. He hastily slipped it back inside the front cover. He looked around for the old flower seller but couldn't seem to distinguish her from any of the ladies hard at work. None of them took any notice of him as he slowly slipped away towards his bus stop.

That evening in his room, he opened up the book again and read the story of Laila. She somehow reminded him of his cousin, Razia, and perhaps of the little sister that his mother once told him had never come home from the hospital with her. The story made him cry a little and so he closed the book again without starting on the next story, 'The Little Girl Who Collected Squirrels'. He put the book away safely under his mattress.

The next day was Faisal's final student teaching practice assignment at a school on the far side of the Cape Town Gardens. He walked there up the long, cool agapanthus avenue alongside the Houses of Parliament. On a bench outside the school gates, he saw a Form Five girl whom he thought he recognised from one of his classes. She was alone, holding her head in her hands, crying.

“What’s the matter.....er.....Laila?” He read her name from one of her textbooks next to her on the bench.

“We haven’t got the school fees for this term; they won’t let me write the exams.”

“How much are the fees for this term?”

“Forty rand – we are twenty rand short.”

Faisal comforted the girl as best he could and got her to go and wash her face and go to her first class. He asked her form teacher to keep an eye on her. Once his own lessons were finished, he raced home, rapidly copied out the Laila story, stuffed the old exercise book back under his mattress and set off for the editorial offices of the Cape Times in St. George’s Street. Every Saturday the paper published a short story from a reader and awarded a fifty rand book token to each week’s winning author. ‘Laila forgets her please and thank-you’s’ appeared in that Saturday’s edition under Faisal’s name. Laila in Form Five could barely believe her luck when a R50 book token turned up in an envelope for her at school. She didn’t know whom to thank. Her mother suggested her god.

Faisal felt terribly guilty. He had pretended that the story was all his own work and had accepted all the congratulations of his parents and friends. His father sent copies to Jamil in Sydney and Arrie in Lancashire. The old black exercise book seemed to be burning a hole through his mattress at night.

In the January after getting his teacher’s diploma, Faisal applied to the Cape Times for a reporter’s job and got through

all the tests and interviews to become a junior staffer on the children's section of the paper. There he began to write a series of his own investigative reports about children in Cape Town in trouble and how they managed to help themselves out of difficulty. His colleagues in the newsroom nicknamed his pieces, 'Faisal's Tears' and so when he was offered a weekly column, he adopted the name in bold print above his byline. His mother began to keep a scrapbook with all his stories which she annotated by hand in the evenings once she had finished her sewing.

And what happened to the old book under his bed up on Signal Hill? That's another story for another time when a child cries.