

Between Walls

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Is it a play or a real life drama?

I could hear the sound of thundering footsteps, troops marching in the Red Square. I followed the sound. 'Step back! I say step back or you'll be dead.' This is the commanding tone of men in balaclavas. Later I was to hear cries of agony and lots of anger.

Shall I move forward or shall I retreat? My curiosity propelled me forward for it surpassed my fear of rifles and shots I heard over the grey building. No one spoke for fear of being picked up by the men in balaclavas who had just dragged some men and women into a green truck. I told myself I am not afraid of them! Yes! Of course I am not afraid of anyone; it is just like watching an action movie. I am fearless for I have been taught not to fear anything or anyone. I had trained myself to conquer my fear.

May 14th 1987. The day I will remember all my life. It is the day my innocent paradise ceases to be. The beginning of immense personal loss. All the fond memories of my childhood and innocence gradually fade. Joy suddenly becomes sorrow. I am helpless to prevent what is happening to my beloved place. The days I joyfully rode in the school bus with my best friend, Shirlene, who lives next door to me in Duvula Road, Nadera, are no more. Shirlene is more than just a best friend; she is my soul mate. Once we dreamt of becoming doctors and running our own private clinics. We promised ourselves that we would never marry, travel around the world, heal under-privileged people...

May 14th 1987. Things change forever. Shirlene stops talking to me. She starts looking at me differently. Although we live near each other, concrete walls between our houses separate us. I would walk between the two walls, whistle to Shirlene; use our code to prevent her mother from noticing our secret communication. Shirlene's mum is paranoid about what is happening. She begins to externalize her fear, and severed my

friendship with Shirlene. Now we are locked into our own prisons by her mum's paranoid behaviour. The circumstances around us are beyond our control. Our mothers' actions condition the way we presently view each other. Shirlene behaves as if she never knew me. I am seen as a total stranger. There is an ethnic divide between us now. I try to console Shirlene and reassure her that I am different, that I am not the others. She cannot change her mind.

Our circumstances continue to worsen. The announcement comes over the radio that a curfew is being imposed immediately to prevent 'popular uprising'. We are not to step out of our house in the evening until morning. Oh dear! I will not be able to walk around the neighbourhood after dark, even to Shirlene's house. I will not meet my soul mate anymore even to discuss Chemistry and Biology. Our plan for the future is foiled forever. Our paths are separated on 14th of May 1987; I will be left behind and she will leave this country never to return. We will never meet again.

Gone are those beautiful evenings when we would play hide and seek around the neighbourhood. Laughter and singing also gone. Our parents will not lie awake to ensure none of us is hurt from our nightly adventures. Instead soldiers are patrolling the street, with guns for our security. Silence! I watch from behind the curtains in the darkness of the room, wishing they would disappear into thin air so I could prowl around the neighbourhood again with my friend. The curfew breaks our life into two. We are changed into lonely individuals. Our sense of community is shattered. I begin to raise questions in my mind regarding my identity. What am I now?

The events of May 14th 1987 are the beginning of a search for my true self. Who am I? Where do I truly belong? It finally dawns on me that I am not a iTaukei or Kailoma. I am a female, the eldest of four siblings and I bear the brunt of being responsible. I am constantly reminded that I should excel in my University Entrance marks to earn a scholarship. You are a Kailoma, my mother would tell me. This annoys me. Who is she to tell me I am a Kailoma? Am I not her pretty daughter anymore? She should be proud of me; I am her obedient daughter. I will bring her pride and fortune when she grows old and retires from the Civil Service. She does not seem to care about me anymore. Her words and actions display indifference.

I begin to erect an imaginary wall between us. I refuse to have anything to do with my mother. I find solace in my dad who is more sensitive to my needs. I would discuss at length with him my frustrations with constant bitter remarks from mother. Yes, I am a product of an inter-racial

marriage or whatever they call it. What is wrong with that? These never mattered until May 14th 1987. The colour of my skin now marks me. Dad ensures that his children are protected from all these issues. He leads by example, and I am ever grateful to have such an understanding father. I tell myself I sincerely do not mind who I truly am; I certainly mind if my security, gender and basic rights are defined by the colour of my skin, biological make up or the name that I carry.

Each passing day, I feel I am enclosed between walls, squeezed by two mothers who are themselves trapped in the colour of their skin. Mother is pressing me toward the Kailoma side, I am not a full iTaukei; and Shirlene's mother, on the other hand, disapproves of our friendship. In the eyes of Shirlene's mother, I am just another Kaiviti. My effort to reassure her that I am blind to skin colour proves futile. I am almost compelled to shout it over the walls: I am a girl and I am human I did not choose to be a girl nor a Kaiviti.

Days roll by. My loneliness grows. I am longing to have wings to fly, be free from these walls, they have become my prison. No more flying kites, no more zurus, no more hide and seek and no more evening strolls along the street with Shirlene. No more paradise. Walls upon walls. How could I soar? My wings are clipped. My calls are monitored, so are my movements, activities and freedom. I am a girl, I cannot venture out into the street at night anymore. I will have no more talanoa sessions like I used to have before.

I begin to abhor many things happening around me. The chauvinistic attitudes especially of my mother and Shirlene's mother who reinforce difference. The more they treat me as different the more resolute I am to break these walls. I resolve to use my education to defy them.

I am determined; I will be the first female from my neighbourhood, church, family, village and tikina and province to scale the height. I achieve this in 1988 when I received my first scholarship to pursue medicine. The *kailoma* is overjoyed. I could not wait to study at University. This *kailoma* is determined to overcome all the hurdles. My critics predict I will not make it to the end of my first year. Their words make me more determined to prove them wrong.

I begin to realize that my love for medicine has dwindled since Shirlene left three months ago. I begin to gravitate towards politics and literature. My dad encourages me towards my new path. He is there for me all the way. *You can do anything you want and you can do it better than others*, his words of wisdom to me. I take his words seriously. They fuel my fighting spirit. I must excel in my studies. I think of myself as the female

version of my father. Together dad and I are demolishing the walls that are erected.

Mum does not notice the subtle changes in me. Her dream of seeing me become a doctor is short-lived. I am drawn to the world of action. I am deeply fascinated by the courage and bravery of women and men who are activist. I admire who they are, the way they passionately and eloquently fight for the voiceless.

My mind flashes back to the day when I heard the voices of pain and agony in the grey old building in Suva, the voices of the helpless. My spirit begins to fight within me; part of me tries to ignore what I heard but the greater part of me wants to challenge those who have taken away my paradise. They try to suppress the voice of truth and reason but they will not succeed. Sticks and stones will not break the bones of my fellow activists. They will not break mine.

The thugs tries to suppress the brave voices but the voices grow louder and louder. Their voices will ascend into the sky. I join them to herald a new beginning. I have a voice now that is my own. The voice will soar into the sky. I am liberated by this voice of freedom.