



The Bake Club of Tailflower Lane

MAIMOUNA JALLOW

THE MUFFLED SOUND OF a lawnmower rocked Louise with its persistent droning. Every once in a while it was interrupted by the baritone voice of Muriel's personal trainer shouting: One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Six! Over and over again, Cyrus counted from one to 20. From her side of the fence Louise willed him to say 21, even if just once, to break the monotony. Louise could picture her neighbour, decked out from top to toe in pink gym-wear, her long but straggly blond ponytail in full swing as she punched against the trainer's boxing gloves. Louise sank back further into her seat tired at the thought of all that exercise so early in the morning. The most she could do at 7am was sip on a giant mug of steaming hot tea, sweetened to a syrupy consistency with three-and-a-half teaspoons of sugar and whitened with thick creamy milk from the president's own dairy farm.

Louise peered at Dedan, her parents' aging Jack Russell, who was at the bottom of the garden, sitting on his hind legs, and swivelling around on his butt. She made a mental note to get him dewormed and sank further into the *kanga* cushions. Gone were the days when women wrapped these cloths around their

waists to send men surreptitious messages. These days women preferred cash gifts to invest in Brazilian hair or fly direct to Dubai. In fact, you were more likely to see *kanga* on lampshades than around the hips of a Nairobi resident.

Louise came out of her reverie suddenly aware of the silence. When had the lawnmower stopped? And the counting? And what was that heavy breathing? Quietly placing her mug on the coffee table and giving Dedan a conspiratorial look, she crept to the bougainvillea bushes that separated the two houses. These ever-generous flowers gave the neighbourhood the sought-after lashings of pink, orange and white that had quadrupled the value of her parents' house in just 10 years.

Louise peered through the gaps in the fence. She could see Muriel lying on her back on a yoga mat; her legs spread open and stretched skywards. Louise had never seen Jane Fonda pull such a move despite being on TV for over two decades and forcing a generation of women to despise their bodies. As Muriel's legs began to tremble under their weight, Cyrus, who was not just her personal trainer but 'trainer-only-to-her' held on to her ankles and pushed her legs ever so slightly backwards with the weight of his body. A single drop of sweat left his forehead and landed on Muriel's crotch. Louise parted the leaves further and watched: paralysed, her heart beat throbbing so loudly against her eardrums she feared they might hear it. She willed them to do something more. She wanted proof of Muriel's philandering, as ammunition against 'Madam Perfect', even if she never intended to use it. Dedan's wet and cold nose against her right calf jolted Louise back to reality. Stepping slowly backwards, careful not to tread on any twigs, she made her way back to her veranda. Squeezing her legs together, she muttered 'forgive me Jesus' under her breath. It

mattered not that her husband was in the UK, getting more than his Advanced Accounting Certificate. Feeling guilty was a convenient antidote to feeling responsible.

“Red or White?” Muriel asked, in that over-bubbly voice particular to Americans, as she paraded around her living room in a white knee-length linen shirt and a giant beaded necklace.

Images of her friend that very morning, legs spread wide open in delivery pose, crept into Louise’s mind making it hard for her to concentrate on what Muriel was actually saying.

“Red!” Louise replied, more forcefully than she had intended. Red wine got her drunk quicker, especially when she had already had two glasses with lunch. And she needed her edges blunted around Muriel’s sharpness. She cleared the strain from her voice.

‘Is Valerie coming?’

“Yes. She flew in from Kigali this morning. She should be here any minute.”

Hands on hips, Muriel strode to the centre of the room and onto the zebra-hide rug in front of the fireplace, and for the third time that week asked, “Did you hear that those cows from the Halloween Committee have organized a trick or treating route in the Lane next week? And they will be setting up a cookie-decorating stall too! I can’t believe they didn’t ask us first!”

Louise wondered why they needed to be asked. There was no law stipulating that there could only be one baking club on the Lane. It was just typical Muriel wanting to be in charge of everything. Louise wasn’t going to get dragged into it. Instead, she decided to fish for information. She had read *The Lady*

Detective's Agency and knew that she had to gather sufficient evidence before she could rightfully claim the upper hand.

"You are looking very well Muriel. How is it going with that personal trainer guy? What was his name?"

"Cyrus. Oh yes. He is fantastic!"

"Can I get his number? I'm serious this time. I need to shift the baby weight."

"Louise, your twins are five years old. You need to cut down on the wine, that's what you need to do."

Louise could smell the sweet scent of evidence. Like a scorpion under attack, Muriel had tried to sting her first with her 'fat' comment. Why wouldn't she give out his number if they did not have a 'special' relationship? It was obvious to Louise that Muriel wanted Cyrus all to herself. And who could blame her? He looked just like Tyson Beckford. Which woman gets a personal trainer that looks like that if he does not come with extras? Besides, he had been coming to the house for nearly a year and Muriel hadn't lost much weight.

Before Louise could say anything more, Valerie walked in, reed basket swinging in one hand, the other reaching for her giant Chanel sunglasses, which she placed on her halo of golden curls.

"*Hodi Hodiii!*" she said in greeting.

How Valerie managed to say *hodi hodi* with a French accent was beyond her!

Louise put on her dimples and blew her a kiss. Muriel came out of the kitchen with a spritzer for Valerie, who would rather drink camel pee than have a full-calorie glass of wine.

The Cake Bake Club trio sat down to their wine and plans. Just beneath a copy of *United Cakes of America*, Louise noticed a magazine with none other than the original Tyson Beckford

on the front cover, black skin laced with oil, his muscles jumping out of his unbuttoned pair of jeans. His thick lips were slightly parted and curled towards his stretched eyes. He must have some Chinese in him, Louise thought. She looked up and caught Muriel looking at her. The tips of Muriel's ears blushed ever so slightly, enough for Louise to smell that sticky, sweet scent of imminent success again.

Outside, beyond the sliding glass doors, Gladys had strapped Muriel's two-year old daughter Rosie on her back and was walking up and down the garden, with the huge avocado tree in the centre. Colourful spades and buckets lay temporarily abandoned under the tree. They didn't make houses like this anymore in Nairobi. There were only a hundred or so here, nearly identical, with large gardens, fireplaces and servants' quarters. All that changed was the décor. Muriel's looked like a cross between a pottery museum and a graveyard for African masks. Valerie preferred the minimalist look, more by default than any deliberate style. Louise had inherited her parents' heavy furniture – green velvet couches and glass cabinets replete with old photo albums that smelt of must and memories. Muriel's oldest two had taken to playing a live version of *Spot the Difference* whenever they were dragged to visit Auntie Louise or Valerie.

Louise was one of the few who had grown up here, her parents retiring to their 50-acre farm in Eldoret, some 300 kilometres from Nairobi, after her father had left government. In those days mostly Kenyan families lived here. She remembered the long summers spent cycling through the neighbouring coffee fields with her cousins, each of them going home only at sunset, ready to be beaten, scolded or ignored, depending on who they belonged to. Now, noisy Land Cruisers hammered

into potholes, replacing the old Mercedes 200s that had silently glided along the smooth tarmac. Louise would often sit on her upstairs balcony, looking down on the lane, wondering where the years had gone. On weekends she would watch the nouveau whites, as she liked to call them, walking up and down the lane, pushing aerodynamic prams, or being dragged by all manner of dogs. She could tell that these were not former residents of the Hampstead Heath, where it was quite normal to bump into a famous actress at the local patisserie. And yet she was struck by the ease and rapidity with which they assumed the special status attributed to them once in Kenya. But 15 years in England had cleared away the white veneer and had taught Louise that privilege is relative. Just as she had gone from being somebody, or rather somebody's daughter in Kenya, to a nobody working in a shoe shop on Clapham High Street to supplement her University allowance, she could tell that deep down, her neighbours could not quite believe their luck. A house on a quarter of an acre was more than they had ever dreamt of. And it didn't come cheap. Louise was still living in the lane only because, unlike countless others, her parents had refused to sell. They let her stay in their house rent-free since her return three years ago.

Muriel had stood up and sat down at least half a dozen times since serving the drinks, all the while talking incessantly, her voice floating away and then getting louder again when she returned.

“I'm going to tell the new Halloween Committee that only the three of us can have cake stalls. I can't believe they decided to organise the trick or treating without even consulting us. And over a month ago I told that Emma in number 62 that we had done it for the past two years!” she droned on. She was the only

one bothered over this. Louise and Valerie only went along with it. It's not like they would be baking the muffins and brownies themselves. 'Delegate or outsource' had been Louise's motto since she had returned home, while Valerie always managed to be on a dangerous mission somewhere during the planning phase of every party. She had already warned them that she would be in the Congo next week, probably taking pictures of kids with AK47s. She had been getting a lot more jobs since receiving the World Photography Award in April.

When Valerie got tipsy and her tongue loosened, she was fond of telling the story of how she nearly missed the shot. It was September and the village on the outskirts of the Maban refugee camp in South Sudan was nearly deserted but for a few families who were too weary to flee, or who had stayed behind to look after an elderly relative or an injured fighter. The heat was particularly oppressive; a heavy blanket that signalled that the rains were on their way. As Valerie made her way onto the dusty airstrip, a child had appeared out of nothingness and stood perfectly still, staring at the whirring propellers of the Kodiak that was gearing up for take off. She and the medical team she was travelling with would be the last outsiders here for months. In a week or two all roads would have become a soup of mud and the airstrip a shallow river sinking further day by day under the weight of water. Just before climbing the few steps that would take her into the plane's belly Valerie had looked back, and in her mind, an invisible frame had wrapped itself around the girl. In the background she could see a clothesline, bare aside from an arresting blue cloth soaking up the last rays of sunlight. In the foreground a little figure with short-cropped hair was now waving at her. Valerie snapped four quick shots before waving back and finally climbing

onto the plane. It was only when she got to her hotel in Juba and looked through the photos that she saw how strikingly beautiful the sky looked in the photos. Strokes of pink and purple looked like they were pushing the orange sun into the horizon. *The Sun Sets on an Entire Population* was the headline that accompanied her photograph. A few months later she was in New York collecting her News Photography Award.

But since then, Valerie seemed different. She had stopped talking about going back to the places that gave her nightmares long after she had left. It was as though she had ticked a box and could move on. The Facebook messages praising her bravery every time she posted the location of her next shoot still made her chest swell, but the ego boost faded faster now. For the first time in years, Valerie had started to dread Christmas, not because of the endless meals with family members she no longer had anything in common with, but because of the inevitable story that was likely to break and immediately set her phone off with calls from news agencies. Rebel leaders had developed a real knack for timing lately.

Muriel's voice trickled into Valerie's ears and she realised she had spaced out. She wasn't sleeping much and had a hard time concentrating these days.

"I have already told them that this is Nairobi," Muriel was on a roll oblivious to whether anyone was listening. "We can't just let our children go trick or treating as if we were in Ohio. I have asked Cyrus to come and provide extra security. You know Derek will be away and I'm alone with the three kids."

Louise's permanent dimples sank downwards. A passing cloud covered the bright sunlight that had been streaming in and a slight chill entered the room. Louise felt the goose bumps spread like centipedes across her upper arm, her chest heaving

up and down. In the corner of her eye, she could see Valerie and Muriel repeatedly glancing at each other and staring at her, wide-eyed, as though she were metamorphosing in reverse, from butterfly to caterpillar, before their very eyes. Only the sound of a lullaby being hummed ever so lightly could be heard coming from outside. But Louise had had it. What did Muriel mean by “this is not Ohio”? This was one of the most upmarket lanes in all of Nairobi, with armed security manning barriers on both ends. The words burst out of Louise’s mouth.

“We all know you are sleeping with Cyrus, Muriel. Why are you pretending? You cannot wait for Derek to travel! What is it with you white women? Why can’t you just leave our men alone?”

A stunned silence followed. Even the humming had stopped. All ears perked up. Louise knew right away that she had just evicted herself from the Bake Club of Tailflower Lane, but right then, she couldn’t have cared less. She stood up, stretched her hand out and picked up the magazine with Tyson Beckford.

“At least you will let me have this,” she said, her dimples leading her out.

The tip of Valerie’s finger began to bleed. She sat on both hands to stop herself from chewing her nails off completely. She stared blankly at the zebra skin, the taste of vomit in her throat, her stomach churning like a washing machine in full spin. She could hear Muriel whizzing up her special mango, raspberry and mint smoothie a few steps away in the kitchen, muttering away about ungrateful friends and the inherent dangers of “letting people ‘of a different kind’ who don’t understand your culture into your heart”.

The pit of Valerie's stomach felt like a cloudy smoothie too; a mixture of panic, terror and joy. What would Louise say if she knew? Heck, what would her mum or older sister say? Would she go to Paris to have the baby? What would the nurse at the fertility clinic say? Would she still have to pay the full fees, now that she had conceived naturally right at the start of the programme? And oh my God, what about Bruno? What would he say when he found out that after two years of trying to conceive, here she was, ten weeks pregnant, only six months after their break up. A single shot by a different marksman and boom!

"Smoothie ready! Just try it. I made it with low fat camel milk."

Muriel plopped herself next to Valerie. The sight of the creamy brownish concoction was more than Valerie could handle. Grabbing her mouth and stomach simultaneously, she leapt up and ran to the guest bathroom.

"Valerie! Are you ok?" Muriel followed behind her, only to be met with a firmly shut door. "What is happening today? First Louise does her whole drama thing and now you, puking in my house! Gladys! Gladys! Valerie I told you to be careful! Gladys! You know Charlotte's husband Nick had to be airlifted from Addis last week. Suspected case of dengue fever. I'm telling you. It is everywhere. You really shouldn't be going to Goma on Monday if you are feeling like this."

Goma! Valerie had completely forgotten. She couldn't go to Goma like this. She had read enough pregnancy books in the last two years to know that travelling in her first trimester could put the baby at risk. Especially when your first pregnancy is at 42!

Valerie flushed the toilet, pushed the seat down, and sat

down. Taking in deep breaths, she held her head, slowly massaging her temples, trying to clear the fog. In the corner of her eye, she could see an array of colourful bath toys; yellow and red ducks, a spiky green ball and something that looked like a plastic kaleidoscope. She knew she was having this baby no matter what anyone thought.

“Done! I have made an appointment for you at 2pm at the Aga Khan with Dr. Rosario,” Muriel sounded like she had her lips pressed against the keyhole. “You know he is the best in tropical diseases. He is the official doctor for all UN staff.”

Valerie picked up one of the rubber ducks. A smile lifted her lips and she pictured a little girl with a halo of big curls playing in the bath. Muriel couldn’t contain a little squeal.

“Hey! Are you ok in there?”

“Yes, I’m ok. I’ll be out in a sec.”

Valerie wondered at which one of Muriel’s weekly dinner parties her vomiting and dengue fever episode would be recounted. But she knew that for all her meddling, her friend meant well. She wanted to look after everyone, whether they wanted to be looked after or not. It was hard to hold that against a person.

Valerie rinsed her mouth in the sink and looked at herself. Her eyes were darker than usual, more like the ocean than the sea. Her cheeks were sunken. She was tired. Ever since she found out about her pregnancy a week ago, she had lain awake at night, concocting a million stories about the father’s identity, trying to create a story that was vague enough for no one to figure out who he was, and yet plausible enough for her friends not to think her a complete liar and slut. But one thing was certain; she had no intention of revealing who he was, not even to him.

In her 12 years crisscrossing Africa, he was the first black man she had slept with. A dodgy Lebanese businessman that smelt of heavy cologne and cigars was the closest she had gotten. Before Bruno, her lovers had generally been old bureau chiefs for international agencies, with wives and teenage kids in Europe or in the U.S. They were intelligent, often kind and most of all grateful—for her youth, her lack of demands and her silence.

Bruno had been different though. They had met at a typical Nairobi expat party in a beautiful garden on Thigiri Ridge and had moved in together straight away, even though it had taken another three years for them to stop acquiring rag tag bits of furniture left behind by departing friends and actually buy a sofa set. And in the last two years, Valerie had finally started treating their house like a home and not a place to ‘regroup’ in between assignments.

Bruno too had slowed down in the last couple of years and was writing a book in between what seemed like endless trips to the fishmonger. Their friends joked that if his book sucked he could always become a chef. He laughed, but Valerie could tell that he was scared. So she told him that she wanted to have a baby, even if at the time what she really wanted was to take away the heaviness that was everyday settling deeper into his eyes. Plus she could feel her ovaries slowing down. The week before her period her bones would ache right down to the marrow and a black veil would cloak the world as though her body were forcing her mind to join it in mourning yet another loss.

It had never crossed Valerie’s mind that she might not get pregnant immediately. By the time the first year had passed, the heaviness in Bruno’s eyes had seeped into everything. By

the middle of the second year, during a quiet dinner, Bruno spoke the words that they were both thinking: “I can’t do this anymore”.

Valerie fanned her fingers across her belly. She didn’t want to replay that night again like she had done for the past six months. Instead, she quietly opened the bathroom door and took baby steps back into Muriel’s living room. She gently sat back down on the cream canvas couch. Ridiculous as it seemed even to her, she didn’t want to move too much, in case she hurt the baby. Emerging from the kitchen, this time with a bottle of bleach, Muriel yelled:

“Gladys! Glaaaadys!” She handed the bottle over to Valerie as she took Rosie out of the nanny’s arms.

“Please wash the bathroom with this. Not just the toilet! The whole bathroom! Use the gloves. We don’t want you spreading dengue to the kids,” Muriel instructed.

Valerie handed Gladys the bottle of bleach, eyes cast downwards and certain she could see right through her to the baby in her stomach.

“You better go too Valerie. I have three kids here and Derek is away. I can’t risk them getting sick.”

Valerie was grateful for the easy exit. She grabbed her bag and sunglasses and waved her way out.

Louise could feel her temples throbbing. She splashed water on her face and looked at her reflection in the mirror. She didn’t like what she saw. Her roots were fighting against her relaxed hair, pushing it upwards and elongating her forehead by a couple of inches. Dark pockets rimmed her almond-shaped eyes. And as her fingers pressed her neck, she noticed

the stripes on her blouse were not aligned, the buttons out of sync. Taking off her shirt and letting it fall to the ground, she tried to remember when it was that she had become such a mess. Amazingly, it wasn't when she had had the twins five years ago. It wasn't when she had to bail Jomo out of jail for being drunk and disorderly on the night of their first birthday. It wasn't even listening to his phone beeping late at night, receiving messages from whichever white trash Essex girl was flavour of the month. No. Like a layer of dust on her skin, a sense of failure had settled the moment she had arrived back in Nairobi.

In London she was nobody. Strangely, the anonymity was more liberating than lonely. It made her feel that she had a handle on her life. But sitting on the black plastic chairs in a corner of the departure gate at Heathrow Airport, she felt that she was being watched. She kept her eyes down as the boys ran around, bumping into the oversized carry-on bags that cluttered the narrow passageways. By the time they landed at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, eight hours later, she had puked twice.

As she emerged from the arrivals hall Louise scanned the faces that stared unblinkingly back, many of them drivers of NGO cars, or taxis, holding up placards with names from different parts of the world. She spotted her mum running towards her. Mum swung her arms around her, dropped her, hugged the kids, and hugged her again. She seemed lost, unable to gather them all at once. Dad was more demure, but Louise saw his eyes water.

They didn't ask her about Jomo straight away. They waited until the boys were out in the garden of their old home on Tailflower Lane, where they would be spending the morning to

help Louise settle in before heading back to Eldoret.

Louise simply told them that he had stayed behind to finish his accounting exams. She instantly felt like a teenager again, lying to cover up for him. A fine layer of guilt settled permanently on top of the layer of failure and grew thicker with their silence. And every time she repeated that lie she felt herself sinking deeper into a space where she felt hollow, like her vital organs had been sucked out of her.

Louise moved away from the mirror to fill the bath. She needed to wash away the additional guilt she was now feeling for being a complete bitch to Muriel yesterday. She pulled out a bottle of whisky hidden behind perfumes and creams and took a long sip. It burnt her throat and floated downwards, finally evaporating off her stomach lining.

When she opened her eyes again, the water was cold. It frightened her. It wasn't the first time she had fallen asleep in the bath. Louise wrapped herself in a soft white dressing gown and walked to her bed. From her room, she could hear the boys playing outside. Agnes, their nanny, was counting to 20 and she could hear them rustle past the wide leaves of the lady palms that framed the garden, searching for a hiding place. The twins always hid together no matter how many times the rules of hide and seek were explained to them. The thought made Louise smile for the first time that day.

Agnes had replaced Jomo in every way but one. She lived with them throughout the week only going home on Sundays. Louise remembered the one Monday Agnes did not show up to resume her shift. She had sat on the porch steps with the twins, waiting.

“Shouldn't we go inside mummy?” Paul had asked as it got darker.

“Yes the mosquitoes are biting me,” complained Peter, who had always been smaller, more delicate and cried easily.

Louise looked at her sons and was scared. They were only three but they came with all the obtuse determination of most three-year-olds. After two changes of clothes each, a bumped forehead, uneaten noodles in matching bowls, shouting, biting, and screaming peppered by slobbery kisses and a few moments of silence when a new episode of *Sponge Bob* entranced them both, Louise shut her bathroom door and crumbled to the floor. That was two years ago and it was the last time she had been alone with them.

Louise fluffed the pillows on her bed and sat back, magazine in hand. She stared at Tyson Beckford and he stared back at her. He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen and he didn't look arrogant. In fact, he looked like the kind of guy who would buy both his girlfriend and his mum flowers on Valentines Day. She wondered if her obsession with Tyson had clouded her judgment of Muriel. Perhaps she was wrong and Cyrus was just her personal trainer. And in that case Lord knows she had been alone for too long. Louise closed her eyes and began making plans to conquer Cyrus.

Muriel couldn't get out of bed. She buried her head under the pillows and the muffled sounds of Cyrus counting wafted in through her windows. One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Six! It was their special game. Two sets of 20 shouted out loud from the Avocado tree outside. If she wasn't out in 40 seconds, it was his cue that the coast was clear and that the exercising would be happening in her bed that morning.

But today Muriel flinched back as Cyrus flopped onto the

white sheets and reached forward to kiss her. He looked at her with a mix of surprise and suspicion but said nothing. She didn't know why she was mad at him. He hadn't done anything wrong. It was Louise who had opened her big fat mouth and called her a cheat.

Muriel knew that technically she was cheating. But it wasn't a fair judgment. It had been nearly five years since Derek had stopped being her husband and had become her logistics assistant. Each on either side of the see-saw they worked in perfect tandem, organising birthday parties for their three children, group holidays, and exquisite dinner parties that were legendary for Muriel's flower arrangements. Muriel had been collecting vases since her first trip out of America 13 years ago. Whether they were delicately hand painted white porcelain ones from China or heavily engraved red clay ones from Pakistan, if they qualified as vases, she collected them. And as only she knew how, Muriel managed to ferry her vases around the world to every new country that they moved to without a single one ever breaking. At every party she would fill her vases with flowers, gorging the living room and outside patio with colours and smells. She would keep them for as long as possible afterwards, hoping their sweet perfume would camouflage the stench that rose to the back of her nostrils every time she thought of the rot in her marriage.

At the beginning when Derek's trips had started becoming more frequent and their silences longer, she had tried to talk to him. But it became clear very quickly that he had fallen out of love with her. He told her so, point blank, as she sobbed on his shoulders. He also told her that he would not divorce her if she didn't want him to 'for the sake of the kids'. She wanted to slap him hard. But there was no way she was going back to

Ohio, back to doing dishes, ironing clothes and waiting at bus stops in the freezing cold. Rosie was only a few months old then, conceived on one of the few occasions when, after a party and a few drinks, they still got intimate. But on a day-to-day basis he dealt with her like one of the people who made up his poverty stats, as though she were faceless and nameless, as though they had had no past and certainly had no future.

For a long time she thought of all she had given up for him until it dawned on her one day that he had never asked for any of it. She was the one who right from the start had treated him with the kind of adoration that women usually reserve for their sons. It took her years of yoga; breathing; tarot readings; constellations; payer groups; and counselling to even start to see herself. And when she did it took her a few more years to stop beating herself about being blind for so long. She had finally reached the point where she was claiming her own happiness and she'd be damned if Louise or anyone else was going to spoil it for her.

Throughout Tailflower Lane houses were decorated with carved out pumpkins and an array of Made-in-China Halloween bric-a-brac. As Valerie walked towards Muriel's gate she noticed dozens of kids ready to begin their sugar pilgrimage. Since she realised she was pregnant she felt as though the population of children in the world had suddenly tripled. On the lane the single NGO types with money had either moved out or had had kids.

As Valerie got to number 45 she was surprised to see Louise manning Muriel's cake-decorating stall. It had been less than two weeks since their fight but she hoped they had made up.

Louise held out a spritzer for Valerie and held onto what looked like a whiskey for her. She looked haggard under her broad-brimmed hat, her eyes puffy beneath a thick layer of mascara. The twins were nowhere to be seen.

“No thanks,” Valerie said and hugged her tight.

“Still on a diet?”

“So, have you and Muriel made up?” Valerie asked, ignoring the question. She was not quite ready to tell Louise the real reason she wasn’t drinking.

“Nope, we haven’t spoken.”

“So why are you here?”

“I actually came to apologise but you know what, I do not need anyone’s permission to be here! I live here. This is my lane too.” Louise leaned in a bit too far forward as she spoke. Valerie wondered how many whiskeys she had already had.

“You are looking for trouble Louise. You know that Muriel...”

“Muriel what?”

Valerie turned to look at Muriel who had at that very moment appeared from behind. She strode right up to Louise, her face red with anger.

“Louise, this is my cake stall and I would like you to leave right now!” Muriel spat, eyes darting left and right making sure no one was watching the unfolding drama.

“As I said,” Louise was not going to back down. “I live here and I will stand anywhere I please on this lane. In case you hadn’t noticed, this is a public thoroughway”.

“I will call K.O Security if you do not leave Louise.”

“K.O Security! Do you think that this country belongs to them? I will call the department of immigration and tell them that you are selling cakes illegally if you do not get out of my face right now.”

“You think you can accuse me of things you have no proof of and then come to my party?”

“First of all, this is not your party. Second of all, I did not accuse you. I was merely stating a fact. We all know that you are sleeping with Cyrus!”

Muriel breathed in sharply and lifted her arm to slap Louise. Valerie caught it midair.

“For Christ’s sake, *I* am sleeping with him! I mean, *I was*. And I’m pregnant!” The words stumbled out of Valerie’s mouth before she could stop them.

She could see her words colliding with their eardrums and seeping slowly into their brains. Muriel and Louise shouted out in perfect unison: “What?”

Across the lane a group of oblivious ghosts, witches and Yodas ruffled plastic bags and asked one of the mums from the Halloween committee for candy as she stood mouth wide open, seemingly paralysed, staring at the three of them.

Louise downed her whiskey and poured herself another. Muriel walked stiffly towards her gate; trying to breathe slowly to contain her tears. For the first time in two weeks Valerie tried hard not to smile but now that her secret was out, she felt like a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders.