



An  
Incomplete  
Love Story

Zaid Ismail

An Incomplete Love Story is a tale, seldom told, of a man struggling to find his humanness in a community where he doesn't belong.

Zayd is a fourth-generation Muslim Indian growing up in apartheid South Africa who fatefully discovers why life matters.

A childhood premonition of hopelessness, a father with an unexplainable rage, and a community steeped in double-standards all make for a perfectly dysfunctional adulthood.

Despite his roots, and his struggle for an identity, Zayd navigates his way through a deeply traditional and culturally aloof community.

The prejudices borne out of the caste system, his racial profile, his social standing, and the sectarianism within his community all make inclusion seem impossible.

Yet, it's not enough to dull his spirit.

Will the emotional isolation of his childhood set him on a collision course with destiny, or will his anomalous nature finally rid him of the inheritance of an emotionally unavailable father, so that he may find peace before it's too late?

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*A note from the author*

*This story was inspired by true events. Some, my own, but many based on incidents that I witnessed in the colourful domains of my life.*

*It is a story of an often-overlooked community. Caught at the intersection of cultural pride while fighting for relevance in a rapidly evolving world, the South African Muslim Indian community is replete with prejudices from religious, political, and cultural influences. Good intentions rarely paved the pathway to heaven. But, understanding those intentions in the face of the carnage that the resulting actions impose on the innocents is what breathes life into a decaying soul. It is this that motivated me to write this novel. That is, my hope to draw attention towards the contamination of the good by the misguided prejudices of a sincere but deeply flawed community.*

*~Zaid.*

# The Story of Me

**A**n ordinary life. Nothing to celebrate, nothing to bemoan. Just life, day in and day out. No clichés and not much to write home about.

Home. A quaint notion that has yet to grow familiar. One thing about my life that was not ordinary was the void that taunted me. It was a void of emotion, both felt and shared. I always stood in awe as I watched so many around me embrace and engage about seemingly nothings, connecting in ways that seemed so naturally familiar, while I struggled to share a sheepish grin or even a *hello*. Perhaps it was not an ordinary life after all.

Sit at the keyboard and bleed. It's supposed to be that simple to tell your story, or at least that's what Hemingway suggested. But it assumes that you're not knotted up inside. It assumes that you would bleed when you exposed your wounds. It assumes that blood ran through your veins threatening to leave your fingertips, if only you let it. But nothing was that simple.

What came naturally to others needed deliberate effort on my part, but only if I needed to participate in some meaningless social tradition. Tradition does not accommodate the odd ones. The ones without an embrace by the rest of the group. It has only ever celebrated the inclusion of the conformers. I was never a conformer. Not by choice, and certainly not by chance.

Conformance demands a level of awareness that escaped me, although I was never totally oblivious. I just noticed what others ignored, and they noticed what I ignored. It was an awkward relationship that I had with my world.

Childhood memories blur, with some hints of joy stabbing through the blur like minarets rising above the fog with a faint familiarity. I recall the images, the scents, the places, and sometimes the emotion of those experiences. But only sometimes the emotion. Connecting with emotion was never encouraged, nor fostered. Discipline before anything else, and conformance of course. We need conformance to establish the significance of the matriarchs and the patriarchs.

In a traditional South African Muslim Indian community, parents are revered beyond their parental status. South Africa had its own quirks. Apart from the peppering of apartheid in our lives back then, we had enough prejudices and distinctions of our own to ensure a rigidly guarded hierarchy.

My parents defined everything of significance in my life, including my opinion of myself, my siblings, or my extended family. They defined my views about my friends, my aspirations, my career options, and my social circles. They even defined my fashion sense. I wasn't allowed an opinion on something unless I obtained their approval first. Until that point, my opinion was merely a suggestion and not an opinion. Anything more would be deemed a rebellion followed by a swift attitude adjustment using whatever was at hand, be it a rolling pin for making roti, sandals, a twirled-up damp dish cloth used as a lasso whip, or even a freshly plucked branch from the nearest tree. And if that didn't work, there was always isolation.

Isolation is an immensely powerful tool for social conditioning. Deny someone access to the group and watch them slowly wither away until they either find another group with which to connect, or they subdue any rebellious aspirations and replace it with trying to belong at any cost. The ones that found a replacement group most often found themselves amongst similar outcasts, or social misfits.

Finding a group to belong to was not always a choice. Sometimes finding my own way within the confines of the little movement and expression that my parents allowed was the only sane choice. Quite unwittingly, this was my choice, but not entirely either.

Obstinate rebellion is a state to which I related all too well. There was no deliberate effort on my part. Accompanied by a resilience and tenacity that stunned even me at times, I was always difficult to pin down, like a writhing cat trying to escape the clutches of an unforgiving child, leaving deep unintended wounds in the arms of those who tried to hold me down. Add emotional detachment to that and I had everything needed to be an amazingly effective sociopath. Alas, my life was not that colourful.

Love interests eluded me, but romantic liaisons were plenty. Romance comes easily to one who lives inside his head. The problem with that is that once you draw your partner close, you need to be ready to let them in. No one mentioned that second part, or perhaps I didn't hear them because I was mostly living in my head. Perhaps this obliviousness of the needs of others and my presence is what created a colourful life after all. Whether it was by design, or by fate, none of it was deliberate nor courted. It simply was.

Expressing what I felt demanded a language of expression that was unfamiliar. It was a protocol of life that had eluded me. Everything was purposeful and sentiment held little value, except when such sentiment was aimed at preserving the cultural inheritance of a glory that never was.

Choosing a life of servitude or a life of indulgence was not something I could do for myself. It was imposed upon me. Indian boys served one purpose only: To make their fathers proud. As for Indian girls, their purpose was to uphold the honour of the family name. She, the woman that would later turn my ordered existence into a frenzy of emotions, subscribed to neither extreme. Instead, she always chose a path of rebellion that cut uncomfortably between the two. It was a path that reverberated strongly with my own inclinations.

I discovered, in the years preceding that fateful evening with her, that much can be learnt from a soul that rejects definition by others. Rebelliousness in such beauty is rarely a deliberate act of protest. It is a conviction of passion towards ideals that most have the luxury of spurning until much later in life.

But what if that later in life was not much later? What if you knew that their later-in-life was beyond reach, and that yours to have was only their youth? This painful realisation arrived too late despite still being in my early years when compared to the lazy souls around me. Years before she entered my reality I struggled with many things, the most prominent of which was what the future held for a detached, uninterested, and awkwardly adjusted boy in a culture steeped in a tradition that had no place for him.

That is how I recall my earliest years in a family and community that offered the only tether I've ever known, while simultaneously withholding any sense of belonging. The truth is, I didn't contemplate the future at all.

Interacting with that culture was strained and awkward, not unlike my demeanour. Understanding the nuances of human touch without the touch was always a great challenge. She sensed that probably sooner than I realised. A touch of the hand was the easy part. Allowing her to touch my soul was a dare I wasn't ready to accept.

Thus, the dance of our lives began.

# In the Beginning

I was born resilient and restless. It didn't matter what others thought, it only mattered what made sense to me. Logic holds the promise of acceptance because logic cannot be denied.

Inclusion is what drew many towards the blind following of traditions that upheld the hierarchies of tyrants but did nothing to form brotherly bonds. I found myself naturally averse to such blind subscription. As I discovered from my early years, such themes would always define the social order before any principles my people claimed to uphold.

My people. The blatant hypocrisy in this was akin to the warmth of the sun. Staring at its splendour would blind you, and deny you the beauty of everything it nurtures. Yet, immersing yourself into everything that it nourished would prompt you to ignore its fierce heat, or its blindingly uncompromising glare. This dichotomy of life defined my ambivalent state for decades to come.

The restlessness that stirred within me was foreign, as foreign as the root of the resilience that defined my spirit. A spirit of hope is possible to sustain only if hopelessness holds as much promise as conformity. Succumbing to the dictates of tyrants went against my nature, and in that speechless protest was born the path of conflict that plagued the relationship that I had with my father.

It was a chilly morning in early autumn. The change in weather meant that the biting cold highveld winter was on its way. It rarely snowed in Johannesburg. Instead, we had the joy of blisteringly cold winds and chills that pierced your bones. The kind that shivers the skin but goes right through you. The mercury always lied. It was always colder than any weatherman suggested.

Many years before my birth, there was snow. Not a whole lot of it, but enough to tease families into the streets during the iciest time of year. Kids tumbling out onto the pavement clad in double socks, triple tops, and thickly padded jackets clamoured with excitement at the sight of fragile sleet that formed on the pavement just long enough to look like snow, before melting away.

The expectations of mothers-in-law saw no boundaries, especially with sons who could never see fault in their own. Supper across town was a cherished tradition, even in the icy weather. Walking purposefully through the streets, occasionally lifting her head to look into the icy wind as she watched the children giggle with delight in the freezing evening air, my mother made her way with her cherished bundle in her arms to honour the traditions of her husband's family. He walked ahead, barely any concern for her load, in his best shoes, and his greased hair. Too far ahead to hear the quiet desperate coughs from his six-month old son. His first born. His trinket of accomplishment.

His son didn't survive that winter. With his innocent beauty still brightening up the dark spaces around him, he succumbed to double pneumonia as the beautiful snowfall gathered pace in the days that followed. He was just six months old when his world ended, but it wasn't the end of my father's

world. My father had a young wife from a farm town. Healthy and naïve, and always respectful of tradition. Having more kids was simply a matter of course, not effort.

Years later, I was born in that same small apartment in downtown Johannesburg. Apartment sounds more sophisticated than it really was. It was a flatlet, or more commonly known as a flat, in an old building near China Town on the side skirts of a semi-industrial part of the city. In the living room, sat on a flimsy couch with cushions flattened and faded, my father entertained his friends while my mother subdued her anguish in the final throes of my birth in the modest adjoining bedroom. It was a bedroom shared between my parents and my three siblings, and now it was the delivery room of life. My life.

Restraint was demanded in the moment of her agony to maintain what dignity she had, lest it be tainted by the attention that her screams would attract from the useless men sitting just outside the bedroom door. But it was a routine that she had grown accustomed to, since I was her fifth bundle of joy and yet another trophy of his manliness.

They were more overgrown soap-scum, than they were men. Like soap-scum, they had a peculiar knack for creating a sense of slithery goo in everything that they touched, similar to the dull shine of hair cream in their unwashed hair, giving it the appearance of being well-groomed while belying the muck that clammed around its roots, accentuated only by the flakes of dandruff in their thick black wavy mop of hair. Their callous humour was like the curried specks and tangled hair encrusted in the soap bars of mindless children.

Appearances were everything in the Indian community. Your *izzat* was more important than righteousness, or compassion for that matter. It was the appearance of dignity that was celebrated, while dignity itself was always on sale. *Izzat* was a concept that I would grow to despise, because, like so many other principles of the traditions on which I was raised, it placed social standing above all else, even above the tenderness with which your blood bonds should be treated.

The tender among us were considered the weakest, and emotional expression was for white people who had nothing better to do with their lives other than to flash their wealth for charitable causes, or to get the world to recognise their struggle for dignity. Such was the toxicity of apartheid. No one was spared the effort to dehumanise beings that bought into the venomous ideals that defined people by the colour of their skin. Not even the ones who defined such loathsome definitions of the worth of each of us.

It didn't take much for the overarching themes in each colour group to become the definition of who they were. Stereotypes are not formed without merit. Whites were considered aloof and despicable in their claimed superiority, but generous and endearing if they accepted you into their circles. Blacks were unambitious labourers looking for an opportunity to serve a master, any master, even from their own ranks. But they were honourable bantu when they respected your social standing. Coloureds were the angry offspring of the bourgeoisie and the slaves, the only real South Africans screaming for their rightful heritage, they were the fourth wheel of the vehicle of apartheid. Colourfully endearing in their self-loathing and expression, but unpalatable in their demand for recognition and respect.

And then there were Indians. Tolerable and amicable, filling the need to be heard by both the whites and the blacks, but rarely being heard themselves. They were the merchants of Venice, only with a smile and a pretence of understanding and compassion. There were many among the blacks and Indians who courted the attention of the whites. When self-respect is replaced by classism, those that do not fit in go in search of affirmations from those who are celebrated as superior. The association with superiority was a gladly accepted substitute for those that lacked any.

Of course, there were exceptions. There are always exceptions. But exceptions are not what defined the course of any nation, nor any community; not until those exceptions became the norm. Norms were unlikely to take shape anytime soon as the struggle against apartheid raged on and the only purpose that gripped the non-whites in the country was to earn the respect of the superior ones. And if that wasn't possible, then to reverse the inequalities under the banner of justice while planted in the manure of hypocrisy. Such themes of conflict would carry through prominently in my life only in much more profound ways.

Perhaps being born in that bedroom was a harbinger of the life that awaited me. Small, purposeful, and just a hair's breadth from indignity. Comfort or celebration was optional and reliant on the spirit of the souls that occupied its space. Everything is neutral until tainted by us.

Again, there are exceptions. In this case, the exceptions carried the promise of hope. They offered a view into a reality that escaped the working class who spent their lives trying to pay off the debt of the rose-coloured spectacles that embellished their view of the world.

My father was the first of many troubled souls that would cross my path in life. I don't recall ever sharing a path with him. I've often wondered why it is that I never found reason to judge him for his ways. It certainly wasn't due to any generosity of spirit on my part. I always just saw it as a truth of who he was. I didn't expect him to be different, I just didn't expect much at all, not from him, nor society.

Not long after I was born in the city, we moved to Lenasia which was still in its infancy. The streets were covered in the same red earth from the dust bowl with electrical lines playing catch on the one side, and bare pavements in front of council-installed wire-mesh fences defining the boundaries between houses. Dispersed among the council-built houses were empty plots waiting for the wealthier ones to construct their owner-built homes. Until then, it was plots of land that offered endless hours of adventure, and sometimes pain, as we'd walk through the thorny brush to take shortcuts to school or grab sandy lumps to hurl at each other as we mimicked the Soweto riots that the adults spoke of.

But that came later. The roads were still covered in sand that caked with mud after the rains, and the electrical lines used to bear down with the weight of hundreds of sparrows that would chirp on it each morning at sunrise. Sparrows were always my favourite. Unassuming, beautifully modest, and always chirping with delight. The clanking of glass milk bottles started the day as the fresh milk was taken in and the empty bottles from the previous day left outside with coupons for its replacement. I never saw the milkman, but I remember clearly the thick cream at the top of the bottle that would sometimes hold back the milk before we could pour it.

The black house maids would laugh and chat loudly to each other after the rains as they sat on the pavements eating cakes of mud. They didn't appear to have an expectation of more and appeared considerably happier with less. Such contentment is easier to attain in the absence of opportunity. Opportunity creates expectations. Expectations offered the threat of purpose and duty, but rarely peace.

Our yard was massive for a tiny boy like me. A crumbling concrete driveway leading up to an empty carport had large beds of lawn on either side with loose bricks struggling to contain it. Another strip of lawn down the centre split the driveway just wide enough to accommodate the tyre tracks of cars intended to enjoy its accommodation. A slate stone walkway lazily curved from the pedestrian gate to the front door, first opening onto a rounded porch surrounded by a yellow-leaved hedge. The hedge was tall enough to dwarf me with a narrow breadth allowing for trespassing to the side of the house. It was a gap I rarely passed through because the labourer's entrance to the yard was from the kitchen door at the back of the house.

The white walls of the house were accented by an oddly soft but garishly blue paint that trimmed the windowsills, the gutters, and the moulded concrete numbers mounted on that ominous front wall. There was nothing particularly notable about that house with its flaking corrugated iron roof that leaked hopelessly leaving brown stains on the old off-white ceilings. The peeling white steel gutters that clogged with leaves every year in time for the rainy season added to the ominous mood of a house that chores were made of.

The metal gate that met you at the door was flanked by a small steel window frame which was adjacent to another wall

that appeared windowless to a tiny child. A narrow but long window stretched across the upper section of the front wall, denying the occupants of the room any view of the street. It also denied most adults a view from the outside into the room. I always wondered if it was for privacy or was it to shut the world out that made that window so curious.

That house defined more than my place of living, it grew to define the awkwardness and smothering of a life denied, while simultaneously breathing hope into my being. Life beyond that house teased my imagination for a long time. Life always seemed so long to a naïve boy with an old soul.

This dusty township in the far-flung southern tips of Johannesburg was home to a close-knit but disunited Indian community. It was a strange combination of good neighbourliness and minding your own business, with deep undertones of politeness and insincerity coupled with a healthy dollop of gossip. The caste system that ravaged the motherland did not abandon its subjects when they arrived in the sugar cane fields of Natal on the promise of a new life full of opportunity. The British liars soon ensured that servitude and exploitation quickly replaced the promises of a new life, and like that the new life very quickly started feeling like the old. Perhaps that's why the traditions of old offered comfort and security to the damned dreams of the new world.

If it wasn't for apartheid, there would not be much more than social class to maintain any cohesion in the township. Named after a British army captain, Lenz was the other side of the railroad tracks that honoured an illegitimate legacy while graciously lending its name to the formation of the Bantustan of the Indians who were more politically acceptable as Asians.

Thus, the name of Lenasia was imbued on the township that was famed for its dust bowl, and its Indian merchants.

The dust bowl was a broad expanse of nothing but dry red earth surrounded by Indian businesses, a narrow one-way street, uneven neglected pavements and cheap facades adorning the shopfronts. Each time a light wind whipped up the dust and flung it in the eyes of anyone that wasn't paying attention, cars, clothes, warm bodies, and goods of all kinds would be covered in a layer of red earth that stained any sweaty mess that it touched. It sometimes undermined the dignity of lactating mothers who would be oblivious to the red earth stains that gathered on their breasts as they went about their business in light cotton tops. The only scene that dwarfed such innocence was the yellowy armpits of oily Indian men. The curry that didn't find its way out of their system in the latrine found its way to their armpits and formed large yellowish-brown stains that only they couldn't smell.

The state unwittingly offered unity to the community who found its common enemy worthy of collective hate. It was a bitter-sweet benefit that inspired the need to watch each other's backs out of necessity rather than compassion or brotherhood. As long as we had a common enemy, we had reason to look out for each other.

My earliest experiences with my fellow Indian countrymen taught me that we're a fiercely defensive bunch, but passively so. Deep-seated pride in traditions that hold little value, or offer no sanity, underpinned the regimen of discipline that defined the relationships between father and son, or even father and daughter. Mothers were a necessary pillar to maintain order in the home and to raise the kids while fathers enjoyed the social standing that such a structure earned.

Mothers, in their need for respect and acknowledgement from their partners, would enforce the household law with an iron fist, sometimes appearing to dethrone their husbands, but never completely taking over the reins. There was only ever one king of the castle, and queens were celebrated in religious texts and family gatherings but never in duty or honour.

And again, there were exceptions, as there always are. Perhaps my jaundiced views were formed by being the inverse exception that I did not recognise at the time. Nonetheless, my selective awareness of reality defined my perception, which defined my reality. And over-thinking it only made it worse. Thus, I simply accepted it for what it was. Reality.

END OF PREVIEW

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*With gratitude,*

*Zaid*