

*The*  
**HISTORIAN'S  
DAUGHTER**

Rashida Murphy has published her short fiction and poetry in various international and Australian literary journals and anthologies. *The Historian's Daughter* was shortlisted in the Scottish Dundee International Book Prize in 2015 and is being published by UWA Publishing in 2016. Currently she is an editor at *Westerly* and Books Editor at *Cafe Dissensus*. Rashida has a Masters in English Literature and a PhD in Writing from Edith Cowan University. After a short-lived career as a pen seller, Rashida taught ESL and Writing for several years as a tertiary lecturer. In 2016 she won the Magdalena Prize for feminist research for her thesis which includes the novel *The Historian's Daughter*. She lives in Perth with her husband and visiting wildlife.

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*I dedicate this book to my friend Mary.*

*I miss her every day.*



*In a certain sense, all men are historians.*

Thomas Carlyle

*The happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history.*

George Eliot

*Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It's the transition that's troublesome.*

Matthew Arnold



*Part I*

# **Family**



This is not the story he wanted me to tell.



## One

The hills towered, range upon range, behind the house with too many windows and women. These hills, with their memory of forest, of deodar, oak and pine, of rivers and waterfalls. The forests were long gone, along with deer and elephants and the men who hunted and were hunted. Now, derelict trees shivered in the wind and tried to stay upright. When it rained, they bent and swayed, bent and snapped and disappeared in bundles carried on the heads of village women. And the hills grew bald and bleak and the famous caves could only be accessed after the rains stopped.

The caves and hills had always been here – legend said – here, in this exact spot, before time began, before the heroes of the Mahabharata set up camp here, before the monks carved stone Buddhas into the hills. Pilgrims peered inside and snatched up sacred earth from the entrance and marvelled at the smell and softness of it on their faces and wept. Barefoot men walked past each morning carrying orange flags to the shrine of the saint revered by both Hindus and Muslims. The Sahyadri hills. Ancient. Holy. Mystical. Thirsty. And the house resisted them with its opulent garden and many windows, immune to dust and thirst. The house with too many windows and an attic.

Why had my English grandfather chosen this desolate cantonment as his final home? Captain Roper, whose impressive moustache topped an unsmiling mouth in the photograph on his

bookshelf, had not been a sensible man, according to his son the Historian, my father. Maybe Captain Roper became attached to the place he had sent so many of his men to, those pale English boys unused to the steaming multitudes of India. A large asylum for 'violent insane lunatics' subject to 'maniacal paroxysms of fury' was built for British soldiers here, so they could recover from the heat and the madness before going back to England.

I wished the asylum was still around. I would send all the aunties there – those dervishes with their dusters and dupattas and constant chatter. They made my eyes water. Mostly I didn't mind them filling our house like smoke on a winter's day. But it would be nice to have the Magician and Gloria to myself. To watch the Magician's hands as they folded, kneaded, straightened, smoothened, caressed. To breathe in Gloria's hair and skin and smell honey; her sighs when she thought she was alone.

The Historian was another matter. In an ideal world it would be possible to live without the Historian. And yet he remained an integral part of *my* world, like howling dogs and rumbling trucks and staccato horns. And shiny shoes.



'Hannah?' My sister tapped her knuckles lightly on my head. 'We're going to be late for school again. Where's your bag? Let's go – come on.'

I held Gloria's hand and waited for the bus. The highway would not come here for another twenty years. The old bus would rumble along the track that used to be a road before the monsoon washed it away. By the time we got to school, we would spill our breakfasts into the paper bags we carried. Every morning the Magician insisted we eat our masala omelettes and drink a glass of milk. This is how she loved us, so we never told her about bus-sickness.

'Gloria,' I said, 'when we grow up, we shall have a quiet house. We shall have a house with a roof that slopes and windows with

white frames. We shall have cream curtains tied back with bows and a tiny kitchen where you can make masala omelettes and biryani. We'll share a room and a bed. We'll never get married and never leave each other. No room for aunties and babies and visitors. No secret rooms, okay?' We settled in the back where the jolts made us jump higher than if we sat in the front.

'Quite an antisocial little person you are,' Gloria said before burying her face in the first of three bags she would use on the trip. I patted her back and fished out my own bag in preparation.



I first met the English conquistadors in the Historian's library. It was actually his father's library, his *despicable* dead father's, but he claimed the books as if they were his. I didn't know what the word meant then, could barely say it. For a long time I thought it meant come-kiss-the-doors. I thought it meant I was supposed to kiss the doors of the library every time I entered it. I was used to kissing hands and books, especially holy books. Occasionally we had to kiss food if we dropped it on the floor. Kissing doors didn't strike me as an odd thing to do. Especially when my fingers found the manes of tigers and tusks of elephants in the dark grain – just before I kissed them.

As for the conquistadors, there were so many of them. All named in blue-and-gold books on the third shelf – forty-four names on the spines of forty-four books with pictures of men wearing fan-shaped hats on the inside cover. *The English Conquistadors of India*. Some names were familiar. Like Warren and Clive, the names of my brothers. Inside these books were other words – words like 'plunder' and 'mastery' and 'tragedy'. I understood those.

I was allowed inside the library if I helped the aunties wipe books with a soft cloth while they clattered around, gossiping and grumbling and eating. They came from Bombay to get away from their sons' nagging wives or their husbands' weary faces. 'So many rooms in your house,' they said accusingly, 'and all this clean fresh

air also.' The Magician always apologised and urged them to stay longer, and the Historian brought his bushy brows together to mutter 'freeloaders' under his breath.

The aunties called me *kallo*. It was true I was darker than my sister and brothers – a throwback, they said. 'Farah,' they said to the Magician, 'did you have dark people in your family? Persians can be quite dark, no?' And the Magician neither confirmed nor denied the presence of darkness in her family, smiling when the aunties tugged my hair and cackled at my frowning face.

So I kissed the doors and the books with my brothers' names on them. The aunties wiped the shelves and said I would be a good wife to some lucky man one day if I wasn't so distracted by books. They complained about what a waste of space it was to have a library instead of a room with extra mattresses where their grandchildren could come and stay during holidays.

It wasn't until I turned seven and was able to read most words on my own, that I discovered the word 'conquistador' had nothing to do with kissing a door. *Webster's English Dictionary* said it meant 'an adventurer or conqueror, esp. one of the Spanish conquerors of the New World in the 16th century'.

Later, at school, my history teacher said that Clive, Lord Robert Clive, was a common thug who stole our country and Warren, Lord Warren Hastings, was an even bigger thug who stole jewellery from old women.



'You have a self-destructive nature,' Gloria said one morning, watching me cut strips of newspaper into fringes I would hang over the mirror in our room. I hoarded pieces of paper the way she hoarded beads and ribbons. I couldn't bear to see all that paper go to the man who came to collect old newspapers. He paid two rupees a kilo for used paper. The aunties watched him carefully, then pocketed the money, and the Magician pretended she hadn't seen them do it. They didn't know I filched some from their pile.

Gloria couldn't see the point of old newsprint lace but didn't tell on me either. Now she held up a shiny blue book called *Your Erroneous Zones* and told me to read it.

'It says here that you can choose how to feel. You can be in charge of your emotions. You can give and receive love without limits,' she said. 'You should free yourself, Hannah, and you might even stop having nightmares.'

'I can give love. I give love to you and the Magician. But I can't stop thinking about stuff. Like what happened to old Ghafoor. Don't you ever wonder?'

'See – that's what I mean. You don't let go. Ghafoor isn't important. He lives in your erroneous zone.' Gloria snapped the book shut and flung it away from her. From the look in her eyes, it seemed as though Ghafoor lived in her erroneous zone too. Before that he used to live near the mosque and sell *jalebis* during the month of Ramzan. Men wearing flat white caps stood patiently in a queue to collect the hot syrupy circles wrapped in newspaper to take home for the breaking of the fast. Ghafoor's legendary *jalebis* – the sizzle filled the market square like honey bees in summer. Until the night he smashed the window in the Historian's library and no one ever saw him again.

It was one of those unquiet nights that had kept me awake, listening to the house and the aunties snoring. I woke Gloria when the window rattled – nothing new; the windows shook all the time, but I was glad of an excuse to wake my sister. 'I'll kill you, Hannah. I swear I will,' she growled as she rolled out of bed at the same time as the brick smashed through the window. We clutched each other in the yellow light of the naked bulb in the passage and ran to the library.

The large black arm of the *jalebi* seller lifted the latch of the window from inside. We knew that arm. It was circled around the wrist by a thick copper bracelet, and a raised scar finished at his elbow. Gloria shouted his name and the arm withdrew. Through the window we saw an old Ghafoor shape, marooned in moonlight. The shape disappeared as we ran towards the window – a thud as

he dropped to the ground. The lights came on behind us, and the Historian and the Magician were in the room, along with our brothers. We spilled outside even as the Magician tried to draw us back. Ghafoor lay on a strip of moist grass outside, cradling a bottle, snuffling, trying to stand. The Historian kicked him in the stomach three times before Clive pulled him away.

'*Haramzada*,' shouted the Historian, and Gloria covered my ears. The Magician lifted her hands to her mouth.

'My daughter,' Ghafoor said to the Magician as he staggered up and placed his body against the broken window. 'You have daughters – I have daughters – how is a father supposed to feel when —' he never completed the sentence because the Historian kicked him again, following with a punch to his face.

'Don't you ever wonder what happened to Ghafoor?' I called out after Gloria who had lost interest in the blue book after I mentioned the *jalebi* man. 'What he was going to say before —'

'Not listening any more – take my advice. Don't mention Ghafoor again, especially when you-know-who is around. Just read the book. It'll change your life.'

I didn't. Because words like 'guilt', 'worry' and 'approval' weren't as lush as 'subjugation', 'ardour' and 'slaughter'.



The room was dark. I wasn't supposed to be there. None of us were, but Warren said it was such a good place to hide that no one would find me, and for once I would win. I let my tall brother lift me to the top of the black wardrobe and hugged him quickly when he said, 'Shush now, and be very quiet.' Warren tapped me on my knees, smiled and tiptoed out of the room even though no one else was watching.

I sat on the top of that cupboard in my short yellow dress and plastic bangles and hummed to myself. The thought of winning my first game of hide-and-seek was incentive enough to keep me quiet, even though it was boring, sitting there with nothing

to do. I looked around at the boxes, albums and curtains, and wished I had thought to bring a conquistador with me. I scratched at something on the curtains that made my fingers smell. Pigeon poop. The flap of wings outside the closed window sounded eerie, and I wondered how they could have got in. I counted to a hundred, ten times, recited all the nursery rhymes I knew and repeated the names of all my conquistadors, starting with Clive and finishing with Mountbatten. I drummed on a round brass plate, hoping Warren would hear me and come back. I knew he had forgotten.

I would be here forever. Like poor mad Rani Aunty, I would be forgotten by everyone except the Magician. But I would die here because the Magician didn't know where I was, so she couldn't bring me food. I would never go to school with Gloria again or paint her toenails. I cried and leaned over the side of the cupboard and saw the long drop to the carpeted floor. When I jumped my teeth closed over my tongue and my feet went numb. I lay on the floor, breathing in dust and blood. Then I yelled.

The Magician and Warren raced in together, with Gloria close behind. The Magician scooped me up and hushed me and took me down the narrow hallway to the room I shared with Gloria. Her eyes were shiny as she kissed my face and looked at my brother. 'This is how you look after your little sister? She could have died or broken her legs. God only knows what would have happened. How am I supposed to trust you, Warren?'

My brother held out his arms and the Magician handed me over. He looked as if he wanted to cry too. 'I'm sorry, so sorry,' he mumbled, wiping my face with his white hanky. 'I will look after you better, I promise.'

Gloria squeezed my hand and straightened my frock. My tongue throbbed and I swallowed blood. I loved them all.

The Magician wiped my tongue with cotton wool soaked in fennel water, and my brothers and sister took turns to sit with me through the long evening, dabbing the Magician's herb mixture on my aching tongue.

'*Jadugar*,' whispered the night servant, rubbing my feet and clucking when I showed her my tongue. 'Your ammi is a real *jadugar* – see how quickly she made you better? She can make bad things disappear, like *jadu* – magic. She comes from an old country, far away in the land of Fars, where fire was born and her people still have the first flame. Her people were all *jadugars* and you are very lucky. Next time, don't let your wicked brother put you on top of the cupboard. There are *djinns* in that room. Now be a good girl and try to sleep.' The servant yawned and slipped away when I turned my back on her. I counted my conquistadors again to while away the time.

I imagined Warren wearing a fan-shaped hat, instructing the Magician and the aunties to hand over all their jewellery in exchange for looking after me properly. Why hadn't my brothers been named after nice conquistadors instead of thuggish ones? Lord Warren of Hastings and Lord Robert Clive of the East India Company – charged with stealing jewels and a country. Gloria told me once we were 'Anglo-Banglos', even though the Magician was Indo-Persian because 'in this country everyone knows us by our father's heritage'. Naturally I asked a dozen questions until Gloria, yawning, told me I was lucky to have a Muslim name as well. 'When you grow up you can be whoever you want to be, but I'm always going to be stuck with the name chosen by the Historian.'

The Magician came to sit with me till I fell asleep. She folded back the sleeves of her kurta and rubbed her hands together to warm them before touching my forehead. Under her breath she hummed a song in Farsi, after a quick look at the door. She stroked my cheek. 'What am I going to do with you, little one? You attract disaster like a truck going downhill on a twisty road without brakes. And you have your whole life before you – I don't know what your brothers were thinking, leaving you like that.'

'I'm thorry, Ammi.' I didn't want Clive to be included in her displeasure. He had done no wrong. And Warren had been genuinely sorry, not like the time he dropped me from the back of his bike – he had laughed then at my tears.

## FAMILY

‘Shh – don’t talk. Your tongue needs rest to heal. Quiet now. Sleep, my *bacha*. And may God love you and protect you.’ She continued to hum the song she had started earlier, and I wished I understood the words. I closed my eyes as her hands stroked my face.

## Two

Always that dream.

I had the dream again that night, the same dream I always had. I stood alone and still in the middle of the world, which was a round disc with blurred edges and black shadows. If I moved I would tip over into the darkness. And in the darkness, the skinny girl cried because she had no clothes. The Historian came for me as I tilted and pitched around. He was a giant with bulging muscles and a syringe that he stabbed into my arm. He gave me his horns to hold onto. Then he became a goat and nibbled at my feet and told me I had bad blood.

When I screamed, Gloria rushed to my bed and held me as I shook and sweated. She ran her fingers through my tangled curls and tried to find the ribbon that usually held my hair away from my face. We looked towards the door, expecting the Magician to stumble in, but it wasn't her shadow that fell across the arched doorway. It was the Historian's. Our father was a notoriously deaf sleeper and had been known to sleep through a prison riot once, early in his career.

Now he stood by the door and enquired, 'Is she all right? That dream again? Don't wake your mother. She's very tired tonight. It's okay. I'll stay with you till you sleep, eh, Hannah? How's your tongue? Here, let me look at it.'

Gloria slipped into bed beside me and wrapped her arms around me. 'No need,' she said. 'I'll sleep with Hannah now so she

won't be scared any more. All right?'

I nodded. I did not want the Historian in my room. If I closed my eyes, I could see the horns he'd grown when he was pumping out my blood. Where was the Magician? Why did he stand there, looking as if he wanted to stay? No, don't walk towards me. Don't touch me. Don't come near. I turned my back and faced the wall, Gloria adjusting her body to let me twist around in the narrow bed.

'He's gone,' she said softly, after a while. 'You know I can't sleep here, so I'll just stay till you fall asleep, okay?'

'Gloria?' The Magician's herbs had worked their magic. My tongue felt no worse than it did when I accidentally bit it. Apart from the dream, I felt good – wide awake and ready for questions and stories.

'Hmm?'

'Is he really our father?'

'Sadly, yes.'

'How do you know?'

'Just shut up and go to sleep.'

'But why is he like this? Why did the Magician marry him? And why does Meher live with us?' I caught my sister's hand and stroked her palm, making little circles with my index finger until she giggled and snatched her hand away.

'One question at a time, you little pest.' Gloria's soft voice spoke above my ear. 'I don't know why he's like this. Maybe he was born this way. And the Magician had no choice. She had to marry him when her parents died. He must have been nice when he was younger. Meher is her cousin and she lives with us because she has nowhere else to live.'

'I think Meher is horrible. She's always watching us and I think she hates me.'

'Yes,' Gloria said, turning away from me. 'Now go to sleep or I'll make Meher come and sing to you.'



My English grandfather's diaries were blue and gold like the conquistador books. Grandfather Roper's diaries were our secret, Gloria's and mine. No one else knew we read them in the afternoons when the aunts napped and the Magician sat in the courtyard with her sketchbook. Gloria giggled more than she read, and I had to be patient, prompting, nodding, laughing. She didn't like it when I asked questions.

'Many of my countrymen realise that independence for India is now inevitable,' wrote my grandfather, Captain William Boyd Roper of the British 10th Armoured Division, in 1944. 'Where do they expect us to go? This, after all, is our country too. We who have married and begat children here – how are we expected to forget that? Must we be blamed for the excesses of our forebears? Those ruinous men with their thuggish ways who gave the rest of us a bad name?'

'Do you think this is important? All this stuff about thugs and ruins?'

My sister laughed. 'That's how they talked in olden times. It's just like reading stories in a book. He made it all up.'

'But the foreigners had to leave. That really happened, didn't it? The English had to leave India, had to go back where they came from? Is that why the Historian gets upset when we say we are Indian?'

'Do you want me to read or are you just going to keep talking?' Gloria flicked her hair back, putting the diary down with a thump.

'Sorry, I'm sorry...please read...I'll keep quiet.'

Gloria cleared her throat and picked up another blue-and-gold-lettered tome. 'Let's see what 1947 looks like. That's when the Historian was born. Listen – our Billy is talking about the Mountbattens as if he knew them. "I wonder if the Lady Edwina and her friend Mr Nehru will view the disintegration of the country from their boudoir? I think the Lady Edwina has taken her husband's attempt to secure an intimate relationship with Nehru too literally." Quite a cat, wasn't he, old Grandpa Billy? Billy the *billa*.'

‘Read some more.’ I liked the sound of ‘boudoir’ as much as I did ‘conquistador’.

“‘The mortal coldness of the soul like death itself comes down.’ This one’s dated the day after the Historian was born.’

I clutched her hand and hung on. ‘What does it mean?’

‘It’s a quote from Byron – the poet the Historian’s named after. See, Grandpa wrote it here – George Gordon Byron. Anyone would be grumpy with a name like that. You know the Historian was called Jordan when he was little? And I was meant to be called Jordana – thank goodness they picked Gloria instead.’

Gloria’s dimples marked her cheeks and I leaned forward and kissed her face. She squealed and pushed me away. ‘Now, where were we? Yes, let’s see what Grandpa said next. Who can blame the Historian for thinking his old man was silly? Grandpa Billy was so morbid. He did kill himself, after all. Oh, here’s another one about our dear old dad.’

‘Read it, read it – please?’

Gloria tried to sound like Grandfather, whom neither of us had met. She cleared her throat and read in a deep voice, ‘My boy, dark-haired, fair-faced, noisy, squalling – eminently suited for the new India, I think, with its noise and squalor. But does this India have any place for us? Does the Nehru–Gandhi coterie have a plan for the former rulers of India or is it to be a bloodbath? What is to become of us? This is our home. We have known no other and grow weary with the effort of remembering the green green grass of home.’

‘Don’t read any more,’ I said. ‘Let’s look at the conquistadors.’

Gloria put the diaries away and pulled down the conquistadors one by one, showing me square black-and-white pictures on shiny paper inside the yellowing books. She pointed out Lady Edwina, elegantly gowned and sashed, standing between her handsome husband and the prime minister, who was wearing the coat that would become known as the Nehru jacket.

‘Hard to imagine them being intimate,’ Gloria said. ‘Lord Louie is much better looking than Pandit Nehru.’

'Maybe Pandit Nehru was kind,' I said, and Gloria looked at me, snatched the book out of my hands and roughly shelved it. I straightened it, lingering over Lord Mountbatten's name on the blue-and-gold spine, glad that he didn't steal from old women, glad that he had returned our stolen country to us.



Another time, under a big pile of books in a corner of the library, Gloria found a book called *Coffee, Tea or Me*. She read it in a single afternoon, giggling and shushing me when I objected. When she finished she said she was going to be an air hostess when she grew up. She walked around the library with a couple of the conquistadors balanced on her head for poise. She was good at it, and didn't once drop the books, which was just as well. They were frayed with frequent handling, and it was only a matter of time before the Historian found out and we'd be banned from the library.

I tried to read Grandfather Roper's diaries on my own but it wasn't the same. Gloria knew where to find the most interesting bits.

'Gloria,' I whined. 'Don't do it. Don't be an air hostess. You can't walk around on high heels on a plane. It's silly. You're going to be a famous writer, or a pretty model, not a waitress. Please, please read the diaries for me.'

Gloria put on her superior face and said I wouldn't understand. I grinned and shook a bottle of nail polish, asking if I could paint her nails.

'All right,' she said, nose still in the air, stretching her bare feet out on the library floor where we sat.

It was a quiet afternoon. Most of the aunties and cousins were out on mysterious errands, and our brothers were playing badminton outside. They were supposed to be looking after us. The Magician was busy with the tailor all day, measuring the windows for summer curtains. After that, we were going to be

measured for new dresses. Gloria was in a dilemma. She wanted new clothes but she couldn't stand the tailor. Abdul Master was a ratty little man with greasy hair, brown teeth and a leery laugh. The Magician thought he was worth his weight in gold. He raised our arms and circled our bodies with measuring tape, brushing his fingers over our chests and hips and stomachs while coughing up phlegm. He had sour breath and stained fingernails. I didn't like him either, but reckoned it was a small price to pay once a year for clothes that hadn't been previously worn by Gloria. We dawdled in the library with Grandpa Billy and his conquistadors, and I gathered up old newspapers to spread under our feet before the toe-painting ritual. These were rare, these moments alone with Gloria, without her noisy friends, without the Magician or the Historian, without the aunties calling us unfortunate half-breeds. Here we were – the two of us.

'How do they put the pearls inside the bottle?' I asked, looking at the drop of pink clinging to the tip of the brush.

'I don't know,' she sighed. 'I've told you, they're not real pearls. Just something they put inside the bottle that rattles when we shake it.'

I nodded and concentrated on painting first her nails, then mine, screwing the top back on between coats, shaking the pearls vigorously to release their shine. We waited for the polish to dry, repeating the process twice, then lay back on the hard floor, content. The wind drifted in through louvred windows, bringing the smell of star jasmine and carrot halva into the room. We looked at each other and twitched our noses.

'Come on, child,' Gloria said, after a while. 'Let's go and get groped by Awful Abdul. I don't understand why Ammi won't find another tailor.'

'You won't really go away to become a *Coffee, Tea or Me* girl, will you? We need to find out why Grandpa Billy killed himself. You promised.'

'Well, stop having nightmares about your father and I'll read to you again. Why are you such a morbid little creature?'

THE HISTORIAN'S DAUGHTER

'I can't help it – the dreams. I wish I didn't have them. I don't have them when you sleep with me.'

'Hannah, you're eight years old. You're too big to sleep with me. And you kick and carry on all night. But this I can do – I can read you a nice story before you go to bed so you don't have nightmares, okay? One story every night from the Magician's Persian fairy tales, I promise.'

I lunged at her and fastened my arms around her waist, despite her screams and attempts to push me away.