

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In my family, there is a story of a curse. My aunt died tragically when she was twenty-one years old and we came to believe that her rose-gold pearl ring was cursed, that it brought hardship, or worse, early death.

I realise now that cursed or not, the ring became the embodiment of a terrible trauma. It was more than just a ring; it stood for loss and grief across four generations. *Blood to Poison* was inspired by this cursed ring – the possibility of magic, of curses and devils, has been inscribed in how I see the world from a young age. But mostly because the ring connected my family in an intensely emotional way. When I held that ring, I felt the loss of my aunt, even though she died before I was born.

*Blood to Poison* is about a curse that forges emotional connection across generations. But the book reaches deeper into the past, to an enslaved ancestor, and the characters are linked by past traumas that reverberate in the present. Like Savannah, enslavement is almost certainly part of my own family history, and the book's underlying themes of trauma and historical rage resonate deeply for me.

Before I started writing, I had useful conversations about what it means to incorporate these very difficult real-life traumas into a story about a girl who discovers magic. What I

heard was this: these are our stories and they should be told. It would be easier for me to explore these themes by writing literary fiction, a quiet reflective piece. But the challenge I took on with *Blood to Poison* was to take this story with all its implicit trauma and work it into a young adult romantic fantasy, and to do so sensitively and without compromising the real suffering that makes up the undercurrents of this book.

At the heart of *Blood to Poison* are two things: Savannah's anger, along with the understanding of this anger as something that links her to previous generations, and the figure of Hella, the ancestor who'd been enslaved during colonial times. When planning this book, I was feeling a constant low-grade fury – at lying politicians, disinformation, at how racism was becoming more overt, the way misogyny was manifesting as violence. While I was writing, angry South Africans took to the streets to protest violence against women and the high rate of femicide. I was researching slavery in colonial Cape Town, learning again about the appalling conditions that the enslaved endured, and finding connections between these two driving strands. Black anger is frequently dismissed or weaponised, women are branded irrational, and this story seemed an opportunity to open up conversations around anger. When I spoke to others about feeling angry all the time, I was surprised how often the response was, *So am I*.

For those unfamiliar with South Africa, it's a complex country with a difficult past. It is a vibrant, diverse place and the characters in the book reflect this diversity. I grew up during apartheid, the oppressive political system that entrenched white

domination, where the small details of my life were determined by the colour of my skin – I was forbidden from certain beaches, benches, train carriages, living in the leafy suburbs, attending well-resourced schools and so on, because they were ‘reserved for whites’. White was elevated, considered the norm – TV, magazines, sport, etc. were populated by white people, all in a country where white is the minority.

Like many South Africans, I am scarred by this past and it affects how I talk about race today. Some readers might find it strange that I don’t explicitly label race in this book. It didn’t feel right here. It’s partly a resistance, from growing up in a time where everyone was defined by race, where these labels were used to oppress. Apartheid’s strategy was to divide and conquer, to dehumanise through othering. I don’t believe we can simply ignore race, not when there is so much to mend, but my instinct is to distance myself from the language of apartheid.

I find the terminology difficult: Savannah and her family, Inez and her family, Mama Daline, Quinton, amongst others, are all what is called ‘coloured’ in South Africa, the official apartheid term, and one that doesn’t carry the same meaning outside of the country. It is the label applied to me. A complex term, it is both contested and embraced by people in my community, and I didn’t feel there was room to explore the topic with any nuance here. Many of us identify as black (or Black – my preference when referring to myself is not to capitalise; both are used in South Africa) while acknowledging colourism and recognising those classified as ‘native’ were disadvantaged more severely during apartheid.

This is a book about magic and witches, self-discovery and love in its many guises. But, under the surface, it is also a story about how trauma is passed down through the generations. The story is inspired by the very real historical trauma and injustice of enslavement and discrimination in South Africa. Writing it required a careful balance between the need to tell stories sensitively and the need to tell stories. I have tried to find that balance and I hope you will enjoy the story.

Mary Watson

# 1

## BABY

I am troubled by a memory that never happened.

We're running, Freda and I. She's ahead, her long hair streaming. The night is unnaturally bright, but not because of the stars. Freda turns to me, holding out a hand:

*Faster, Savannah.*

My bare feet beat the hard earth. Fear tightens my chest.

I glance behind me and see the world burning. The orange blaze, the hidden depths within the curling flames.

And from those depths, something comes for us.

I reach for Freda, grasping at her billowing nightgown. She looks back again and her face contorts with terror.

That is where the memory ends.

It feels real. But we've never escaped a fire.

Freda, my aunt, my second mother, was killed in a car accident nearly ten years ago. It is an impossible memory.

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‘Savannah, you gonna hang in the doorway there all day?’ Solly says from behind the shop counter.

I ignore him. I have the devils in me today. Restless. That’s what Minnie always says when I get like this: Savannah, you have the duiwels in you. Come here. Sit still. *Kry jou rus, meisiekind*. Get your rest, girl.

From the doorway of the corner shop, I look out on to the empty road. The sun is high in the afternoon sky and, in the distance, cloud covers Devil’s Peak. I’m here for the sugar, to fuel me as I study for another exam. Just three more papers, then three glorious months of summer break.

I take a step forward, then hesitate. The memory felt more real today.

I’m holding the jelly babies I bought, but I can’t eat with devils dancing inside me. I turn back to where Solly leans on his elbows, watching me. He’s beginning to grey at the temples.

‘All that sugar you eat.’ He shakes his head at me, like he isn’t the dealer who feeds my addiction. ‘It’s gonna kill you one day.’

‘Can I return them?’ I hold up the jelly babies. ‘For a refund?’

‘You opened the bag.’

‘Small details, Solly.’

‘You ate some.’

‘Is that a no then?’

‘Go home, Savannah.’ He raises his newspaper, blocking my view of his face. On the front page is a picture of a smiling woman. *Stabbed seven times*, the headline screams.

I leave the shop. A car is parked beside the empty

playground, with two guys inside, smoking with the windows rolled down. Their eyes light up as they see me.

‘Hullo, girl.’ The words slide out, slick with oil.

I keep walking. Look straight ahead. I know how this goes.

‘Sexy lady,’ the man in the parked car sings. I make the mistake of glancing over.

He runs his eyes over my body, down my black cami, the short shock of grey tulle, my bare legs, red Converse. Makes a kissing noise. ‘Mm-mmmm.’ Like I’m something delicious.

I’m not angry. Not yet. But the duiwels want to play.

I step towards the car. He’s young, this guy, twenty perhaps. Something about him makes me think of an insect. A cartoon bug.

A metal pipe lies on the tarmac, near the tyre.

‘I like what I see, baby,’ Bug-Face informs me.

‘I don’t give a fuck what you like.’

‘You hear that?’ Bug-Face jerks a thumb at me and he looks at his friend.

‘Sies, girl.’ The other man, full lips and a goatee, runs his eyes over my body.

‘Can’t you take a compliment?’ Bug-Face tuts. ‘Still, I like them a little dirty. You know, you really pretty when you’re not so cross.’

He shifts in his seat, the hem of his T-shirt riding up. The shape of a gun is unmistakable, even before I see the black handle at his waistband.

‘You should be more careful around here. A neighbourhood

like this.’ He shakes his head. ‘You just never know.’

What happens next, happens fast. The metal pipe is in my hand. The jelly babies are scattered in the road. I bring the pipe down on the hood of the car. The damage is disappointing, barely a dent. I swing back and hit harder.

Shards of glass spray everywhere. I hit again. Bug-Face shields his face with his arm, eyes wide. And again.

The other man scrambles out of the passenger side, but he doesn’t come any closer. He’s too scared. I want to laugh. People are emerging from their houses.

*Kyk die Tinkerbelle. She’s gonna moer him.*

Arms grip me from behind, stilling me. The pipe is prised from my fingers.

‘Let it go, Savannah.’ The voice is gentle. Solly.

I’m trembling now. And embarrassed. Aunties have come outside. Small pieces of broken glass are trapped in my skirt. The skin on my inside wrist is red and mottled, even though I don’t remember hurting it.

‘The police are coming,’ a woman says.

Bug-Face revs the car hard when he hears that; no one is sticking around for the police. His buddy jumps in.

‘You’ll pay damages,’ Bug-Face shouts, jabbing a finger. ‘Burns Road – you’d better bring the money.’

‘I’ll come,’ Solly says to Bug-Face. ‘Tomorrow.’

Their tyres screech as they drive away, burning rubber.

Walking home, Solly talks to me the whole time – about the shop, my exam the next day, if I’ll resume dancing in the new year.

‘Has Kim set her wedding date yet?’ he asks, and I am so deflated that even this distant disaster, my mother marrying Quinton, doesn’t make my stomach knot with anxiety.

The duiwels are quiet. They’ve had their feed, and now they rest.

The fear hits me later that night. After I’ve endured my mother’s worried outburst, then her frightened silence. After I watched her seek comfort in Quinton’s arms, barely able to look at me. He stroked Kim’s slim shoulders, eyes on me, offering to take the money next door to Solly.

Lying in bed, in the quietest hours, I wonder if Kim ever allows herself to think: *My daughter is a monster. My daughter is cursed.*

There’s a story that’s been handed down the generations in my family. The story of a curse. The story of a woman so wronged that she burned with anger until it destroyed everything. The story of Hella, my ancestor, whose anger was passed down from mother to daughter.

I turn on to my side, rest my cheek on a cool spot of the pillow. In the glow of the outside light, the mottling on my wrist appears an orange red.

Hella had been enslaved, forced to work for a cruel family. Her anger grew until one day, it exploded out of her.

Hella cursed them.

*You will die before you have fully lived.*

She cursed them for every lash of the whip, every slap, every cruel word.

*My anger will follow you.*

She cursed the enslaver for his assault on her body, and his wife for looking the other way.

*My anger will destroy you.*

She cursed their ancestors, their children, the children of their line yet to be born.

*You, your children, and your children's children. Until my rage burns out.*

In the struggle, a fire had started. During the chaos, Hella fled, and around her the world burned.

She did not know she had his child growing inside her.

I think of Hella, running across hard earth, the dark night lit by the fire behind her. Running until she felt her heart would burst.

This story lives in my bones.

## 2

# OLD WOMAN

Quinton drives with one hand on the steering wheel, the other on Kim's thigh. I want to slap it away, like an annoying fly.

We're heading away from the mountain, towards the Cape Flats. We drive through residential streets where tidy houses are fortified with burglar bars and barbed wire, through run-down roads where the shops badly need a lick of paint. People gather outside a church, hats and best dresses lifting in the wind. In the distance is a rise of council flats. I know these roads well, I've been coming this way for as long as I can remember.

Quinton parks on the road outside Minnie's house, a small rectangle with thick black bars on every window. The aunties, six women who have loved me my whole life, spill on to the stoep. This is the first time we're seeing them all together after Kim and Quinton announced their engagement weeks ago.

‘They’re going to fuss,’ Quinton says. His lips are quirked in amusement.

‘Oh yes they will.’ Kim unclicks her seat belt, laughing. ‘And you’re going to have to suck it up.’

He gives a good-natured groan and gets out. The aunties are bouncing with excitement as they surround Kim. *Show us the ring*, they clamour.

Auntie Nazeema wags a schoolteacher finger at Quinton.

‘Took you long enough.’

*They’ve only known each other a year*, I want to scream from the back seat.

‘I wasn’t sure she’d have me,’ he says. ‘I’m a lucky man.’

Hanging back, I let the happy couple go ahead. Then I scoop up the salad from the back seat and follow.

I’m grabbed before I reach the front door.

‘Too skinny,’ Auntie Chantie declares. ‘It’s all that dancing. You must eat.’

‘Such thick hair.’ Auntie Dotty tucks a lock behind my ear but it immediately springs out. My hair is more curly than wavy today. It’s like the sea, changeable. Some days the long, thick weight of it pulls the waves straight, and then on others it twists into a semblance of curls. Kim likes to think it reflects my mood: straight when I’m calm, curling when the tempest inside stirs. But it was straight as a pin the day I beat up that car, so her theory doesn’t hold.

‘You’ve been eating too much chocolate, I can tell by your skin,’ says Auntie Glynis.

Tietie pulls me into her arms, saying ‘Pretty girl’ into my hair.

I’m used to this, the customary dissection of my body. It’s their way of showing me love, this circle of women, with their neatly pressed dresses and pink lipstick and recipes.

In the living room, a table is spread with food. There’s always too much food at Minnie’s. Auntie Chantie takes the salad from me and gives me a sly look. ‘When you bringing your boyfriend, hey?’

‘Don’t have a boyfriend, Auntie Chantie.’

‘Well, chop-chop then. You don’t want to be left on the shelf.’

‘I’m seventeen!’

‘It’s different for young women these days, Chantal. These modern girls, they don’t need a man,’ Auntie Dotty chides her, placing a tray of bread on the table. ‘They just take what they want and put them out the door the next morning. Isn’t that right, Savannah?’

‘Exactly right.’ I can’t hide a laugh.

Auntie Chantie looks scandalised. And intrigued.

‘A lady never tells.’ Auntie Dotty flips her hair. She’s worn it the same way since she was a beauty queen decades ago: long and extremely straightened.

‘Who said I’m a lady?’ I snatch a piece of bread from the table and Auntie Chantie smacks my offending hand while Auntie Dotty shrieks with laughter.

She stops abruptly. They’re both looking at the red spots on my wrist. The red mottling that appeared the day I smashed up

the car hasn't gone away. It sits beneath the surface, like damaged blood vessels.

'What's that, sweetie?' Auntie Dotty says.

'Just a rash.' I press my arm against my sundress.

They glance at each other. I know what they're thinking. It's the curse, making itself known.

When it comes to the curse, the aunts are divided. Auntie Glynis is undecided, but Kim, Tietie and Auntie Nazeema don't believe.

'You want to know why I'm angry?' Tietie likes to say. 'Look out the window.' She rarely elaborates, but I've heard enough to know she means 'the system'. The system that hasn't delivered housing, or addressed the high rate of femicide, or stopped corruption. And, further back, the system that divided people by race, elevating white to the detriment of everyone else. Apartheid ended before I was born, but the damage persists.

Kim says that by believing in the curse, we make it true. Women in our family have always been prone to outbursts of rage. Tietie served maggots in her cheating husband's rice and briedie. Auntie Glynis slashed Uncle Lester's tyres after he gambled his wages. They're not cursed, Kim says; they just have tempers.

But then there are the rare few whose lives are claimed by the curse. Hella's girls, whose fury turns their blood to poison. Kim finds this harder to explain.

My grandmother, Ma Stella, was one of Hella's girls. Cross and tired, she'd once sat on a 'whites only' bench. It took three men to drag her off, scratching and hissing like a cat. She died

from a sudden brain haemorrhage at twenty-nine years old, and Minnie, her unmarried sister, cared for Kim and Freda as if they were her own.

Freda, the older daughter, was one of Hella's too. Family lore says that Freda was fearsome. A shrew, a harridan. Wild, wilful and sharp-tongued, she ran through a glass door in the middle of a screaming argument.

I remember Freda as the woman who loved me completely. When Kim found herself pregnant at sixteen, the aunties brought food and wisdom and hand-me-downs. But it was Freda who looked after me, so that Kim could finish school and train as a librarian. In those days, I had two mothers.

It was Freda whose bed I sought in the middle of the night, when nightmares tossed me out of my own. As a child, I was prone to loud, furious meltdowns, and Freda would hold my rigid body, whispering, 'Remember, Savannah, fear and anger are kin. And sometimes one comes when the other's been called.' She would wrap me in her arms and the scent of her perfume was my haven.

One April evening, during a bad tantrum, she slipped a cheap silver chain around my neck. On it hung her rose-gold ring with its jewelled star; the ring she wore every day. 'When it gets too much, touch this star and know that I am always with you.' Then we went outside to watch the shooting stars, just the two of us.

The next night, Freda lost control of her car on the highway. Her life ended when she was twenty-seven years old.

Because here's the thing about Hella's girls: they always die before they've fully lived. And the angrier they are, the younger they die.

When Freda died, my world bottomed out. And it's never been put right. I wear the ring with its shining star on my pointer finger every day.

In the cramped kitchen, I find Minnie alone, washing dishes in the sink.

'How you, my girl?' Minnie asks me. She holds out sudsy arms as she searches my face. Her hair is cut short, and her face is speckled with sunspots. 'Those boys trouble you again? The ones who pointed a gun at you?'

'No, Ma Minnie. And they didn't point a gun at me.'

She gives me a look: *Don't think you can hide from me.* 'Go on out, the boys are by the pool.'

Outside, my older cousins are actually *in* the water. Three young girl cousins drive tiny cars through their Lego town, their dolls tossed face down on the cement. More aunties are gathered under the awning on the patio. There are some in headscarves, my Muslim cousins who stop me to ask about my plans for next year. There are two aunties who passed as white during the apartheid years, and then a handful who aren't blood at all.

The men are gathered around the half-barrel, lighting the fire. At the centre of them is Quinton, talking loudly, gesturing. Showing off.

'Savannah!' The guys yell my name like a war cry. I go over to the small pool and they splash water on my sundress and leather sandals.

‘You’re going to regret that,’ I say.

‘Yeah, what you gonna do?’ Harrison splashes me again.

‘She’ll bash our heads in with a metal pipe.’ Donley holds up his hands, pretending to shield himself from me.

Harrison sees me wince.

‘Wow, Donno, you can be a real tit sometimes.’ Harrison smacks the back of his head.

‘I’m going to change,’ I say.

I take my time putting on my swimming costume in the back bathroom.

When I leave, I walk past the slightly ajar door to Minnie’s bedroom and hear whispers.

‘She has them, Kim,’ Auntie Glynis hisses. ‘The marks. You can’t ignore *that*.’

‘Enough.’ Kim sounds tired. Like this conversation has been going on too long.

‘What will it take to make you see?’ Auntie Chantie says. ‘That boy needed stitches from the glass. Savannah is one of Hella’s. Just like Freda, and Stella.’

‘The curse isn’t real, for goodness sake,’ Kim says. ‘I won’t tell her she’s doomed at seventeen.’

‘It was in her last months,’ Auntie Chantie says, ‘that Freda’s marks came.’

No one says anything for a moment. I look at my wrist, at the deep red spots. Nearly a week, and they haven’t faded.

‘It’s just a rash,’ says Kim at last. Another pause. ‘And even if it’s not, what can I do about it?’

‘There are people who know about these things,’ Auntie Dotty says.

‘Savannah,’ Harrison says loudly from the opposite end of the passage, and a hush falls inside the room. He’s olive-skinned, with curly hair, a wide nose and strong jaw. He has laughing eyes and his mouth is always slightly upturned, as if ready for fun. But now a shadow crosses his face. ‘What are you doing?’

I walk away from the door. ‘Eavesdropping. You interrupted.’

‘They talking about you?’ Harrison says, as I reach him. ‘Because in case you were wondering, there is no curse. You need to be careful, though. Those guys could have—’

‘Harrison, your mom said something just now,’ I interrupt him. ‘About people who *know about these things*. What does that mean?’

‘You know. People met die helm gebore. Born with the second sight. They’re open to ...’ He waves a hand. ‘The other side. The supernatural.’

‘They can fix curses?’

‘Savannah.’ He shakes his head. ‘Don’t do this to yourself, man.’

‘Later, *Uncle* Harrison.’

I walk off, ignoring his tirade about being only three years older than me, not to mention better looking, so please not to call him that, thank you.

It’s later, much later. I’m floating on a pink doughnut in the pool. As I float, the evening grows dark. I feel it inside me too,

something shadowed. Stirring. Slow and sure and biding its time.

The boys have disappeared to watch a match on TV and the smell of charred meat still fills the air. Barbed wire curls on top of the back fence. It feels like the surrounding houses are crowding in. Far above are the stars, which remind me of Freda. There, but distant. Always out of reach.

I think of Freda's face turned up to the night sky, her finger tracing patterns as she taught me the constellations. I see Taurus, then search for the Southern Cross, Freda's favourite. The Four Sisters, she'd called it, telling me the names of the four stars: the Jackal, the red star on top; the Arrow and the Worm at each side; and at the bottom, the Claw, the brightest of them all. The names of witches who'd once lived in the Cape.

Long ago, Freda would say, when there was still magic in the world, four girls were born on the night of the falling stars. The stars shed some magic that night and drops of it fell into the babies' eyes. They grew up to be powerful witches and when they died, they went back to the stars that had made them.

That scared me, the idea of witches in the night sky, but Freda would laugh. 'They won't hurt you. They're good witches. Except when they need to be bad.'

Good except when they need to be bad.

After a while, I notice Auntie Dotty watching me from the lounge. She has a colourful drink in hand, with a cocktail umbrella, and her high wedged sandals are studded with crystals.

‘Coming in?’ I call to her.

‘You know how long this takes?’ She makes a circle around her perfectly made-up face and immaculate hair. ‘I’d have to be on fire first.’

Taking a last look at the sky, I ease off the doughnut and wade to the edge.

‘You are so like Freda.’ Auntie Dotty can’t hide the sadness in her voice. ‘She always had her face turned to the stars.’

‘I was looking for the witches.’ I pull myself out of the pool.

‘I heard those stories from *my* aunties.’ Auntie Dotty’s red lips take a sip from the red-and-white straw. ‘Proper church-going ladies all of them, but still they believed that seeing the Four Sisters was a good omen. That the witches would give them luck.’

‘Funny that. My aunties are exactly the same.’

We both look at the sky.

‘You’re worried, aren’t you?’

I nod. I’m dripping water on to the brickwork, suddenly chilled.

She considers me for a long moment, then puts down her drink. ‘I have something for you, but you can’t tell your mother.’

She tosses my towel to me, then lifts a book covered in pale pink, shimmery card from her lap and slips it inside the canvas bag where I stuffed my dress.

‘What is it, Auntie Dotty?’

‘Freda’s notebook. All her research.’

‘Research?’

She nods. ‘Curses. Strange happenings. I found it in her

things a few years ago, when your mom was having a clear-out. Looks like she wanted to fix herself before she – well.’

‘Freda believed in the curse.’ I mean it as a question, but it comes out certain.

‘She believed that something was happening to her. The marks appeared on her skin. She began to see things that weren’t there. She remembered things that couldn’t have happened.’

Dotty stops abruptly when she sees the look on my face. I’ve never told anyone about Freda and me running through the burning field.

‘Kim won’t like this.’

‘She won’t,’ Auntie Dotty agrees, setting her empty glass beside her and getting to her feet. ‘But I think you’re looking for answers.’

She’s right. But I hadn’t expected them to come from Dotty, the youngest of my grandmother’s sisters, the frivolous one, only interested in shopping, abhorring all serious talk.

She begins to walk back to the house.

‘Do you believe in it?’ I say, and she pauses, not looking at me.

‘I want to help you, Savannah, in any way I can.’ Then she calls over her shoulder. ‘And for heaven’s sake, wear a damn bikini. Nothing wrong with showing a bit of tit.’