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The Way Home



Leila Aboulela

Leila Aboulela was born in Cairo in 1964. She lived in Khartoum and graduated from the University of Khartoum in 1985. She travelled to London to study statistics at the LSE, and in 1990 moved with her family to Aberdeen. Her work has been published in *Mica*, *Chapman*, *Special Reserve* (Scottish Cultural Press), *Left to Write*, and *Scottish Short Stories 1996* (HarperCollins).

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Intangible Publications, Inc.

1430 Willamette #200

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E-mail office@intangible.org **Web** www.intangible.org

Friday Afternoon

IT IS STRANGE TO VISIT TRACY in a nursing home. Somehow Nadia associates the words with the old and the infirm and Tracy has not yet said good-bye to her teens. But that is what the gold elegant letters say and when Nadia rings the bell she asks herself, But what else do you expect them to write on the front door?

Cosy, unobtrusive, the house is like any other in this quiet North London street. A quaint gate, a small front garden and when she goes inside Nadia can see the back garden with a clothes line, a green lawnmower propped against the wooden fence of next door.

There are four women in the room. Tracy, three others and two empty beds. It's not one of our busy days, the nurse later says. The curtains separating the beds are open and Oprah Winfrey beams down from the TV which protrudes from the wall high above. Bullying is the topic of the show. Childhood victims of bullying are telling their stories to a sympathetic audience.

Tracy in a pink nightgown, lank hair, a little pale. No it doesn't hurt much now, it did at first. We all had it done one after the other. I was first, then they brought me back here in a wheelchair.

She tells Nadia about the other women in the room. The oldish looking woman is Irish, Mandy or Maggie, Tracy isn't sure. Her husband is sitting with her on the bed, they are laughing at the television show. The skinny woman with the permed hair, Kay. And the blonde with the great tan, she's come all the way from South Africa. She was far ahead of us, Tracy whispers, you can

still see now how big her stomach is. And believe me Nadia, she soaked her bed with blood.

The South African girl has a visitor, a similar-looking friend who arrives with flowers. Kay's boyfriend appears shortly after Nadia. Fat and reluctant he edges his way into the room, empty-handed. I should have brought flowers, thinks Nadia. But then she consoles herself with the thought that if she hadn't come, Tracy would have been the only one without a visitor.

Do you have change for the phone?

Tracy takes twenty pence and gets up slowly from the bed, shuffling her feet around in search for her slippers. When she walks to the door she holds her lower stomach with one hand and Nadia flinches when she sees the dark stains on her friend's nightgown.

Nadia lied to her parents to be here. Of course. What could she have told them? Long ago Lateefa unwittingly bestowed glamour on Tracy, making her friendship even more desirable. Lateefa said, 'That girl Tracy is no good. Don't be her friend any more'. Perhaps she saw warning signs in the streak of colour on Tracy's lips, the awareness in her eyes. When Tracy wore a short skirt, she no longer crossed her bare legs carelessly like a child but did it deliberately with all the calm knowledge of an adult. 'She'll have a bad end', Lateefa said and Nadia knew that her mother's mind held images of the fallen women of the Egyptian cinema screen. The wrathful uncle from the south of Egypt stalking his niece with a loaded gun. Only blood could wash his family's dishonour. And off the screen, in urban Cairo where there were no guns, there would be shame. Lateefa could imagine the shame. Mothers get divorced for this kind of thing, sisters remain unwed. Grandmothers go to their graves before their time, crushed by sorrow. A girl's honour is like a match stick, break it and it can never be fixed. Not an Arab saying any more, a cliché.

Tracy has no gun-wielding uncle from the south. Her father will not divorce her mother because he already did so years ago. He went to Australia and Tracy's dream is that she will visit him there one day. She watches *Neighbours* with obsessive love, she has three stuffed koala bears in her bedroom.

Tracy threw a tantrum when the perfect blue circle showed up on the stick she dipped in her morning urine. She could not believe it, such a thing could not happen to her. And today is a kind of relief, it is over at last. Time to get back to normal, to start pretending that nothing really has happened.

Her mother, a most 'enlightened' lady, paid up the two hundred and fifty pounds without a fuss. Then she packed and drove with Tracy's stepfather and the twins to a house-swap holiday with a family in the Black Forest. The travel plans were made ages ago, house-swapping takes a long time to arrange and there was absolutely No Way they could cancel. And as Stepdad said, was it fair really that the family's holiday be disrupted because of Tracy's carelessness?

So yesterday Tracy was 'counselled' as the law prescribed, today she is to spend the night at the nursing home and next day she will go back to her everyday life. End of story.

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They called me white trash. Oprah's guest says this and bursts into tears. Compassion gurgles around the studio audience. Only Oprah reigns plump and polished. The softest baby cheeks, coiffured, coated with a yellow designer suit.

Now the show reaches new heights: former bullies appear to confront those people whose childhood they ruined. Boos and hisses from the audience. Irish laughter from the bed in the corner. Nadia can see that Maggie and her husband are holding hands. I never get to see this show, she is saying to him, it's the time when the children are always watching their programs on the other channel. But Nadia cannot laugh like them, her own childhood is still too close to her. She is moved by the pain unfolding before her on the screen. Was she bullied, did she ever bully anyone? Uneasy thoughts. And why is it that so many years later it is so easy to distinguish the bullies from their prey? Adult bodies surrounding the children of long ago. The years have changed nothing.

He wasn't there. Tracy gives the coins back to Nadia. Let's go

upstairs. We're not allowed to smoke in here.

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UPSTAIRS IS A BRIGHT ROOM overlooking the front of the house. Oriel windows with seats all around, a high ceiling, sandwiches on a tray. Coffee, tea, a kettle. Magazines and pamphlets on the low coffee table, posters on the walls. 'Have You Considered Sterilisation?'... 'The Morning After Pill—Ask your GP about it'.

Nadia chews a cheese sandwich, makes tea, leafs through the pamphlets. So what are you going to use now Tracy, progesterone injections, the low-dose mini-pill, the IUD? She reads them out as if she is choosing lunch from a menu.

Shut up Nadia. I'm not in the mood. Tracy lights her second cigarette, and for an instant the flame gives her features a delicate glow as if she is painted, not real. She snaps the match in her hand into two before she throws it in the ashtray.

They sucked it out. The vacuum roared and sucked and gobbled. It's a very loud noise, I told the nurse. Not really, she said, you must be imagining it. All the painkillers that you took. She held my hand and chatted to me to distract me. I lay down and it was like an initiation rite in those weird ceremonies they have in horror films. *The contents of your womb*, she called it. This is what they call it here. So many words for such a tiny thing.

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SOON THE OTHERS COME UPSTAIRS one by one, their visitors have left. More cigarettes, tea, coffee. These sandwiches are good... I'm so hungry the dinner I got was terrible. It was a mistake asking for the fish... They said we'll get breakfast in bed tomorrow... We'll be lucky if it is Rice Krispies, probably one piece of toast with jam...

In their nightdresses and with the unexpected sandwiches, there is almost a festive atmosphere in the room.

I had a scare two months ago, says Kay, my period came late, five days. It's strange that is. Last year exactly the same thing

happened to a couple we know. My boyfriend was all stiff and disapproving. Said it was the wrong thing to do but now when he's in the same situation, it's all right. We came here last night so that he could pay because he couldn't come with me this morning. I nearly changed my mind then, I hated the look of this place.

I have four kids, Maggie says, I have asthma and look at my legs mottled with varicose veins. I couldn't face a fifth, had to come specially from Ireland for this.

And the golden beauty came all the way from Cape Town. The laws in South Africa are so backward. I'll stay in London for a few more days, I've been here before but there are still things I'd like to see.

I've been dancing, jogging and I didn't miss my aerobics class. We even went hill-walking on the weekend, Kay smiles for the first time. I thought something would happen but I was fine, nothing ever happened. My boyfriend kept saying, come on walk faster, save us some money.

Everyone laughs.

Nadia imagines Fat Boyfriend puffing up the hill. *Two hundred and fifty pounds could take us to Majorca.*

My mum said the same thing, she tried everything to get rid of me, Tracy says, and it was so difficult in those days. She is laughing now enjoying the conversation, the smoke-filled room, the feeling that her body no longer hurts like before.

I walked up the underground steps instead of taking the escalator, adds the golden beauty, though it is not true; but she is eager to join in.

Now they boast of their fertility, brag of the way the lumped clot clung firmly inside them. The primitive urge to celebrate the ability to conceive overtakes them for the first time. Only Maggie does not brag.

Some of my friends were so mean about this, says Kay. Why don't you get yourself sterilized, one of them said. Imagine, what a thing to say.

Though she does not yet admit it to herself, Kay wanted him to propose marriage, commitment. Wanted him last night when they crept stealthily to the nursing home to turn back and say, No,

forget it. But the fat man would not be prodded by the unscheduled, would not surrender, give way. And fine lines are now marking the edge of his lady's smile. Miss Thirtysomething's fecund sun is a long way past noon.

I'm taking a week off work, Kay goes on, hate the job anyway. Stupid boring job being a data operator. Is it by half past nine that we have to leave here tomorrow morning? He's coming to pick me up at nine.

Kay is talking more than the others. Pulling at her cigarette in tension, her thin legs crossed tightly together.

Chris told me, 'Make your own way home Tracy', and Tracy laughs a little unevenly, shakes her red hair. Chris is my boyfriend, she adds to explain though there is no need. And he wasn't there when you phoned him, Nadia thinks.

Chris and Tracy. There was a Michael before Chris, an Ian before Michael. There was a time long ago when Tracy and Nadia were two little girls with the same Barbie dolls. They watched Blue Peter together. When they spoke, their words were spontaneous and pure. (Your tummy is brown... Why do you have red dots on your nose?) In school they pushed each other into fits of giggles, finding humour in things they would not have found funny if they were alone. A girl's stocking, the janitor's moustache, a deviant white hair that grew right in the centre of Mrs. Hickson's cheek and quivered when she spoke. An exchange of looks and Tracy would start spluttering, covering her mouth with her hand, knees clenched together. Nadia's suppressed laughter would turn to shrill squeaks, a knot of pain in her chest. Then, and it did not happen overnight but gradually, Tracy crossed to another world, entered a dimension that was neither adult nor child. Tracy's code became that of the glitzy magazines, the parameters of her new world boyfriends, dates, parties and first kisses.

Your parents are awful, Nadia. You're not allowed to do this, to do that. They are so inflexible. I mean this is London, people are free here, not some village on the Nile.

Cairo is a city, a big modern city, my father and mother never lived in a village.

Tracy is a broad-minded young girl. She knows people have different 'cultures', which means they dress differently, eat spicy food. No one told her there are different lenses through which you could look at the world. She is a 'tolerant' girl which means that at the whole Nadia issue she rolls her eyes skywards (that particularly British gesture) and sighs.

Don't you like anyone Nadia? How about Ryan, he likes you, when he went cycling in Wales he sent you a letter.

No he doesn't talk, he's too quiet. His handwriting is horrible.

Nadeem then, he's Muslim, your Mummy would approve.

I don't like the way he keeps tossing his hair away from his eyes.

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IN NADIA'S LIFE there are crumpled notes which she picked up from a waste paper basket. A smile of recognition, more than a year ago, across the aisle of an aeroplane. Plenty of dreams. All this she keeps from Tracy lest the spell be broken if she utters any words. Her dreams turn to drivel before Tracy's patronizing eyes.

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PERHAPS SHE HAS COME HERE TODAY to gloat. Gloat and sneer and witness Tracy's punishment. Sit prim and virginal in her smart clothes, pocket back the change for the failed telephone call.

She feels guilty at such thoughts, quashes them down. Reminds herself of 'friendship', digs deep for sympathy towards Tracy. Yet she is aware of the superfluity of her presence. She is out of place in this room, the only one not in a nightgown, the only one without an experience to swap. Why is she here then, flaunting the end of visiting hours? Why hasn't she gone home already? She is, in a strange way, enjoying herself, feeding her curiosity about the lives of these women. And she is contemptuous of herself for feeling this way.

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THE NURSE COMES IN with sleeping pills. Swollen runny nose, a muffled voice. Sorry ladies I've got a bad cold.

Only Maggie has room for a sympathetic response. Tracy is eager for the pills. She isn't bothered to try the telephone again.

It is time for Nadia to go home.

A few stops on the underground, no need to change lines but she is still home a little late. I was at the library, she lies to her parents and feels again that odd disappointment when they believe without question what she says. And that evening she does not eat very much of the dinner Lateefa cooked. She is too full of cheese sandwiches.

Saturday Morning

FAT BOYFRIEND IS IN HIS CAR blocking the road when Nadia arrives. Fiddling with his CD player. Big car, a Granada. Fat Boyfriend has a good job in the city, a nice flat. Kay keeps it nice for him, scrubs the toilet bowl with disinfectant, presses his shirts better than they do at Sketchley. And free of charge.

She comes out now, a flamingo doing a quickstep. Pink leggings, pink stilettos. A wide belt around her waist, nipples angry against the tight tunic she is wearing. She blinks at Nadia through mascaraed lashes, yesterday's intimacy is forgotten.

Inside the home a new mood prevails. The nurse strips the sheets, eyes watery, hankies bulging in her pockets. I still have that terrible cold.

Golden beauty is squashed in her blue jeans, the flowers next to her bed limp and redundant. Tracy bustles about, blow-drying her hair, searching for her contact lenses.

Cheerful now, energetic, ready to go home. Home to Chris, she has keys to his place. Her room at home with the koala bears is taken over by the house-swappers from the Black Forest.

Maggie's husband arrived early, shared her toast and jam. He is ready to carry her bag for her. Are you sure you got everything? Your toothbrush, your slippers? They are no longer in love, these two. They are peacefully addicted to each other. In equilibrium. And he did not sleep well in his bed and breakfast room the night before. Pity for her enveloped him, he lay conscious of the clammy sheets, the unfamiliar scents. Could not remember the last time he slept alone.

Maggie has time to greet Nadia, say good-bye to the nurse. Has space to think it's a treat not to have to make the beds, get the children's breakfast. Nice to get away. It's almost like a holiday really.

Now they leave to catch the ferry home. Pack some surprises for the children; a pencil with a rubber troll's head, two tiny London taxis, a Beefeater doll. They know what they left behind in the nursing home.

And Maggie is the epitome of why women are judged irrational. Through asthma attacks which squeeze her lungs, send her flinging windows wide open to gasp the icy night air, she remembers. Though she chants to herself all that she knows about the population explosion, she thinks what if? In the midst of the strain of her children, the resentment that drains her at their unreasonable requests, she secretly grieves. Mourns the sweet smell of an orange stained nappy, that prickle in her breasts when the milk gathers speed and sprays out, a whole personality she will never know.

Outside, the spring air is fresh for Nadia and Tracy. Tracy feels she has been indoors for too long. The sun is a little too bright, the noise of the traffic harsh. They walk to the tube station together.

Let me carry your bag.

No I'm all right.

It seems to Tracy that the station is too far away. Was is that far when she came yesterday? Was it only yesterday that she walked in the opposite direction? It seems like a long time and she is now aware of a dull dragging pain inside her. She will need to rest when she gets home. Two weeks, that's what they said, until she will feel that she is back to normal.

Outside the station, she lights a cigarette, drops her bag on the floor. Leans against the stained wall.

Go ahead, don't wait for me.

It's okay. I'm not in a hurry.

Tracy is not the only one smoking outside the station. Others stand like her observing the ritual, preparing themselves for the descent under the ground.

So what are you going to do the rest of the day?

We might go to Islington.

Tracy smiles at the 'we' in Nadia's words. Nadia goes out with her parents more than any girl that Tracy knows. There is something childlike about Nadia, something pampered, though she could not be described as spoilt. She has a 'looked after' air about her.

Why Islington?

My mother wants to visit a lady whose husband is a student. The university hostels and flats are all there.

In the busy station, they walk down the few steps and buy their tickets. Back and forth people move; the Saturday morning shoppers, elderly ladies with trolleys, women with pushchairs, young men with the ear-plugs of Walkmen around their throats. The ticket barriers suck the tickets, plastic doors swing open, the tickets are spat out. Open and shut go the doors, the escalators rattle and groan, their steps bristle and sweep down like the back of a Stegosaurus.

On the escalator, Nadia thinks that once you put your first foot to go down, you cannot change your mind. It is difficult to walk up again, there is someone standing on every step, there would be people running down towards you. Even if it was empty, you would look silly trying anyway. She used to do that when she was young, play on the escalators in department stores, deliberately struggle against their flow. Run quickly down the Up escalator, pant up the Down until someone told her off and brought the game to an end. Now she looks at the emergency Stop box, its red wrinkled paper uninviting to touch. Pressing the box would bring this giant, rattling machine to a standstill. It would be a dramatic moment, people would perhaps fall from the jolt, hurt themselves.

She has never seen this happen. Now as she and Tracy stand in a single file to the right while others walk quickly past them, she can understand the reluctance that prevents the red box from being pressed. There is a fear of stopping a process that has already been set in motion.

They are half way down when a rushing man steps on Tracy's foot. His briefcase brushes against her knees. She begins to cry

and the escalator keeps on descending, down everyone goes, under the ground. For Tracy the ads on the side wall merge together in a blur of tears. Musicals, the latest Michael Jackson album, Big Mac. Only when they reach the bottom does Nadia notice.

What's wrong?

Nothing.

Why are you crying?

I don't know.

People walk past them. The sound of footsteps is like an endless march, the indefatigable continuity of life. Nadia and Tracy are the only ones standing at the bottom, where no one needs to stand. There is not even a busker today filling the station with the eerie sound of his voice. People are making a choice now; left Northward, right Southwards.

Nadia and Tracy should go right, follow the woman with the beads in her hair South, follow the man with the tweed jacket holding his son's hand, the old woman with mauve hair. Instead they stand and Tracy rummages automatically in her bag, remembers the smoking ban and gives up. Leans on the wall, wipes her tears with the back of her hand.

Nadia is conscious of all the sounds around her, all the bustle of the station. Tracy is crying and Nadia is thinking we must have missed a train by now.

Are you in pain? Should we go back?

No just cramps, like period pains. They told me I would get them.

Pity for Tracy is superseded by illumination. Nadia can see the silver drop earring nestle in Tracy's earlobe, entwined by a single stray hair. She can see Tracy's eyebrow ruffled, the little hairs disturbed, askew. Nadia can see Tracy's womb. Bewildered, its mouth agape in a round full O. It murmurs and drones reproach. Sighs, pulses its defeat, retreats. Grudgingly contracts, adjusts. Sheds, expels, but there is little left to shed.

From her own body, Nadia hears the songs of stillness. No pain, a harmony. Her womb is deep, buried. Undisturbed, it follows its own rhythm. Oscillates and she cannot conjure it, it is hidden. Protected by veils that cascade in layers. Their colours,

the colours of jewels. In their silkiness they caress one another, blow playfully apart, then settle to curtain what's precious.

Try and feel pity for Tracy. Perhaps her tears are the tears of remorse, the tears of regret. Perhaps she lingers here under the ground so as not to go back to him. Back to the Chris who said, 'Make your own way home Tracy'.

Chris is younger than Tracy. Just a little younger. He delivers pizzas on a motorcycle. Tracy thinks he looks good in his motorcycle gear, better than he does without it. Looks better with the helmet and all the leather blackness. Chris sometimes forgets his gloves with the delivered pizzas and has to go back to ring the doorbells of customers. Mumbles for them back, bounces his weight from foot to foot. His eyes shift beneath a long fringe. He does not mean to be unkind when he tells Tracy to make her own way home. He has known her for five months and he is just very young. A child playing with Tracy.

You can come home and stay with us, says Nadia, until your parents come back. Or maybe my dad could get you a cheap ticket to join them in Germany.

A grandiose invitation in true Egyptian style. Nadia speaks and awaits Tracy's yes. The yes that would herald a war with Lateefa. She can imagine putting up a good fight, the explanations tumbling after each other. Lateefa livid with rage, with disbelief, rendered silent or eloquent? Nothing silenced Lateefa. Perhaps they could lie then, not even mention the nursing home. Nadia's mind churns intricate deceptions. Every angle must be covered. Every question that Lateefa can possibly ask, predicted and prepared for.

No, says Tracy, no. She is surprised by Nadia's offer. She can't understand why Nadia said that. Come on, let's go.

The flood of relief is delicious. There will be no confrontation with Lateefa, no complications. But guilt shadows relief's triumph. Hypocrite! Hypocrite! he hisses in a tempo which matches that of the station, the trains arriving, snug in the tunnels like swords in sheaths. Doors sliding open, doors sliding shut.

So for Tracy there is no remorse over her relationship with Chris. Simply staying in motion conquered the instinct to question, to doubt. Like the reluctance to stop the escalators. They

rattle and thunder down and once you take the first step it is difficult to change your mind. To continue is easier than to repent.

Tracy is like the imprisoned thief whose only regret is that he was caught. When the doors of the train slide open, she will ride to her old life again. Mate illegally with Chris again, but be careful, really careful that she is not caught again, caught and taken to the nursing home.

Why doubt what the magazines encourage. She was just unlucky that's all. And the pinches of doubt can be silenced by motion, by perpetuating the myths, keeping them alive. Here, right in front of them as the train pulls away, there is a poster of two handsome people, happy in the sunshine. The girl is blonde with a tan, she wears a green bathing suit. 'Be Safe this Summer with Durex' is the command. That ad with its clean sea and sand must be the truth then, not the vacuum that roared and sucked and gobbled.

Does the girl look a little like Golden Beauty?

In a few weeks it will be as if the nursing home has never happened. Tracy will never meet the people she met there. She will never see again the nurse who held her hand, the other nurse who had a cold. Only Nadia will be a reminder. Now Tracy wishes that Nadia had not come, her presence made Chris's absence more poignant, more marked.

When friendships run their course there are no rituals of mourning. There are no tears. There is not even a premonition of finality. So in the train as Tracy and Nadia sit in front of a woman in a sari reading the last pages of a library book, a man with a mermaid tattooed on his arm, they promise each other meetings and telephone calls. They will meet in college after the Easter break. Tracy wants to get a job with the Body Shop during the holidays, she will tell Nadia what it is like. Nadia will work at her father's agency, she will get Tracy brochures of Australia. They are not insincere in their promises but they will not keep them.

After three stops Nadia says good-bye, leaves Tracy to continue further south, change trains and head east. Alone Nadia can walk fast, run up the escalators, out to the fresh spring air.

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IN THE SMALL GARDEN near the station, Nadia sits and watches a tramp rummage and mutter over the contents of the rubbish bin. She does not really want to look at the pigeons, though she does eventually, not wanting the tramp to think she is staring at him. The pigeons are sick in this garden, they are bloated and lazy. They waddle about gorging themselves on the remnants of crisps and cigarette butts and all the things they were not created to eat. Near Nadia's foot a pigeon pecks at the dark bubbly liquid oozing out of a Diet Coke can. She stamps her foot to frighten it away but the bird is placid, shrugs its wings, cooes and continues to drink. Once at school, Tracy and Nadia did a project on the threats to animals from pollution and waste. They spent months reading about animals. They even became vegetarians for a time, a whole month, until they lapsed one day together in Burger King. Two Whoppers with pickles and mayonnaise. Eventually, Tracy took down the poster in her room of a Tyrannosaurus with the caption 'Dying To Meat You'. In its place went a smiling Jason Donovan. Nadia sits and around her the benches of the garden are decorated with pigeon excrement, greyish white stains congealed in peaks like icing. On the grass, that of the dogs nestles in clusters, brown among the green.

Nadia tries to think of Tracy but instead thinks of how Lateefa can be both right and wrong at the same time. In Tracy's family there were no guns and maybe even no shame. Lateefa's fears have no place here. They belong to another age, another continent. Here, the furious uncle was substituted by a stepfather who went away on holiday, who could eat Wurst and drink beer and sleep soundly at night while Tracy bore her own pain. And shame was substituted by the sense of inconvenience, washed by a facile night at the nursing home.

She used to envy Tracy, envy her and listen to her talk of Chris or Michael or Ian. Hoard the images to weave her own daydreams. Always feel childish next to Tracy, made small by envy. Is she still ready to envy her now after she sniffed the dust under the carpet, seen behind the worldliness? There might have

been no guns at the nursing home but there was still blood.

When do people make choices? What choice did Tracy have yesterday, last week? What was there to choose when she herself was the child with her Koala bears and posters of *Neighbours'* stars. When do people make their choices? Is life like a flow chart with a multitude of branches? Or do you choose a path and take the rough with the pleasure? A choice of paths. A choice of escalators. Take your pick and don't complain about the bumps on the way.

Your parents are awful, Tracy used to say, so strict, so old-fashioned. As if they were moving Nadia, propelling her against her will. Was that true? Perhaps it wasn't and Nadia was using them as an excuse not to do all the things she didn't really want to do.

Maybe she herself made her choice, quietly picked her own path. She does not possess the courage to defend it loudly and with passion, but she lets herself go along with its flow. All the time with Tracy she never dared suggest that Tracy was wrong and she was right. Even today when Tracy cried, she did not say 'See, see where your actions have led you'. Perhaps she did not care for Tracy enough to sound like Lateefa, perhaps she was a coward, perhaps she was just 'polite'.

Her mother advised, interfered, poked into everyone's business. It was a kind of love. And when she ever told anyone, 'You're free to do what you like', she was angry, in a huff. Said the word free like it was the ultimate insult, a banishment from her radius of care. Meant it, and the sentence would always come at the climax of an argument, as a cry for concession, for appeasement.

She isn't like her mother then. She should be glad of that discovery, so often she has fought any resemblance to Lateefa. Yet now it seems like a shortcoming. She has not been a good friend to Tracy.

Underneath the park and the pigeons, underneath her feet, Nadia feels the low rumble of a passing underground train. A thick brooding murmur that ceases after a while.

Make your own way home, Tracy.