

SAMPLE
TEXT

MUDDY

'Enchanting and refreshing'
MAXINE BENEBA CLARKE

A MEMOIR

'Vibrant and dynamic'
MICHAEL MOHAMMED AHMAD

PEOPLE

SARA EL SAYED



The girl in this picture is me, just after publishing my first piece of writing, in *Growing Up African in Australia*. I am doing a radio interview and have been asked to provide a headshot. My hair is straightened because I attended a friend's wedding a few days earlier. In this picture my hair is severely damaged. When loose, it sits at approximately six different lengths, and falls out every time I touch it. The state of my hair is due to a combination of harsh chemicals, the wrong hair oil mixed with a too-hot iron, tying it up when it's wet (upon drying, it expands and snaps against the hair tie) and general negligence. I put on a clean white t-shirt and stand in front of my mother's brick house. I think I look okay.

In a few months' time this picture is used again, to accompany an excerpt of a different work of mine, in a magazine. I send the same headshot for everything because I cannot afford to

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hire a photographer to take a better one. I also cannot afford to straighten my hair again.

When my story runs, I notice that my photo looks a little different. The colour of my skin is lighter. I look again, and I check with friends to make sure that I am not seeing things – that the corners of my mouth have in fact been erased, the size of my lips reduced. I am now pale-faced and pursed-lipped.

At first, I am embarrassed. I hadn't anticipated that the shade of my skin and the size of my lips would be a problem. My hair was the issue, and I'd fixed that. Then I am angry. The kids in school called me *muzzie*, *mud skin*, *slave*, *sand n*gger*. Muzzie, short for Muslim, sounds like *mozzie* – the Aussie word for the parasite that sucks blood. The insect that you swat. I am light-skinned, but back then, it didn't matter. I wasn't white, and that was enough.

Some shout about muddy skin because they think it's funny. Others try to clean you up.



In a shed my mother and I repurposed as a writing space, Gina is curled up on my lap as I sit at my desk. The rain is hammering the roof. Gina is a male cat, but the word for cat in Arabic is feminine, so to us she is Gina.

I'm in Queensland, but in the middle of winter it is cold even in the sunshine state. The small flame of the candle, which I light every day, helps a little. In the winter my hair is drier, my skin paler. I used to relish these months when I felt just a little whiter. But not anymore. When I visit my father on the weekends, he tells me I look ill.

I talk to my father almost every day. The contact is concentrated right now because there's a white boy in the picture, and

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my father is on guard. He wants me to know the rules. We are Egyptian, after all. We are Muslim, after all. We are not white.

My parents' advice has always been a crucial part of my life. When I say 'their advice', I mean them telling me to do things and me doing them. Their rules govern how I live. Our culture governs how I live. The fact that I am an adult does not change this. There have been many rules over the years, some logical, some not. Sometimes they contradict one another. It means that sometimes things get a little messy. A little muddy.

Writing about my family is not easy, because we are not perfect. I would say we are doing our best, but sometimes we are acting our worst.

On my desk is a stack of books. It's crowned by a wax-spattered copy of *The Family Law* by Benjamin Law – a library copy, so I'm scared to take it back. I borrowed it because I am struggling to write about my family.

I know what people expect when they pick up this book. Stories about racism, about Islamophobia. The name-calling, the ostracising, the bullying. Some of that is in here. But that's not all this book is about. It's about my family, and what we are on the inside too. It's hard to write about family because, as I have explained to my parents, one person's perspective is not the same as another's. My father might say the sky is blue and my mother will say to take an umbrella. The stories we tell don't always match up. That's something that I've had to accept in writing all of this down.

I want my parents to know that this book is told through my eyes: those of a girl growing up and trying to understand. I still have a lot of growing to do. These are versions of my family that have existed to me throughout periods of my life.

I love my parents. They are both good people. They were just not good together.

THESE ARE THE RULES

Mama learned early on that her daughter was different from her son. Mohamed threw tantrums; Soos stayed quiet if you gave her something sweet. In Arabic, a *soos*, a cavity, is what you get after eating too much sugar. My parents gave me the nickname when I was four. By that time, I had two gold crowns and twice as many holes in my teeth.

In my mouth now, one would struggle to find a tooth not stuffed with a filling. I was never in the habit of maintaining good oral health. We aren't brought up that way; we don't nurture what isn't healthy. When our grass isn't as green as we want, we concrete over it.

Mohamed was difficult from the beginning. Stuck sideways inside my mother, he didn't want to come out.

'It's too much,' the delivering doctor said in Arabic, throwing his hands in the air. 'He won't budge. I don't know what to do.' He left the room to pray and came back smelling like cigarettes. By that time, Mama was screaming and Mohamed was crowning. 'By the grace of God,' said the doctor.

My father was happy his first child was a boy. They named him Mohamed, like every other baby boy born in Alexandria, Egypt, on that day.

When my grandparents came to see him, the nurse brought the wrong baby.

‘That’s not my son,’ said Baba.

His son, of course, was the one with the big nose.

‘It was like a hook,’ Nana tells me, reminiscing about the birth of her first grandchild. She makes a hook shape with her finger, in case words don’t do justice to the severity.

‘It was big,’ Mama concurs.

‘Huge. So ugly. Like his grandfather’s.’

‘An Arab nose, for sure.’

‘And he was *green*. All over. Like an alien. Green and a big nose – very unattractive. A truly ugly child.’

My father describes my birth as ‘no problems’. The biggest hitch, in fact, was Mohamed asking for squid sandwiches. ‘*Soo-beyt soobeyt!*’ shouted the toddler, standing up in the front seat of our Lada Niva. Baba drove him to the sandwich shop after dropping Mama at the hospital.

I ask Mama about my birth and she describes being knocked out by an anaesthetic, then being shaken awake by doctors telling her to push, then passing out, then waking up to the smell of squid, then seeing the contents of her stomach on the floor.

Mohamed never slept through the night as a baby. Soos never woke up. I didn’t even wake during my first *zelzal*, earthquake. I was a newborn, the weight of a bottle of milk. My brother was the weight of a small cow, Mama says. The *zelzal* struck in the middle of the night. ‘Your father picked you up out of your cot and ran downstairs straightaway,’ says Mama, ‘and he left the big fat two-year-old to me. Seven flights of stairs. Seven flights of stairs.’



The apartment building we lived in had armed guards out the front, who swung their guns over their shoulders like schoolboys with backpacks. They were there to protect the person

who lived on the top floor: a diplomat. Someone from elsewhere who was important enough to kill for.

I was not supposed to talk to the guards, but sometimes they would smile at me when I was with my father. They weren't always around, which somewhat defeated the purpose. But always there, living in what was likely built as a cloakroom, was the porter and his family. I counted seven the last time I got a peek inside.

The porter was a friendly old man who treated us like royalty. He greeted my father, calling him *ustaaz*, professor. My father was not a professor, but this is what people like the porter called people like my father. It was clear to me, even then, that the porter would never be a *ustaaz*. That title was not made for him.

The porter would stand sentry outside the building when the guards disappeared, sometimes all night. Evening was when people were energised, walking through the streets, kids playing in the park, dripping ice cream down their hands under the watchful eye of their smoking parents. People stayed out even later during Ramadan. One year, when we arrived back home late, the porter greeted my father.

'*Ramadan karim, ya ustaaz,*' he said. His voice was croaky from hours spent in silence.

'*Allahu akram,*' said my father. The door of the cloakroom was open, and I could hear the family, whispering to one another.

My father thanked the porter for running an errand for him earlier. Baba removed the gold sparkly watch from his wrist and held it out to the porter. 'An early Eid gift,' he said, in Arabic.

The porter had a hard time accepting, but eventually he took it, looking a little wet-eyed. There was a blotch of ice cream on my father's shirt, from when he had finished my strawberry cone. I wanted to tell him, but I was worried it would ruin the moment.

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By morning, a guard would usually be back at his station, giving the porter a chance to sleep. From our seventh-floor balcony, they all looked like toy soldiers. I wasn't scared of them, even with their guns.

A cardboard box on our balcony housed our pet tortoise, Leafy. One day Leafy escaped his box. Being slow, he had plenty of time to think. Even so, he walked right off the edge. His shell shattered when he hit the ground, and the guard who found him threw his body into the bushes of the park opposite the building. Always watching.

From our balcony we could see the entire park. To a child, it was a grand vista; in actuality, it was a circle of turf, lined with hedges twice as tall as a toddler. Pavement ran around the circle, then out diagonally to the corners of the rectangular plot, like the crosshairs of a sniper rifle. But for a long time, it was the biggest place on earth to me.

Baba has a story about a time he took me there. 'It was a rainy day, a bad day to go out,' he says. 'You were walking behind me, and suddenly you started screaming. Screaming and screaming, like you had seen a ghost. You had stopped in front of a puddle of water. You were screaming, "Sunny! Sunny!" And I said, "What do you mean, sunny? It's not sunny today." You keep screaming, "Sunny! Sunny!" And pointing to the water.

'You were screaming your lungs out. You know, the whole park was looking at us,' my father says. 'Finally, I got it. You didn't mean *sunny*. You meant *muddy*. You were worried about crossing the water. You got the words confused. You meant one thing and you said something else. The complete opposite. Isn't that funny?'

Wet shoes – that was the problem. I was four, and I was learning how to keep my shoes clean. I had learned at mosque that cleanliness was next to godliness. You had to be clean when

These Are the Rules

you spoke to Allah. Even outside the mosque, clean people got respect – people with neat hair, ironed shirts, pressed trousers and spotless, expensive new shoes. If you didn't have those things, you did not belong in the building. You belonged in the cloakroom.



My best friend Nour's grandmother lived on a street bordering the far side of the park. I could see her piano, which I was never allowed to touch when I visited, through her front window. Nour was as pale as can be, and stupid too. She'd bounce a basketball with two hands, while jumping up and down in time with the ball. Every time I saw that piano through her grandmother's window, I thought about how two-hand-dribble Nour was allowed to play it and I was not. Nour looked sickly, with her pasty skin and black heavy plaits. I didn't want to be like her. I just wanted to touch that piano, and that made me angry. Whenever I visited Nour's house I would make sure Mama brushed my hair back neatly; I checked my clothes didn't have any wrinkles, and I inspected my shoes for muddy spots. But even when I looked perfect, I was never good enough to sit on that piano stool.



In the bedroom I shared with Mohamed, the walls were decorated with drawings of Bananas in Pyjamas and a letter that Mohamed had submitted to his Junior Three teacher, titled *I love you Miss Sohad*. A wooden bookshelf bordered one wall. Nana would read to us every night before we went to sleep, the light of our bedroom lamp peeking through the crown of her

dyed hair. There was no way there were any natural blondes in our family.

The last book we read together in that room was *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Hermione was my favourite character, because she was a girl and had fuzzy hair, just like me. Nana would pronounce her name how it was spelt: *her-me-own*. When I saw the movie, I realised someone had to be wrong.

Next to the bookshelf sat a toy plastic castle that opened in the middle to reveal petite royal quarters. It came with a tiny princess, no taller than the top half of my finger. She had blonde hair, white skin and no pupils. Her gazeless blue eyes frightened the hell out of me. Princess Shaitan. One look was all it took before I locked her in the castle and never opened it again.

There was soon to be another little princess in the house. Ear pressed to Mama's belly, I imagined what my new sister would look like. The image of the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, pupil-less princess fixed itself in my mind.

Mama went into labour two weeks before my birthday, in the middle of the night. I awoke to a house with no parents. Nana bundled Mohamed and me into a taxi to take us to school. Our uncle picked us up afterward.

'Have you seen the baby yet?' I asked him.

'No. Not yet,' he said. He looked like my father. They had the same pattern baldness.

The car had a sunroof that wasn't letting any sun in. I stood on the seat and stuck my head out. The smell of seawater and garbage water hit me. The streets in Alexandria were plastered with posters of President Mubarak. At the time I thought this meant we loved him – some people even had portraits of him in their homes. Underneath the posters were families sleeping on cardboard. My uncle shouted at me to sit down. Little girls holding their infant sisters begged for money from passers-by.

When we arrived at the hospital, my sister was wearing the Winnie the Pooh outfit I had picked out for her. She smelled of cooling dough, and screamed as I held her. I passed her to Nana and ate the jelly the nurse had left for Mama.

Baba was freaked out by her fingers. ‘So long and thin,’ he said. ‘Creepy.’

By the time Aisha was one, she had a head of blonde curls that took everyone by surprise. ‘Like an alien,’ Baba said.

Aisha’s *sebooua* was the last time I saw all my family and friends in one place. A *sebooua* is a sort of christening for Muslim babies. So, not a christening at all. A doula came to the house and placed Aisha in a sieve on the floor. She put a large knife next to her, then moved it to the other side, then put the knife on Aisha’s little chest. Everyone else walked around the house in a line, a candle in one hand, slipping sugar-coated almonds into their mouths with the other. Nour stepped on the backs of my shoes as we circled the apartment.

I barely recognised anyone. The only sense of warmth was from the candle in my hand and Nour’s hot breath on my neck. They all must have been there before, for my *sebooua*, but I hadn’t seen them since. People only show up when there’s food.



Mama already had an Australian passport because she’d lived in Melbourne before. In the 1970s, her father got a job at an architecture firm. Nana remembers the names *Glenferrie* and *Malvern*, and a tram on their doorstep. Nana worked in a library while Mama went to preschool with little girls named Liz.

They stayed until Mama was ten. Then Nana took Mama and fled, back to Alexandria, leaving her husband behind. Nana didn’t mind Australia, but there was no place beautiful enough

to make her forget the hate she had for her husband.

Mama loved Australia, and promised herself that she would return one day.

‘I found it very strange,’ Baba tells me, ‘that your mother was so obsessed with Australia. Every year from 1992 to 2001, she would ask me, “Can we go to Australia now? Can we go to Australia now?” Like a little girl asking to go to the toilet. I don’t know why she wanted to go so badly. I kept saying no, I have a business here, we can’t go. But it got a bit hard. The business. The money. So I said, “Okay, fine. Let’s go.”’

My parents decided to leave Egypt for good. The economic uncertainty and political unrest that would eventually erupt into a revolution in 2011 was showing its signs.

In 2001, Baba began compiling a binder of all the suburbs in Brisbane – comparing house prices, schools, jobs. He spent weeks on the computer researching.

Since Mama was already a citizen, her children could become Australians too. But Baba had to get a visa.

‘Are you sick?’ I asked as he prepared to see a physician. We didn’t visit doctors in my family, because Mama was a doctor. We only had to show Mama our cut or the colour of our poo – she’d figure out what to do. Baba seeing someone else was odd.

‘No. But I have to get checked before they let us go.’

‘Why, if you aren’t sick?’

‘These are the rules,’ he said.

Years later, Baba tells me what the physician said that day. ‘There was a shadow behind my heart,’ he says. ‘He didn’t know what it was. He just saw a shadow there. But he let me go. To him, I was healthy.’ Baba places both his hands on his chest. ‘You know, when I was young and I played with my friends, I always had a problem with breathing. I couldn’t run for so long. And I think – I know – it was the shadow. If the doctor had

known at that time. If he had known what it was, maybe he would have tried to treat it. Maybe it couldn't have been treated. Either way, we wouldn't have come here. We would've stayed in Egypt. I would be alive or dead. But I would be alive or dead there – not here. The shadow has been behind my heart for a very long time. Allah put it there a very long time ago.'

In his bedroom, twelve years after his first doctor's visit since marrying my mother, Baba's lymph nodes swell and press against the nerves in his back, his abdomen and behind his heart, and he falls to his knees.



There was a room in our Alexandria flat with couches no one was allowed to sit on. A carpet no one was allowed to walk on. No muddy footprints. No feet at all.

Most families I knew had this. A salon. A façade for friends.

A gold-framed picture of my parents on their wedding day hung on the wall. It was near the balcony, and in the afternoons the light would catch on the frame, and on the edges of the furniture.

When we moved, we took at least one thing from every room. From the living room, videotapes of Teletubbies and family celebrations. From the kitchen, plums to eat on the way to the airport, which ended up giving us all diarrhoea. From Mohamed's and my bedroom, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. From my parents' room, the Qur'an. But we did not take a thing from the salon – from that sunny room. That room was to be preserved as it was at all costs.

My parents are still there, hanging on the wall.

A hilarious, heartwarming memoir of growing up and becoming yourself in an Egyptian Muslim family

Soos is coming of age in a household with a lot of rules. No bikinis, despite the Queensland heat. No boys, unless he's Muslim. And no life insurance, not even when her father gets cancer.

Soos is trying to balance her parents' strict decrees with having friendships, crushes and the freedom to develop her own values. With each rule Soos comes up against, she is forced to choose between doing what her parents say is right and following her instincts. When her family falls apart, she comes to see her parents as flawed, their morals based on a muddled logic. But she will also learn that they are her strongest defenders.



Sara El Sayed was born in Alexandria, Egypt. She has a Master of Fine Arts and works at Queensland University of Technology. Her writing features in the anthologies *Growing Up African in Australia* and *Arab, Australian, Other*, among other places. She is a recipient of a Queensland Writers Fellowship and was a finalist in the 2020 Queensland Premier's Young Writers and Publishers Award.

'Finally, a personal story that reflects so much that is familiar but is rarely found on bookshelves. This is the kind of memoir I have searched for in vain for years.' **MONA ELTAHAWY**

