

## **Boma : Child of the Location**

By the time she was seven, Boma was already pursuing a life of crime. Like any miscreant, she was greedy, cunning, had no respect for authority and no conscience. As long as she could get away with it, whatever it was, she was okay. Her little sister, Baba, two years younger, was a bit of a pest. She had been brainwashed by Mummy and Daddy into believing that it was wrong to steal and tell lies and as the sisters spent most of their time together, Baba's honesty really cramped Boma's style. Whenever Mummy went out, Boma climbed onto the kitchen table so that she could reach the shelves from which pickled lemons, mangoes, and carrots beckoned to her. She couldn't wait to get at them.

Skinny little Baba, standing in the middle of the little kitchen, her large eyes wide with disapproval, always yelled at her. "I'm going to tell Mummy when she comes back."

"I'm just taking a few. You want some?" Boma, on the kitchen table, holding out a soft, brown, lemon segment, grinned like a little devil.

Baba, who was never hungry, couldn't be tempted. "You know you're not supposed to touch them. The pickles aren't ready yet."

"I don't care." Her mouth crammed, Boma simply wrinkled her nose.

Her little sister couldn't understand this disregard for truth and honesty. "I'm

going to tell Mummy."

&quot;I'll kill you if you do.&quot;

&quot;Spanky, Spanky, Spanky,&quot; Baba knew how much her sister hated to be called that as she had a secret crush on Spanky, a character in the *Our Gang* film shorts that they saw at the Empire Bioscope.

&quot;Oh shut up, Dragon, Dragon, Dragon.&quot; This was Boma's hate name for Baba, also from a film, *One Million BC*, in which dinosaurs and other monsters fought fierce and terrible fights.

Like any addict, Boma's quest in life was for money to buy junk food.

Whenever she had a penny or two, she was off to the yards where housewives running home businesses produced a variety of take away eats. All kinds of goodies were on offer - samoosas, moorookoo, fried peanuts, koe'siesters, achar and kerriballs. So Boma always needed money. If Mummy left pennies or tickeys lying around they would disappear, likewise Boma, who would be sneaking off to one of the yards, especially the one on the corner of Grand and Sixth Streets that sold sour figs and kumquat pickles.

And she was always searching for dropped coins in the yard or on the streets. Once, when she found a sixpence in the yard and jubilantly showed it off, Mummy immediately claimed it as the exact amount that she had lost. After that, whenever Boma found a coin, she didn't say a word and as soon as she could, was off to buy sour figs or joysticks and cool drinks from Makooloo Hopaan, the Chinese general dealer on Bloed Street, or sweetmeats from Chagan's cafee at the corner of Boom and Cowie Streets.

As Mummy didn't trust Boma, she always gave her the exact amount for whatever she needed when she sent her on shopping errands. Boma usually went to the general dealer on the corner but if she couldn't get what she needed there, she walked down Bloed Street, which had

shops or cafes on almost every corner. One day, Mummy gave her two-and-six and sent her off to buy a pound of butter. She went from shop to shop but there was no butter to be had and she thought she would have to go home empty handed. There was just one shop left, the cafee on the corner of Bloed and Tenth Streets.

When she got there, she found that it was very busy. As there was only over-the-counter service in those days, she had to wait a while before the shopkeeper turned to her. Then she gave him the half-crown only to find that this shop too was out of butter.

Handing back the coin, the shopkeeper asked Boma to wait as he was expecting a delivery at any moment. After a while, he turned to serve her again. With so many customers coming and going, he had forgotten that she was waiting for the butter. She handed him the coin once more but the butter still hadn't come so he gave it back again. When the butter finally arrived, the shopkeeper, wrapping up a pound, smiled, "I know you paid me already." As she took the butter, she looked the picture of innocence. When she got home, she was very proud to have saved her mother a whole half-crown. Mummy didn't say a word. She should have sent her daughter back with the money but she was too ashamed. After all, her husband was an interpreter at the court and they were from Durban.

The Naidoos had come to the Asiatic Bazaar in 1938. Boma's father, originally from Durban, was sent to Ladysmith when he joined the police force. After a year or two, he was promoted to Court Interpreter and transferred to Pretoria where the family took up residence in a tin shanty at 370 Cowie Street. The stand had the typical location barrack structure: blocks of units around a yard with a communal ablution block comprising one toilet and one bathroom for all the families on the stand. The Naidoos occupied one of two units on the Cowie Street side of the stand; the Padayachys rented the other. An old man, Green Door Thatha (Grandfather) lived alone in one of the one-room units on the side.

The Naidoos' unit was a rectangle, divided down the middle on both sides into four smaller rectangles or rooms. The rooms overlooking the street were wider than the ones overlooking the yard. One of these bigger rooms was a bedroom for the parents and the two girls, with Mummy and Daddy's double bed in one corner and the girls' bed in the corner under the window. Seeni, Boma's brother loved to stand outside on the veranda, making snake shadows

on the window blind to terrify his sisters. Between the beds there was just enough space for a wardrobe. Another wardrobe next to the foot of the girls' bed permanently blocked a door that led out onto the veranda. When the girls grew bigger, Boma slept on the floor in front of this wardrobe. Since the toilet was in the yard, there was a chamber pot under the big bed for use during the night.

Adjacent to the bedroom on the street side was the living room with a sofa, chairs, a coffee table, a lamp table and a radiogram, all with vases of fresh flowers set on doilies. A connecting doorway led from the living room into the next rectangle, the dining room, and almost next to it, at right angles, another doorway into the kitchen and almost next to that, at right angles, another doorway into the yard. The dining room, which overlooked the yard, was also the boys' bedroom. They slept on goothrees (comforters), one on the table for one bed, another on the floor for the second bed.

The narrow kitchen adjoining the main bedroom had a chimney alcove with its own floor that was about six inches higher than the kitchen floor. The shiny black Dover coal stove stood on this platform. A small window next to the alcove looked out into the yard.

The end wall, the short side of the rectangle, was lined with three shelves, neatly covered with newspaper that Mummy cut to form the patterned fringes that hung over the front of the shelves - the very shelves that Boma raided for pickles and biscuits. Adjacent to the shelves was the doorway into the bedroom. The kitchen table stood against the wall under the shelves, with Daddy's chair at the bedroom end and Mummy's chair on the side.

Most units in the location, consisting of two rooms and a kitchen, housed families much larger than the Naidoos. So the Naidoos and their next-door neighbours, the Padayachys, were quite privileged to have three rooms and a kitchen. With only these two families and an old bachelor in a room with a green door, their yard was not crowded. Other yards had four or five, sometimes up to ten families, sharing one toilet, one bathroom and a tap outside. As there was no water in the units, large zinc baths, huge enamel basins and buckets were common utensils in every home. Tin containers, in which cooking oil and paraffin were sold, were used to boil bath water, steam Christmas puddings and make ginger beer. Mummy made the best ginger beer in the world.

GP (Ganes Padayachy), who lived in the unit adjoining the Naidoo's, drove the big blue Hudson Terrapin that was parked outside on the dirt pavement. As he was one of very few people in the location who owned a car, the only one Boma knew, she always thought of GP and his Hudson as a single entity. His mother, a tiny wrinkled old lady with white hair pulled back into a bun at the back of her head, lived in the room adjoining the Naidoo's living room. In a white sari, with a pale green shawl over her shoulders, she often stood in her doorway singing Tamil songs and calling out to passers-by on the street,

&quot;

*Na Morsele vanthè&quot;*

(I came from Mauritius).

As she always fixed outraged eyes on children and swore loudly at them in Tamil, they found her quite scary.

Although they were afraid of her, all the children in the neighbourhood loved to tease and enrage her. They would bang on her door, run off and watch from a distance as she rushed out onto the veranda, arms flailing, hurling the vilest curses

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They loved it.

They were thrilled at their own daring.

GP's orphaned nephew and nieces, Shunmugam (Boy) Pillay, and his sisters, Velliamma and Parvathy, also lived next door. In the evenings or over weekends, Boy, who played the saxophone, came out into the yard to practise. To Boma, his sax was as much a part of him as GP's car was a part of GP. Boy's sister, Velliamma, a very beautiful, dark skinned girl in her late teens, was like a big sister to Boma and Baba. When they played house-house together, she would build a tiny fire, put a little makeshift grate over it and boil peas and rice in tin lids. The girls loved Velliamma but she wasn't with them for long.

She died and Boma was mystified. This was her first experience of death and she had no idea how or where it had come from. Mummy never took the girls to weddings or funerals but this funeral was right in their yard. Having no understanding of death, all that the sisters saw was their friend laid out in the yard, beautifully dressed in an expensive Benares sari and gold jewellery with gold coins over her eyes to keep the lids closed. Boma, who had no idea why the coins were there, was strangely fascinated. This custom, more than anything else, gave her an eerie feeling about death. After that, whenever there was a funeral, she would ask, &quot;Did

they put coins on the dead person's eyes?"

GP's brother, Murrthee, lived just opposite, on the other side of Cowie Street, which, despite being one of the three or four tarred roads in the location, was very narrow. With a hop, skip and a jump the children were across it and in each other's homes. Uncle Murrthee, a very short, thin man and his wife, Nagoo, much taller and a big woman, were the Naidoos' best friends. They had two little boys, Visoo, the same age as Baba, and Kathi, a little younger. A third boy, who was born to them some years later, became Baba's little pet.

Like all the children in the location, the Naidoo girls and the Padayachy boys, played in the street. There was such a horde of children in the location that they turned every available space into a playground - the verandas, the yards, the pavements, the streets, the river and even the bioscopes.

The long, narrow veranda at 370 Cowie Street, which was not sectioned off, provided a playing space for less vigorous games like Baby Steps, Giant Steps and Ten Stones. On the dirt pavement below the veranda, children played borretj

ie (hopscotch). In the yard, they played skipping games or ball games or house-house, for which they put up a makeshift tent with a stick and a sack. There were plenty of sacks back then, as sugar, flour, rice, and vegetables were sold in large gunnysacks.

Boma, who loved sleeping in the tent, annoyed the others when she tried to get them all to sleep in it. They preferred to explore the yard, a little game park, with roofs on two sides and the syringa berry tree in the corner, just calling out to be climbed. Using the fence next to the tree, the children made their way up to the lower branches, then onto the roof over Green Door Thatha's unit.

As the climbers clattered over the flat roof of the Padayachys' and Naidoos' units, they would suddenly hear Mummy's terrified voice shouting at her daughter. "Come down at once. You'll break your neck!" But Boma, ignoring her mother, simply continued on with the rest.

They were on their way down anyway.

At the end of the roof, they would clamber onto the boundary wall next to the kitchen and jump to the ground. When she was naughty like this, Mummy put the poker in the fire. That sent Boma in a mad dash to the bedroom and under the double bed. Crouching in the farthest corner, she watched the red-hot poker thrashing around trying to find her.

Knowing Mummy would never hurt her, Boma wasn't really scared so Mummy's attempts to discipline her didn't work and she always did whatever she wanted.

But her mother's constant nagging, eventually convinced her that she would break her neck and she gave up the climbing expeditions.

After that the syringa tree became just a tree. But it had other uses. It provided the leaves for treating measles. Mummy spread them with a paste of turmeric and crushed ginger and then applied them to faces and the children, though not confined to bed, stayed home wearing their leaves for the duration of the illness. The tree also invited the peacocks from the Marieamman Temple in Sixth Street into the yard.

When the birds came floating down, Baba and Boma held their breaths in delight, waiting for them to display their fantails.

Sometimes they were lucky.

But yards weren't the only playing spaces. The street was a much bigger playground, with many more children and a greater variety of games - Lucky Charms, Pannetjies, Marbles, Kennetjie, tops, kites and hide-and-seek. Lucky Charms and Pannetjies required the skill of shooting charms or tin caps into a circle drawn on the ground with a target in the middle. Whoever hit the target won and took all the charms in play. The brightly coloured charms made of clay or plaster of Paris represented all kinds of objects, animals and people; Boma's favourites were the little gnomes. One day, being on a winning streak, she decided to challenge one of the older boys. They played, and before she knew it, she had lost all her lucky charms. She felt she had somehow been diddled, but her brothers just treated her appeals with contempt. What business had she, a little pipsqueak, to challenge one of their friends?

In the evenings, just after the sun went down, the children played hide and seek in the street and the darkness came alive with little shadows flitting about looking for hiding places behind pillars, near the shop and around the Tamil School. While sounds of running, whooping, yelling, shouting, swearing and laughter filled the air, parents sat on their verandas, quietly contemplating their boisterous offspring, and enjoying the coolness of the evening.

As Cowie Street was a main thoroughfare, horse-drawn carts and motor vehicles intruded into the children's playing area during the day but the children knew how to incorporate these vehicles into their play. When they saw a horse and cart in the distance, they waited in quiet anticipation. As soon as it came by, they leapt up, grabbed the backboard and hung on by their hands and feet. Sailing his whip over them, the driver would try to jettison this unwanted cargo but the children, not at all intimidated, rode along to the end of the street before they jumped off.

They played a more dangerous game with passing motor vehicles. Cars and trucks were novelties on the street so when the children saw a motor vehicle approaching, they waited on one side. As soon as it was fairly close, someone gave a shout that sent them dashing to the other side in front of the vehicle. Drivers probably suffered near heart attacks trying to slow down in time.

One day, when Mummy was out, the children saw a truck coming down the road. As usual, they waited and then at the signal, charged. Little Baba, a skinny, sickly child, was left behind. When Boma called to her to hurry, she made a sudden dash into the middle of the road and fell down right there. Fortunately, the truck stopped in time. The driver got out, picked up the terrified little girl, set her down amongst the other children and gave them all a good scolding. That evening, Mummy, very angry with Boma, put the poker in the fire. Boma in her corner under the double bed didn't really need any punishment. She couldn't forgive herself for what had happened. After that, the sisters didn't play the game with motor vehicles anymore.

But that didn't stop their play activities from being of concern to Mummy. Every so often they escaped to the forbidden paradise of the Apies River, about five streets away, where they joined other children whose parents were not as strict.

All the children loved the river. In the section that bordered the locations, the bed and banks had been cemented over and only a trickle of water ran through.

The children ran down the cement bank on their side of the river, sped across the bed and allowed the momentum to carry them up the opposite bank on to the other side where white people lived. No matter how hard she tried, Boma could never get up the opposite bank. She just wasn't very athletic and her friends always had to pull her up. Once on the other side, the children ran among the white folks' houses to steal keerè (herbs), weeds to white people.

When the white children saw the little coolies outside, they swore at them, threw stones and chased after them. The children then scampered back across the river to the safety of their own side from which they returned fire and kept a barrage of stones flying through the air.

The children often went beyond the cement channel to explore the lower reaches of the river. There, hopping over rocks, they looked for frogs and swimming holes. When they reached an enticing pool, the boys jumped in and the girls, who weren't allowed to be in the water, tucked their skirts into their broekies and waded in as far as their courage would take them. Knowing that they were defying their mothers made it a great thrill.

But life wasn't all play; children also had responsibilities.

Every afternoon, after a herd of cattle had passed along Cowie Street towards Marabastad, the children collected the sarni that lay scattered across the road. Boma didn't mind doing this as she loved the feel of the fresh dung and scooped up mound after mound till she had filled her bucket. The sarni was needed to keep down the dust that blew over the verandas and into the houses. One of Boma's chores was to spray sarni over the back yard and the pavement in front. After she had swept the yard and pavement with a little grass hand broom, she broke up the manure in water and mixed it to a liquid consistency. Then holding the bucket in one hand, she splashed the mixture over the ground with the other.

If she found any coins during the process, it made the task really worthwhile.

Another daily chore was the cleaning of the stove. Boma and Baba had to empty and clean the ash box that lined the grate, clean the grate, put the ash box back in, fill it with a layer of paper, then wood, and lastly coal so that it was ready to be lit. Boma also chopped the wood that was delivered once or twice a week and dropped in a pile in front of the kitchen. She placed little sections of log on the chopping block, lifted the chopper and brought it down, splitting the wood

in one clean stroke. As she loved the feel of that, she often chopped wood just for the fun of it. Then she and Baba carried in armfuls of chopped wood to store under the stove. The off-cuts from furniture factories that they found among the wood made good building blocks and the girls played with them for hours on the kitchen floor.

Being a little mercenary, Boma did one unpleasant task quite eagerly, because it always produced a tip. As Green Door Thatha lived alone, Mummy cooked for him and sent over his plate of food every day. Boma always volunteered to take it. She knocked; he came to the door, took the plate and then closed the door in her face. She wasn't put off; she just parked on his doorstep to wait for the empty plate. He obviously did not appreciate being dogged like this. When he had finished his meal, he stood in the doorway to rinse his mouth, and spat out quite close to where she was sitting. Boma felt disgusted but as he always paid up, that was what really mattered.

One activity that occurred, perhaps once a year, was more of a game than a chore. When the sky inexplicably went dark, everyone ran out with utensils and sticks, anything with which they could make a noise, and stood in the street beating, yelling and shouting to keep the big black cloud from descending - locusts swarming across the sky!

The locusts were as complete a mystery to Boma as was the war that enforced total darkness upon the location at night when blinds had to be pulled down to prevent the tiniest spark of light being seen from the outside. Food was rationed; that too had something to do with the war. She and Baba had to go to Boom Street and queue with other people in front of trucks that brought supplies of groceries - rice, flour and sugar. And the war did not allow people to sift the flour, which was full of husks. As Mummy could not bake with this flour, she sifted at night when she would not be caught and co-conspirator, Boma, helped by turning the handle on the roller that pushed the flour through the fine cloth filter underneath and left the husks behind.

It was only at the bioscope that the children got some understanding of war. As Daddy ran the cafee at the Empire, and later the Royal Bioscope, they watched the newsreels that were shown

before the main feature, and saw that the war was about ships and soldiers and bombs. But it was really Charlie Chaplin who put Boma in the know.

From him she learned that there was this ridiculous little man called Hitler who was responsible for their nightly blackouts and the queues for rations. But he was funny and she enjoyed his antics so she couldn't really be cross with him. Daddy, who belonged to a book club, had *Mein Kampf* in the bookcase but Boma never took it out to read even though she loved Charlie Chaplin.

Sundays were special; they were family days and days for social occasions. The whole location settled into a relaxed and festive mood, with sumptuous and lavish meals, followed by outings in the location or in town. The morning began with music blaring from every radiogram in every home, playing the latest film hits featuring singers like Thiagaraj Bhagavathar, Boma's favourite singer, and Subuluxmi.

For the Naidoo family, the day began with a huge breakfast. On weekdays, they had a plate of porridge and a mug of tea. But on Sundays, Mummy served fried muttonchops with fried onions, tomato chutney and bread and butter. Mummy and Daddy sat on chairs at the kitchen table, the boys on benches and the girls on straw mats against the kitchen dresser. Boma loved her blue enamel plate with its bunch of painted flowers running from one rim down to the other. Baba's plate was green with a scattering of flowers. Boma, as always, ate with gusto, and as Baba had a poor appetite, she magnanimously cleared her plate as well. The family finished the meal with samoosas bought from vendors who always appeared at the right time. They ate so much for breakfast that they needed the long walks that they took in the afternoon.

Some Sundays, the whole family walked to the zoo to see the animals. Near the entrance was the snake tank and further along, the place for elephant rides. The family walked around looking at kangaroos in their fenced-off enclosure and lions and other animals in cages. In an enclosure, with a very shallow pool of water, was a large crocodile that fascinated Boma, who waited patiently just to see it open its mouth wide and show all its teeth. When it did, she ran like the devil.

Then they walked up to the monkey houses. Around the cage of a male and female orang-utan, there was the usual crowd watching their "domestic" fights. People stood around laughing and enjoying the spectacle but Boma didn't find it funny. It disturbed her to see the apes in their cramped cages screaming in frustration, yelling and hurting one another. Although she loved the zoo as a child, mainly because of the swings, when she grew up she saw only the captivity - animals in cages and confined spaces - and came to hate zoos and all kinds of prisons.

The Naidos didn't go to the zoo every week. Sometimes they walked around town visiting museums, churches and occasionally the Union Buildings. At other times, they planned outings to the Hartebeestpoort Dam or the Wonder Boom.

Sundays spent in the location were for visiting with friends.

Daddy, who loved to play cards, often went to the Reddys' place on Tenth Street where a crowd of men sat at a long table in the shade of a vine-covered wooden canopy playing *thunny*, the lively, boisterous Indian card game. While Daddy played cards and Mummy congregated with the other mothers, the children hared off for fun and games at the river.

The family often went to Mr Post Master's house. Everyone called Mr Pillay, Post Master. There, all the men sat in the living room or on the front veranda while the women gathered in the backyard where Mrs Postmaster asked Boma to perform. Boma had a regular stand-up comedy routine that she thought was great so she didn't care whether the audience was laughing at her or with her. She had a two-joke repertoire that she performed with great dramatic flourish. One of her jokes went like this:

*One day, a man went to visit his friend who lived a long distance away.*

While they were chatting, it began to rain and didn't stop. When it got late the man, very worried, looked out of the window.

*'How am I going to get home in this rain?'*

His friend said, 'You can't go home in this weather. You must stay here tonight.'

The man turned to his friend with a smile. 'Thank you, you're very kind.'

His friend then said, 'Come, let me show you your room.'

The man answered. 'In a minute. I have to run home quickly for my pyjamas.' And he was out of the door before his friend could stop him.

Her audience laughed heartily and Boma felt confirmed in the profession she had chosen for herself: she was going to be a clown just like Tickey or Sixpence in the circus.

Once in a while, Mummy and Daddy stayed home on a Sunday afternoon. Then the girls went out with Aunty Gladys, a Coloured woman, who lived opposite. She took them to the 'Greenies,' wild bush areas along the Apies River where they walked, enjoying their surroundings. When an African congregation was in the river for baptisms, Aunty Gladys and the girls sat down to watch the minister immerse heads in the water while the congregation prayed, sang and chanted. The only other awareness that the children had of Africans in the community was the parade of

"Malaitas" on Sunday afternoons. Dressed in traditional warrior garb, men from Marabastad trooped down Cowie Street on their way to the fighting matches that took place in a ground somewhere in town.

Boma started school at the age of seven, the age of admission in those days. As there were no government school buildings, the Tamil School was used for "English School" in the morning with vernacular school following in the afternoon. On the first day that Mummy took her to be admitted, Boma was dressed in a bright blue dress with a big slide in her hair. More significantly, she was wearing socks and shoes. Normally, she ran about barefoot like all the other children. But on this day, the socks and shoes indicated a new phase in her life: she was going to English School.

After all the registration formalities, a teacher, pointing to the three oak trees near the fence along Eighth Street, said in a-speaking-to-little-kids voice, "Do you see those trees, there, far away?" Glancing at the trees, Boma thought the woman an idiot - they were just there next to the fence. "Go and play there until the bell rings."

Boma went out into the playground with lots of other new children. She was very worried about the name under which she had been registered so she asked another little girl to read her tag. She wanted to know whether the name on the tag was "Madevi."

Boma couldn't read but it did not occur to her that the other children couldn't read either. When the little girl assured her that the tag said Madevi, Boma felt relieved.

She was happy until she got to her classroom where she had to answer to her official name. Both Boma and Madevi, being pet names, did not appear on her birth certificate. To make matters worse, there was a boy in the class with exactly the same name, first and last.

English School, so called because of the medium of instruction, began at about 7:30. But Boma was always late. She resented having to forego the game that she and Baba played on the double bed every morning. They rolled up Mummy and Daddy's blankets and pillows to make a bank on one side of the bed.

Then one of them would lie on it while the other jumped until she rolled off.

Of course, Mummy had tried time and again to put an end to all this jumping on the bed with its weak springs, so she was glad that Boma was now going to school. As they lived just across the road from the school, there really was no reason for Boma to be late every day but Mummy couldn't get her out of bed in time. A classmate, whom the teacher sent to fetch her, often found her squatting on the bathroom floor washing her face from an enamel basin.

When she got to school, she ran into the playground to find her friends. In the baby classes, the morning began with free play. Children chose whatever they wanted from all the toys and equipment set out in the middle of the ground and played until the bell rang, the signal that they had to return their toys and line up in front of the veranda for assembly, the purpose of which completely escaped Boma. When she marched off with the other children to the classrooms, she never knew whether she was in the right line or not. Dressed in a white shirt, black gym, black shoes and white socks, she stood out from the majority of barefoot children in their everyday clothes.

Mummy, who had standards, knew the proper protocol and Boma was the only child in school wearing a "uniform";

At English School, they wrote on square chalkboards whereas at Tamil

School that began at three in the afternoon, they wrote on slates with slate pencils. At English school, they spent a lot of time drawing; they drew the objects that they counted in arithmetic and learned about in other subjects. Boma loved drawing. Her brothers and Baba also loved drawing because Mummy and Daddy often sat drawing with them in the evenings. Those were just pencil drawings or sketches on slates. At English school, there was coloured chalk. One day, Boma mixed red with white and discovered pink. She was so excited that she went around

sharing the magic with all her friends.

She quite enjoyed English school especially the stories that they could act out. As she loved performing, she was once chosen to play Cinderella and was delighted until she had to dance with the Prince at the Ball. She was mortified to find that the boy with exactly the same name was the Prince.

After she had completed the first two grades at the Tamil School, Boma went to the newly built Big School, the Pretoria Indian Government School, on Von Wielligh Street, about six short blocks from Cowie Street. The school, a brick double-storey building, not a tiny three-roomed structure like the Tamil School, housed both the primary and secondary schools. Mummy took her to the Big School on the first day and when Boma found her way home by herself at the end of that day, Mummy was extremely proud of her.

At the Big School, the morning started with breakfast. From Monday to Thursday, the children received a glass of milk and two jam sandwiches. Fridays were special: that was the day for cheese. Later, when Boma was in Std. Four, she was one of those entrusted with preparing the bread in the morning. True to herself, she made sure she got the thickest slices with the most butter, and on Fridays, big slices of cheese. How she always landed these jobs, she never knew. It was only much later in life when she had gone straight that she realised that crooked people, who were most ingenious, knew how to get ahead in the world. She had been on the right road to begin with but then had screwed it all up. The children also received lots and lots of fruit at school - oranges, apples, grapes, raisins and other fruit. Boma did not have to sneak any because each child got a really generous amount and she sometimes went home with six oranges.

After breakfast in the morning, they went in for lessons. Her class teacher, Mrs Dougall, a short plump very strict woman, couldn't stand the sight of the children's snotty noses so she made little nosebags that tied at the back of the head. During singing lessons, Mrs Dougall, who played the piano, taught them English songs. That was fun.

But Boma's favourite lesson was reading because they always acted out the stories that they read. Even though she was a crook, she got the roles of the 'good guys.' When she played Cottontail, the rabbit, who saved himself from a lion by tricking him into going after his own reflection in a well, that was a little closer to the person she was.

In addition to Mrs Dougall, there was Mr Andrew Anthony, a tall, very dark, very handsome man, one of the first Indian teachers in the location. He taught Hygiene. One day, he asked the children how often one should have a bath. All the children's hands shot up. He asked several pupils but no one had the right answer.

Pumping the air with her hand, Boma, who knew the answer, couldn't wait to be asked. When Mr Anthony finally got to her, she proudly answered, 'Once a week.' But instead of congratulating her, Mr Anthony went on asking other children. In the end she discovered that the right answer was every day.

Boma couldn't believe her ears. Every day! Their bathroom in the yard was an empty room with

a cold tap and a drain. For her bath, Mummy boiled water in a paraffin tin on the stove in the kitchen then carried it to the bathroom. When she eventually got Boma in, she had to chase her round the bathroom before she could wash her hair, scrub her down with coir and soap, rinse and vigorously dry her off.

Then she combed out the myriad tangles and smeared her hair with coconut oil to keep it straight. As far as Boma was concerned, anyone who would submit to this on a daily basis had to be crazy. She began to have serious doubts about the wisdom of school.

Furthermore, she had to put up with the nonsense of being on time. Coming late to school was what she did, but she hadn't reckoned on Mr Pickles, the principal of the Big School. With his cane in his hand, he waited at the gate every morning to greet latecomers. When the children saw him brandishing his weapon, they charged helter-skelter through the gate to avoid contact. Of course, Mummy was his ally. She didn't want Boma to be late so she insisted that Reggie, the eldest, take her with him in the morning. Reggie, four years older and a fifth grader, didn't want a little sister tagging along so they walked together but on opposite sides of Grand Street.

At Big School, playtimes were very short and there was too much concentration on sport. This did not suit Boma at all. When she watched the big girls playing netball, she thought to herself, *What a barbarous game!*

She vowed never to be caught doing that. Then there were sports days. For these, all the children in the school had to be tested and put into teams. One day, her Std One class was called out. They stood in a line ready to race so that the teachers could pick out the best runners. Boma took one look at the set-up, decided it was not for her and willed herself to faint. So while all the others were dashing off to the finish, she was lying inert at the starting line. Sports day itself was great because she and other recalcitrants escaped to the far end of the ground and played their own games.

They rolled down slopes, chased each other, and just had fun. They had not been harnessed into races and long jumps and other such restricting and exclusive activities.

Neither had they been reduced to being mere spectators.

When Boma started English School, she and Baba were also sent to Tamil School which began at three o' clock in the afternoon and finished at five. Mummy sent the girls to Tamil school in slacks or shorts and shirts. Their curly, bobbed hair was held in place at the side with big slides. The Naidoo girls' appearance irritated the teachers; girls in those days did not cut their hair or wear shorts or slacks. On one occasion, when the girls arrived late at school, they had to stand with other latecomers. There were two lines, boys on one side and girls on the other. The teacher, KP annè (big brother), a skinny man with rimless spectacles perched at the top of his thin sharp nose, was a real martinet. Taking one look at Boma and Baba through his small, narrow glasses, he sent them to stand with the boys.

"If you dress like boys, you must stand with the boys," he said. "So? You call your mother 'Mummy' and your father 'Daddy?' You think you are English people, eh?"

Though full of resentment, Boma said nothing. Her eyes were fixed on the cane in his hand. Tamil school was the place for corporal punishment. If you mispronounced Tamil words or wrote in a bad hand, your ears were twisted or you received cuts on your hands. If you were asked to stay after school, it meant a caning. And KP Annè was known for his dexterity with the cane but, on this occasion, he sent them off without punishing them.

Boma found Tamil school a great place to indulge her criminal tendencies. She loved pencils probably because she spent so much time drawing. One afternoon, she made off with every single slate pencil in her class. How she stole them even she didn't know, but when she had the lot, she disappeared from the class and made for home. Not long after, the Tamil teacher and all the children from the class were in the yard at the back door. On seeing them, Boma made her getaway out of the front door. She was running away and would never come back. She ran all the way to Uncle Munia's house next door and hid in the little garden on the side. It was the only house in the street with a garden.

She waited there and waited. No one was looking for her. There's no point in being a fugitive if people don't come looking for you. So when it got dark, she had no choice but to give herself up. When she knocked on Uncle Munia's door, the aunty who opened wouldn't let her in. She just told her to go home. Boma crossed the little driveway, entered the yard and went in through

the back door. Daddy, in his shirtsleeves, was sitting in his usual place at the end of the kitchen table,

Mummy was frying fish and the others were sitting around. As soon as she set eyes on Daddy, Boma ran up to him, threw herself on her knees, and clutching his leg, began to cry. She expected to be scolded or given a hiding but all Daddy did was to pat her on the head and say, &quot;There, there.&quot; And that did it! She never stole a thing after that. Perhaps if she had been punished she would have felt that she had paid for her crime so she could go on to others. But she wasn't punished. Even at Tamil School, once the pencils had been retrieved, it was as though nothing had ever happened.

And the great pencil robbery marked the end of a promising career in crime. At least temporarily.

But Tamil School remained a bore. Because she could not speak the language, she found it difficult to learn especially as she hated chanting and having to learn things off by heart. Though she did learn to recite a few sentences in Tamil, they made no difference to her ability to communicate in the language. &quot;*Payan koothiray mel yeri vandaan. Un-the payanuku sakthi illay* .&quot; The boy came riding on a horse. The boy had no strength. It was part of a story but she never learned who the boy was, where he had come from or why he had no strength. As she was considered a dunce at Tamil School, she was quite surprised when Soobiah vathiar (teacher), who was handing out prizes at the end of a term, presented her with one.

If it was to encourage her to learn, it had no effect whatsoever. But it was a marvellous prize, a set of wooden building blocks that gave her and Baba endless hours of pleasure on the kitchen floor.

Outside the classroom, Tamil School was great fun. Unlike English school, where playing was limited, there was the long period before class during which children played all kinds of chasing games in the schoolyard. They even ran around the three oak trees that stood in a row near the

fence on Eighth Street. All the children knew that you could not go near the trees at noon because that was when the Devil and his henchmen occupied them. Any child foolish enough to wander into the shade at midday would be snatched up and unspeakable things would occur. Boma and her friends believed fervently in the Devil; he was definitely more powerful than God. There he was every day at noon in those trees *right across* from the little Subramanian Temple, fearlessly intimidating children. They knew exactly what he looked like but had no idea of God, who was called by so many names, Subramanya, Marieamma, Muruga, Kartikeya, Ganesha, Sivan and so on, that they couldn't get a fix on him/her.

Boma, of course, had no such problem; the name of her god was Food and the temple provided plenty. On the five Saturdays of the month of *Purrataasi*, the whole Tamil community gathered at the temple to pray. But for Boma,

*Purrataasi*

had only one meaning - the brown paper bags of kadlè (fried chickpeas), sacra-satham (sweet rice) and poolie-satham (tamarind rice) that were distributed after the ceremony. People arrived hours before the service, the grown-ups to work and the children to play. The women gathered in the yard to prepare the special prasatham and when the cooking was done, they filled brown paper bags with two big balls of rice, one sweet, one tamarind, and a cupful of chickpeas. As soon as the prayers were over, the packets of food were handed out.

Boma typically tried to get as many as she could.

During kavadi, people fulfilled vows that they had taken to cure illnesses by marching around the temple three times carrying on their shoulders the decorated wooden arches that represented their sacrifice. The whole congregation walked with them singing kirtans and chanting bhajans

In the evening, they gathered around the lingam

where some devotees went into trances and spoke in tongues. That terrified Boma. Glancing at the oaks where the Devil lived, she wondered whether he and his demons were still in the trees or whether they had entered the bodies of these penitents with rolling eyes and lolling tongues.

Boma didn't understand anything of these religious practices or a word of the prayers she recited in Tamil School but she had a good reason to attend the Sunday services at the Subramanian Temple, a little tin shanty at one end of the Tamil School yard with a lingam in the ground under a nearby tree that also shaded the tall wooden housing of the temple bell. As Uncle Murrthee presided at this temple, Aunty Nagoo provided a huge dish of kadlè for distribution after the service on Sunday mornings. And this was the reason for Boma's sudden interest in religion.

The kadlè.

She

never missed a service and was eventually rewarded for her devotion when she was allowed to serve the kadlè.

The tiny congregation did not seem to notice that after she took over, they received smaller portions while the leftovers grew large.

The temple also offered Boma other opportunities.

As Uncle Murrthee and Aunty Nagoo didn't have daughters and cleaning the temple and all the lamps on a Friday afternoon was woman's work, this job also fell to the devotee Boma. On Friday afternoons, she swept out the temple and covered the floor with sarni. After that, she took all the lamps to the taps at the opposite end of the playground, rubbed them with tamarind and salt, then washed, dried and decorated them with turmeric paste and kunkum.

She was there every Friday afternoon without fail.

But money grubbing Boma didn't work for nothing. There was a thaambalim (brass tray) filled with ashes in the little inner sanctum of the temple. The priest, Uncle Murrthee, held it out at the end of the service so people could take a little thinoor (ash) to draw a horizontal line across the forehead - the symbol of devotees of Lord Siva. Invariably, they put a coin or two in the ashes. On Fridays, after her chores were done, Boma headed straight for this brass tray. Digging around in the ashes, she looked for the more valuable coins taking just enough to satisfy herself without arousing any suspicions. Boma obviously didn't believe in a hereafter or in karma; she believed in making the best of the circumstances in which she found herself.

And she was consistent: a regular at temple and a regular truant at Tamil School. She skipped often to visit Aunty Salatchie who lived close to the river on Grand Street. There she played in the yard, climbed the fig tree, helped Aunty Salatchie with the baby or went down to the river to play in the water. It didn't matter how often she was punished, she bunked whenever she felt like it. She hated Tamil School and wished she didn't have to go. Then one day, quite miraculously, Mummy whisked her and Baba out of Tamil School and did not send them back.

Boma was jubilant.

She secretly congratulated herself, believing that Mummy, fed up with her truanting, had pulled them out of school. When she discovered that one of the older girls, who had often been asked to stay after school, was pregnant, she didn't make the connection. When the girl suddenly married KP Annè, she still didn't get it. While the community was agog with the scandal, all she cared about was her reprieve.

Boma had no knowledge of sex whatsoever. When they were very little, she and Baba believed that aeroplanes brought babies - no such old-fashioned thing as a stork for Mummy. Whenever the girls heard a plane, they ran out into the yard, holding a shawl between them, chanting, &quot;Aeroplane, aeroplane, bring us a baby.&quot; They fully expected a baby to drop out of the sky into the shawl. As Boma grew older, she and her friends became extremely interested in sexual organs. Before Tamil School, they sat on the pavement telling tales about private parts. Boma invented a story of a disembodied penis, metres long, crawling along streets, turning corners, constantly roving. All the girls shrieked with laughter. They had no idea of the penis's quest; they were simply meditating on the lingam.

When Boma was told that the penis was in search of a vagina, she was disgusted. Visoo had come in great excitement one day to find Boma and Baba and tell them what he had spied through a hole in the corrugated iron wall that separated the neighbours' bedroom from his living room.

What he described horrified the girls who refused to believe it.

People didn't do such nasty things. Boma was outraged at Visoo for making up such a revolting story.

The Naidoo's time in the location was coming to an end and Boma in Std Four, was in her last year at a Pretoria school. In that year, 1947, the Big School was divided into a primary and high school. Prefabricated classrooms were put up in one part of the ground for a primary school that was separated from the high school by a fence.

The principal of the Primary School, Miss Wolf, a tall German woman with honey brown hair drawn into a soft bun at the nape of her neck, began the day with an assembly at which all Boma ever concentrated on was Miss Wolf's fingers, knitting away at great speed. She held her needles in a different way, the German way, the other children said. Boma, who had begun knitting lessons with Mummy, and used string and two long thick nails, considered her laborious efforts clumsy compared to the smooth, fleeting grace of the Principal's hands.

Boma's new teacher was Mrs Lamprecht, a lively, blonde Afrikaner woman, whom she liked very much. Mrs Lamprecht, who knew she loved drawing, didn't mind when she pulled out her pencil to draw as soon as she had finished her sums or other work. In fact, Mrs Lamprecht often praised her drawings. And to Boma's delight, in history lessons she had them copying or drawing pictures of important events. As Mrs Lamprecht, an avid radio listener, tuned in to the same radio theatre programmes as the Naidoos, mostly BBC radio dramas, she and Boma got into discussions of the plays. And for once, and only in her last year at this school, Boma found school stimulating and interesting.

1947:

Daddy was making arrangements for the family move back to Durban. As they had to have a permit to live in the Transvaal, Mummy and Daddy had never been able to think of Pretoria as a permanent home.

The struggle for independence in India was coming to an end, a struggle that had aroused strong anti-British feeling among some Tamilians in the Asiatic Bazaar.

The Royal Family was visiting South Africa.

When it was known that the King, Queen and Princesses were coming to the location, there was talk of a boycott but nothing came of it. The school children were given King George VI mugs, a medal and a tiny tin of boiled sweets and marched off to the sports ground to see the Royal Family. When King George, Queen Elizabeth, Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret Rose arrived, hundreds of children watched them mount a dais where they stood waving to the crowd. Boma was amazed at how pink they were. If there were speeches or formalities of any kind, she missed them; she was too busy struggling to open her tin of boiled sweets.

Not all the school children had allowed themselves to be herded off to the sports ground. Boma's thirteen-year old brother, Seeni, was one of those who boycotted the occasion. In the week before the arrival of the Royal family, he had been working hard trying to make a bomb, but hadn't succeeded. Boma, aware of his efforts, had simply dismissed them as his usual pranks. He had such shining, bright eyes, round cheeks and big smile that it was difficult to take him seriously. As she knew nothing of the struggle against the British in India, she had no idea why Seeni would want to blow up the Royal Family. She understood only the concrete. Once she had opened the tin of boiled sweets, she was most disappointed. If she had to throw a bomb, it would be a demonstration against flat, uninteresting confections.