

## SPECIAL FRIDAYS

I grew up in South Africa in the shadow of Table Mountain. Each morning I opened my bedroom window to the sight of this constant rock - sometimes grey, sometimes purple, sometimes with wisps of cloud hanging over it, like an old man's hair.

"The tablecloth is on the mountain today," Amina would say. Amina was our maid, young and beautiful, her coffee-coloured skin silky and smooth. Her hair was black and always tied up (Mother insisted on it) and she wore pale pastel shades of apron, one day lemon, another pink. She reminded me of sugar almonds – fresh and appealing.

Mother and Father were busy running a grocery store in the centre of Cape Town so my life was with Amina, listening to her tales, learning her songs. I loved my days with Amina. And of course, we had our special secret.

Every Friday morning, Amina dressed me up. "Come now, Master Joel, we are going to our special Friday morning service."

I knew the routine. This meant smart trousers and shirt, and worst of all, having my face scrubbed. My skin held taut with one hand, she would use the other to launch a soap and flannel attack which left my cheeks stinging. She would change into a pretty dress and off we would go, hand in hand along the dusty road, stopping to pick a bouganvillea flower and feel its dryness in my hand.

Inside the mosque we were warmly welcomed. I sat with Amina behind a screen. There were other maids there with the Jewish children they looked after: Sammy, Rebecca, Jackie Shapiro with his runny nose. We loved the service. It seemed to me not very different from synagogue where we sometimes went - the women and children behind a screen, the praying, the singing, the sense of joy.

Then the long walk home. Amina would remind me, "Remember, Master Joel, don't tell your Mummy about our special Fridays. If she found out, we might not be allowed to go any more."

The dreaded day of school arrived. As Amina put on my new uniform, I wept. I would miss her sugar-almond aprons, her lovely smell. The private Jewish school was alright but I missed Amina.

At the end of our first month, we had an open day. The headmistress made a speech. She asked, "What is special about Fridays? Why do we enjoy them so?"

I was surprised. How did she know our secret? Amina wasn't even there and we didn't go together any more, now that I was at school. Mother was there, in her best brown hat. She nodded at me as if egging me on. Go on, Joel. You can answer the question nicely. My hand shot up.

"Yes, Joel. What do you do on Fridays?"

"I go to the mosque," I said.

My mother didn't speak on the way home and then I was sent to my room without dinner. I can still remember her voice hissing at Amina in the next room. I heard the maid's sobs and then a few minutes later, the front door closed. I stood on my chair and pulled back the blind. There, below the huge block of Table Mountain, was Amina, her pale lemon apron shrinking as she disappeared from view. I have often thought since, about how and why religions are different and to what extent we can appreciate someone else's without losing our own. I am an adult now and proud to be Jewish, but I have never forgotten Amina.

