

Chapter 4

Who's Who and Why

Smoke and Mirrors, Mick Leonardy. <https://youtu.be/jFOFxa19Zsk>

Discovering her true identity

Although Auntie's hugs were the best melty type of hugs, warm and soft, Cecelia couldn't help but notice that she usually turned her head away.

"Why do you do that?" Cecelia asked, "Why do you turn your head? Do I stink?"

"No, dear, you don't stink," she brushed Cecelia's hair back from her face and looked down with compassion. "I'm just allergic to Hajar's, I mean your mother's perfume." However, she wasn't allergic, she couldn't stand the cloying smell. Everywhere Evonnia went she smelled Hajar's scent like an animal had marked its territory. Hajar wore Dior's Hypnotic Poison, *by the gallon*, thought Evonnia. *She drenches herself in it, then rubs herself against anything she wants to claim as her own: my daughter, our husband, the overstuffed armchair.* At the thought of the armchair she frowned, then rolled her eyes at herself for thinking about that and not about Cecelia. The scent kept her in a constant state of defense, especially when she was with Cecelia. So she chose to turn her head away, and hoped that her anger wouldn't show.

Cecelia wasn't sure when she realized that her mother Hajar wasn't her real mother. It was a long process of putting together the puzzle pieces: a comment from her nanny asking the cleaning lady 'which mother', or the way that Auntie Evonnia treated her. Auntie was always kinder to her than her mother, spending extra time with her, or giving her little gifts when no one was looking. The way each woman hugged her was different; Mother's hugs were quick and always ended at the count of 3: Cecelia counted each time. Auntie's hugs felt warmer, safer.

Putting the story together took the clever mixing of out of place puzzles. Once she figured out that Auntie probably was her real mother she started investigating. She was a precocious 10 year old, small, quiet and sneaky, practiced in many hours of hide and seek with her siblings. When everyone else hid in one place, Cecelia would carefully follow the seeker around and was never found. This made her siblings quite angry, as they never could figure it out. Sometimes, in order to keep her technique secret, she would take extra time coming back so that they thought she was in some far corner, not just on the other side of the door.

These qualities made it possible for her to hide in tight spaces unseen and unheard; she listened in on many conversations and a few arguments. They lived in a large Riad home, Cecelia's room was on the second floor and faced the courtyard like all the other rooms of the house. Straight out of her door there was a flower patterned lattice panel that, if she moved the door slowly and kept crouched down, she could creep out of her room unseen. Then she would crawl around to the other side of the courtyard where she could hear what was going on in the adult rooms. Or if the adults were in the courtyard she could sit right against the parapet and hear most of what they said, though the fountain made it hard to hear everything clearly.

Being a temperate climate, windows were kept open and rooms had only visual privacy provided by the lattice. This made concealment and eavesdropping very easy for Cecelia. This day she could hear her father talking especially slow, and in a very low tone. She knew that this was his angry voice, that he was trying so hard not to blow up that he exaggerated calmness.

"You need to keep your distance. Hajar says you've been coming to visit every day."

“Coming to visit? How do I come to *visit* when we all live in the same house.” Cecelia recognized the voice of her Auntie, who sounded desperate.

“Hajar doesn’t want you to confuse the child. She knew it was going to be difficult when she took on the task of raising Cecelia, don’t make it more difficult.”

Took on the task: Cecelia wondered what that meant. How could Auntie make it more difficult?

“Abu-Afzal, I’m sorry. I just want to see her. She’s mine, after all. Isn’t that natural?”

“What’s natural is a family all working together. You were too sick to take care of her.”

“I don’t remember being sick at all.”

“That’s how sick you were.”

“That doesn’t make sense. I remember hearing Hajar saying she wanted my baby because Cecelia was so beautiful and didn’t have any girls of her own.”

“Where would you have heard that. That’s preposterous.”

“She was talking to you. You thought I was asleep, but I was waking up and heard you.”

“Don’t ever say that again. Don’t tell such ridiculous lies,” he was losing control and was starting to talk faster. “Your lies will get you into a heap of trouble” he pounded his thick index finger on the desk hard enough to make the pens and pencils rattle as he stood up. Walking around the desk, breathing his words into Evonnia’s face, “Don’t forget I brought you in off the streets. You were nothing, and I let you come in as my fourth wife. In you came, out you can go.” Then turning and muttering to himself, “What was I thinking, being swayed by her pretty eyes.”

Auntie Evonnia tried to talk through her tears. Her voice stuttered and cracked, “I, I won’t say,” gasp, “anything.” Heaving breaths, “I just want to be around her.”

“I think you need to go to the summer home for a week or two and calm yourself down.”

“No, no, please. I will keep my distance.”

“Take one of the servants with you.”

Cecelia heard the change of soft steps on the carpet to claps on the tile by the door and knew she better move quickly.

Auntie Evonnia came out of the room, as if ushered out, catching a glimpse of Cecelia ducking around the corner. She was in the direction that Evonnia would normally go to her own room, but seeing Cecelia she halted and turned back quickly. Father was right there at the door.

“I, I need something to drink. May I go to the kitchen before I pack?” She wasn’t thirsty, she just wanted to keep Abu from exiting and give Cecelia time to hide herself better.

“What do I care,” he said turning and shutting the door in her face.

Evonnia went away, so Cecelia was at loose ends more than normal. Out behind the house was a U-shaped veranda around the pool. Cecelia liked the pool, but was shy around the adults and usually hid behind the pillars. Feeling lonely she decided to join her brothers and sisters in the pool. Dalia was there, and they always had fun together, and that made her feel safer. She also hoped that since all the children seemed to be there that she would be lost amongst their large numbers. How many kids were there? She had tried to count all of them from the 4 wives. 30 maybe?

They were screaming and splashing, dunking and flipping. Cecelia’s head was more often underwater than above; she was quite startled when she surfaced and heard her father screaming. He had been yelling at her for some time, and was now raising his voice to maximum volume to get her attention.

“...and if I have to keep yelling at you, you will be shut for a week. Do you hear me?”

Now she was hearing him, “I’m sorry, Father, I didn’t hear you before. What did I do?” She had to answer dutifully or she would get extra consequences, and the threat of being shut was terrifying to her. The last time she

had been shut away she was locked in the dark for days. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“That’s enough of your absurd silliness. You laugh all day as if there’s no sorrow in this world.”

“I’m sorry, Father. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh. There are so many poor deserving people, I wouldn’t want to hurt them.”

“Fine.” He wasn’t in the mood to be bothered, “Just quiet down and behave with respect.”

“Yes, Father, yes, I will, Father. I will.”

“Stop your blathering on,” he rolled his eyes and shook his head as he headed back to his seat.

“Why does he do that to you,” Dalia asked. “I mean, what did you do that the rest of us weren’t doing also?”

“I don’t know,” Cecelia choked out and tried to cover her tears by splashing in the water. “Lets just go before he finds something else to yell at me for.”

“Yeah, lets go,” Dalia grabbed her hand and pulled Cecelia out of the pool on the far side from their father. Their towels were near their father, so they crept around behind the bushes to try and grab them.

“Why are you so soft on her?” Cecelia heard her mother Hajar ask. “She’s a wild, untamed girl that doesn’t know her place.”

Cecelia stifled a gasp; Dalia threw herself down and pulled Cecelia with her. Dalia signaled quiet with her finger on her lips, and waved to her to crawl closer. They crept up to the bushes as close as they could get to the conversation.

Hajar continued, “I took that girl on as my own out of pity, and look at where she is now. How much worse she could have been if it weren’t for me.”

“If not for you? That’s a laugh. Before I sent her away, I told Evonnia that same story about her being sick. You call it pity when you just wanted control, but enough of you!” Spit was flying out of his mouth, landing on Hajar’s lip, “You wanted her. You took her as your own. You made us all accomplices to your lies. I let you, on my head and my eyes, claim her as your own. You are making me regret it.”

Cecelia knew that Hajar, the third wife, was his favorite, and that her mother, the 4th got little attention. She thought there could have been something tender between Father and her real mother, but first hand saw that Hajar sabotaged their relationship whenever she could. *Was Hajar taking me from my mom part of that sabotage*, she wondered. What she did know, what she had witnessed was that any time Evonnia was with Father, Hajar would be on edge and angry. She would sit with her phone texting Father about what a spoiled brat Cecelia was being, or how this or that was broken, how lonely she was, anything she could think of. This upset Father to be disturbed on his nights with Evonnia, and upset Evonnia to be disturbed with the news of Cecelia being mistreated. She knew that Cecelia was not causing trouble, or if she was it was only natural childish behaviors. Cecelia could hear Father yelling on the other side of the phone that he didn’t want to be getting into a fight with Hajar, and then Hajar would start crying uncontrollably. Evonnia, out of concern for Cecelia, would send Abu back to Hajar—sometimes pleading, sometimes acting indifferent or mean to Abu if he was trying to ignore Hajar and stay. She would take the heat to let Cecelia have peace.

Sometimes Father went to Hajar and stayed. Sometimes he came back to Evonnia after pacifying Hajar with promises or treats. Then Evonnia would smell Hajar on Father, and in turn be inconsolable. Father somehow thought this was all Cecelia’s fault.

However recently, after Cecelia had learned of their true relationship, her behaviors had gotten worse. Being the wise 10 year old that she was, critical thinking was starting to blossom. She began reading the adults expressions and formulating theories of their motives. She made the mistake of interpreting all negativity as being directed toward her, when some of it was just rivalry between Evonnia and Hajar. (The other two wives, being much older and over the drama, were often away together.)

Here by the pool, Hajar had started to softly sob, a technique Cecelia had seen many times before. The soft

cries were followed with staccato breaths, and if that failed to get attention then small gasps would be thrown in. Finally, if nothing else worked Hajar would resort to all out sobbing. Father was responding to the soft sobs, which gave Cecelia hope that the argument would continue. When they argued and tempers flared then the words became more biting and often hidden truths would be thrown at one another—this was Cecelia’s chance to learn something new. Dalia tried to pull her away, afraid that they would be caught listening in and both be shut, but Cecelia wouldn’t budge being caught in the web of fascination and curiosity.

“Now what?” asked Father in exasperation.

“You blame me for everything. All I’ve ever tried to be is your most loving wife. The others were old, and then you married me. I was to be your beauty, but then you brought in that Evonnia.” Her mouth moved as if to spit at saying her name, then thinking better of it she swallowed.

“Do not disparage Blankity-blank, and Blipity-blip. They are the mothers of my first children. Your father brought you to me in desperation, and I paid a handsome bride price for you.”

“Am I not worth it? Haven’t I given you 4 sons?” she pawed his knee.

“Stop that,” he pushed her hand away. “Yes, you are worth it. Why don’t you believe that?”

“Then why Evonnia? She has been nothing but trouble.”

“Trouble from her, or trouble from you? The fighting of a man’s wives is like a never ending dripping faucet.”

Hajar blew her nose like a trumpet, and wiped her eyes, “yes, yes I took her from Evonnia.” Hajar stared at Father with a pinched, piercing gaze. “Is that what you want to hear from me?”

Cecelia started to shake, *would she say it? Would she really say the truth?* Dalia was in shock, not having heard anything of this before.

He looked at her with a stoic face. “Fine,” she continued, “fine, just fine! I’ll say it. I took Cecelia because I wanted my own daughter.”

“And?” He leaned towards Hajar.

Softly she continued, “And because I was jealous. I didn’t want Evonnia to be giving you her own children.”

Father pursed his lips, chewing on one side and slowly nodding his head. He leaned back in his chair with a loud sigh, then pushed himself to standing and quietly walked away.

Hajar didn’t know what to do, whether to cry or not. She didn’t have an audience any more so she wasn’t sure if there was a purpose for it even though she felt very much like crying. Everyone stayed right where they were for many minutes: Hajar unsure where to go, Cecelia and Dalia frozen behind the bushes afraid to be caught. Eventually, when Hajar’s eyes had dried, she pulled out her large sunglasses, pulled down her floppy hat and walked away leaving her books and belongings behind. She wanted some control in her life, and by leaving her belongings so the staff had to clean up after her was one way of finding it.

“Are you my full sister?” Dalia asked.

“Yes,” Cecelia looked up into her sister’s eyes, “Yes, yes I am.” She cried with a smile and a huge hug. What sweet relief it was to Cecelia to know she was actually related to Evonnia instead of the sharp-edged Hajar. “Yes, I am,” Cecelia hugged Dalia’s shoulders.

“Oh, I think that’s wonderful. Now you can come live in our apartment.”

“No, I don’t think so. This will need to be our secret. Can you imagine how long I would be shut if they knew that I knew?”

“That would be terrible.”

“This needs to be our secret. It will bind us together for our lives. Not only are we best friends, but now we’re real sisters forever, and we know it.”

They nodded their heads, then crawled the long way around the bushes so if someone saw them coming out they would think they were looking for a lost ball.

Evonnia sent away

Evonnia spent her two months away, and it was actually refreshing, it did give her a new perspective. She was able to strategize without the presence of Hajar's acid words. The words Blipity-blip (Wife #2) said as she was departing kept spinning in her mind, "He will never change. You need to fix you." Evonnia knew what she needed to do, be what they expected but don't give up. She determined to be sweetness through and through on the outside, and true to herself on the inside. To do that she would need to figure out where she would find her own space. She knew that wouldn't be in the house.

Upon her return there was an unspoken understanding between Cecelia, Evonnia and Dalia. They never openly acknowledged their relation, but they took the opportunity to spend time together surreptitiously. Their pattern followed that Cecelia and Dalia would bounce off together to play somewhere on the grounds. They would meet up with Evonnia and have a lovely picnic together, walk the hills, or some other quiet activity. Cecelia and Dalia would return the way they came with running, hooping and hollering. If they had the opportunity to get dirty on their way back, they took it. Not only did they enjoy the rough play but it was also a good disguise.

Evonnia, having parked her car nearby, would then go to the mall and get her hair or nails done, or buy herself some frivolous item of clothing. The mall was the perfect alibi, as one could spend hours there and still come home with just one thing. Hajar thought that Evonnia was finally showing some good sense by 'investing' in herself. To Hajar it was logical to indulge oneself instead of grieving over what was. She thought that maybe the two of them could be friends after all. She even went so far as to ask Evonnia if they could go together. Evonnia would fawn and say '*yes, what a lovely idea*', but never followed through on the invite.

After their outings and her quick trip to the mall, Evonnia would come back smiling as if her beauty regimen fulfilled her personal needs, and Father was none the wiser thinking she was finally acting the part of presenting herself as a good wife. Evonnia just smiled at him with syrupy submission, and he was quite happy with that.

Even with this new sense of connection between her and Evonnia, the feeling of resentment and anger was growing in Cecelia. She was painfully aware of how her real mother had to submit to Hajar in even the smallest details of what she wore or ate. Hajar was subtle in how she ran the house, or rather *her* part of the house as Blankity-blank and Blipity-blip just ignored Hajar and kept to themselves. It was Evonnia who was under Hajar's thumb, and Evonnia played the part to keep the peace, to keep up the deception that let her see Cecelia more often.

This keeping the peace on Evonnia's part just fueled Cecelia's hate for her family. Other than Dalia, who she was able to see on a limited basis, Cecelia was alone. She didn't feel connected with her brothers, the sons of Hajar, and she had little affection for her Father who she doesn't remember having ever hugged her. As Cecelia matured her thoughts of leaving became more elaborate and detailed. With these fantasies that fed her hope, she would sometimes test the boundaries by wandering off and seeing how far she could make it before someone noticed.

Some days she went quite far, to a shop or down by the shore, if the family was busy with a birthday celebration or some other event. Other days she was tracked down before she could get off their grounds as a gardener might see her, or a tutor was calling roll and they would come looking for her. She would then lie and say that she was pretending to be a spy or detective, or that she had forgotten. She mused with the idea of pretending to be insane like they said her brother Zain was. He often wandered the grounds in just his underwear, talking to himself while he rhythmically slapped his left shoulder with his right arm. The day she decided to try to run again she crossed paths with him and stopped to talk.

"You shouldn't be out here," he sung loudly.

"Shhhhh. I'm right where I'm supposed to be. They told me to come out here," she said cupping her mouth with her hand and stated this practiced lie.

“They did?” he replied in amazement.

“Yes, and they said to keep it a secret.”

“A SECRET!” he yelled back, “I like secrets. I’m good at secrets. Can you tell me a secret right now?”

“I just did,” she replied with confusion.

“Oh, yeah. They told you to come here—Wait! That’s not a very good secret. Are you playing Hide and Seek? You don’t come her for Hide and Seek. I see you following around. You don’t hide right.”

“You’ve seen me?”

“Yes, I always see you. I would catch you, but they don’t let me play,” he waved his hand in the direction of their house trying to point.

“I’m not playing Hide and Seak,” then with wide eyed realization, “You’ve seen me leave the grounds?”

“Yes, yes. I see you go. I see you come back. But I’m hiding. I’m a better hider than you!”

“You know, Zain, I don’t think you’re insane like Haj...mother said.”

“I’m not insane! Hajar is not very nice. She doesn’t like me. I know that. I know she’s not good. She’s mean.”

“If you’re not insane, though, then why are you in your underwear?”

“I don’t like clothes. They’re scratching. Very scratching. I only wear Fruit of the Loom, but mother says they’re cheap and gross. I like Fruit of the Loom, I like the big apple guy. He’s funny. Do you think he’s friends with the Kool-aid guy? They look like they’d be friends.”

“Uh, I don’t know. At least you wear your underwear.”

“I have to. They make me. They hit me if I go naked. Hey, that can be another secret. I keep your secret, you keep mine. Can you do that? I can do that? I’m good at secrets.”

“Yeah. I’ll keep your secret. You keep mine.” She leaned in to give him a hug, but he jumped back with his arms in the air as if he were about to be mugged. “Oh, sorry. I forgot you don’t like to be touched.”

“No. No touching. It hurts.”

“That’ll be another secret between us,” she smiled.

“Yeah, another secret. I like secrets. I’m good at secrets.”

“Don’t tell *them* you saw me. OK?” she cocked her head slightly.

“No telling! I never tell. No one listens to me anyways. But I’m not insane! That’s mean.”

“Yeah, that’s mean. I gotta go. OK?”

“OK! Bye Cece! Be good. Be a good girl.”

She smiled and skipped as she kept on her path toward the small gate to the east. It made her a little sad to think about going out in the world and leaving him. Someday she would have to leave Zain, Dalia, and real mother, but she knew that she couldn’t stay and survive.

Going to the mall or into town was a family affair: all of her sisters with a brother or two along as chaperone, and the driver that followed them. One of the men was always keeping track of the women. Rarely Cecelia could go with just her favorite sister, driven by her brother if no one else wanted to go along. Brothers were a bother, because they wanted to tag along and come into every store, even the intimates stores. Then they would look at all the bras and panties as if there were women inside of them, embarrassing the women. When they went to the mall, Cecelia tried walking different routes and routines, but which ever brother came would still be spotted. Depending on the brother: one would hide as he followed, others would follow and make their presence known.

One day, without realizing it, she left her phone in the bathroom, and the brother that liked to hide didn’t show up for hours. Cecelia and Dalia wondered where he had gotten to, and why they weren’t seeing him hiding behind bushes. The continued to shop and enjoy themselves without a care. But when Cecelia realized she didn’t have her phone they had to retrace their steps, ending back at the bathroom.

There was an attendant there that was holding it for her, "A man came in the bathroom," she exclaimed, "he barged right in here and asked where Cecelia was. He wanted to take your phone, but shoed him out and told him that I certainly couldn't give him something that was not his property. Can you believe it! A man in here! What is wrong with him!"

"Oh," Cecelia was shaken, "Oh, uh, thank you. Thank you for holding my phone."

"Unlock it and show me that it's yours," she demanded.

Exiting the bathroom she ran right into her brother as he blocked the door. "Time to go," he said angrily. He wasn't vexed by the time that he had been sitting waiting for her: it mattered little to him how much time it had taken, but rather that he had lost them. The girls didn't argue, but looked at each other with a conspirator's smirk.

This incident made Cecelia realize that there was tracking on her phone. Why else would he have barged into the bathroom. She reasoned that he must have thought she was hiding in there and had gone in to get her.

"Why were you waiting for me by the bathroom?" she asked sweetly.

"Where else would you be," he snapped.

"I don't know. It's not like I spend all my time in the bathroom."

He looked down at her, "Isn't that what girls always do? Go to the bathroom together and giggle in there for hours. So where else would I look for you when you were late."

"You're ridiculous. Especially since you went into the bathroom as if you knew I was there." Cecelia showed her hand too quickly and gave away her suspicions about the tracking app.

"Don't think you can just remove the app. If you do then your phone will shut down and never be usable again," he sneered at her with a smile.

"Oh, I won't. Believe me, I feel safer knowing that you always know where I am. I wouldn't want to get kidnapped or something, and be lost forever," she moved her shoulders back and forth with the discomfort of this lie.

"Good," was all he said the rest of the afternoon.

By this time Cecelia had let her Dalia in on her plot. Dalia wasn't sure if she was going to join Cecelia, but she was without a doubt going to help. They debated whether it would be easier for Cecelia alone, or with a companion. Dalia didn't want to foil the escape, and if she were at home she could give false information.