My Two Mothers by David Bass

Katie Jacobs was in her mid-teens when my mother recruited her to keep house for a family whose needs had grown well beyond her brittle resources. By the time I began noticing my surroundings, Katie was well-settled in the dark, damp “maid’s” room in the basement of our large home on the slopes of Table Mountain.

On a limited household budget, my mother had somehow managed to furnish her home with meticulously curated artworks and a mixture of classic Cape and Regency furniture, topped with antique silver, copper and brass pieces. All these treasures required many hours of polishing and buffing. The house itself was draughty in the winter and buffeted by the South East gales in the summer, and so required frequent hoovering and dusting in addition to the washing and ironing, cooking and minding the baby (me). Having created a large gilded cage around herself, my mother handed Katie the keys, the Hoover, the rags and the polish, and then either retreated to her bedroom, or met her friends for tea, depending on how the mood took her.

Katie was born and raised in Saron, a tiny, impoverished hamlet about 130 kilometers north-west of Cape Town. Saron had been founded as a Rhenish mission station in the mid-19th century. The only available source of income was seasonal employment on local wine farms which meant no employment for women, and – thanks to South Africa’s infamous “dop system” - chronic alcoholism for most of the menfolk. Katie’s father eked out a living as a lay preacher despite which both his daughters fell pregnant out of wedlock in their late teens. With no prospects in Saron, Katie left school early and headed for Cape Town and a career in domestic service.

Katie’s first suitor and father of her first daughter was a police constable. He cut a fine figure in his khaki unform and pencil moustache, but he drank heavily and used his fists quickly. When Katie returned to work after weekends off, her arms and legs were often covered in welts and bruises. Once, when I asked her about these, she smiled wistfully and said: ‘I’ve been dancing’. Katie was beaten and bruised, but she was no victim. By the time I started school, the constable and the bruises had both disappeared. A few years later, she married Bailey, a monosyllabic but kind-hearted dock worker who adored her and fathered her second daughter.

My birth mother was a gorgeous, intelligent creature with a flair for style and volatile emotions. Funny and engaging one moment, she could swing into dark, silent moods the next, and remain there for hours, days or weeks. While the black dog reigned, she would stay in her bed room with the door shut, and speak to no one. Katie would ply my mother with cups of tea, get me ready for school in the morning, sign my homework diary and handle phone-calls from my father’s patients. My father was a devoted family doctor – but only to other families and we saw little of him. He spent Saturday afternoons at home, either listening to sport on the radio, or pre-occupied with his struggling flowerbeds which were regularly decimated by the South Easter.

To the outside world, we were a model middle-class Jewish family. More often than not, I felt like an orphan.

Whether or not Katie actually read my sense of abandonment, she increasingly filled in the gaps. Even in steady state, my mother was an atrociously bad cook. Katie had lunch waiting for me every school day, roasted a chicken and baked chocolate cookies on Fridays. For a special treat, she made my favourite dish of curried eggs. She brewed pineapple beer, introduced me to coffee and taught me to love black tea. She once told me wistfully about a chocolate "from overseas" called Cot d' Or. How did an underpaid preacher's daughter from Saron know about that? And how did she feel about comforting a lonely boy in a genteel home while her own children were farmed out to some or other relative.

Despite cutting her schooling short, Katie could read and write, and often helped me with my primary school homework. When the phone rang, Katie would straighten her back, pat her hair and announce in her best approximation of the King's English: 'Dork-ter Bess's rezi-dance. Ken I h-yelp yoo-oo?' and then record the message in a painstaking copperplate: "*Missus Clever Antsky son has got stummik pains again and past a worm this morning. Doctor must come ergently*." I figured out in time that Katie's plummy telephone persona was learnt from my birth mother whose girlhood elocution lessons almost - but not quite – airbrushed her Afrikaans back-country accent and rolled consonants. Katie said little in my mother's presence, but was always observing, listening, learning.

By the time I left school, Katie and Bailey had moved into a tiny council house on the Cape Flats. She "charred" for my mother only on Fridays and occasionally helped out whenever my mother's grandiose dinner plans exceeded her executive abilities, as was the case more often than not. Once the guests had left and the last dishes were stacked, I would quickly volunteer to drive Katie home, my first motor car still being a novelty which I itched to drive on the slightest excuse. Once, while Katie was changing into her street clothes, my father drew me aside and muttered darkly: 'Make sure she sits in the back seat. You don't want the cops stopping you'. As politically naïve as I was at that age, the implications of the Immorality Act still cut like a knife. After all, this was Katie we were referring to. Was my father being paranoid or would even the most predatory enforcer of the Calvinist moral code really think we were dating each other? Yes to both. This was South Africa in the 1970's.

At night, I would normally drop Katie off at her gate, and speed off once she was safely inside. One day after she'd stopped working altogether, she contacted me and asked me to tea. It was Spring, and her tiny front garden was packed with a riot of flowering bulbs – dahlias, anemones, ranunculi and others. These were bulbs which my father had gifted her once he'd given up trying to cultivate them himself. Where he'd failed, Katie had succeeded in the lifeless, nutrient-free sand of the Cape Flats. Walking through her front door, my eyes slowly adjusted to the low light, and another, more poignant tableau greeted me. Katie's compact living area was

decorated almost exclusively with decades-worth of my mother's hand-me-downs. There were mahogany ball-and-claw chairs, brass and silver plate ornaments a little worse for wear, glass-beaded doilies and all nature of bric-a-brac and ornaments given to my father over the years by grateful patients. Everything my mother had acquired and loathed, or grown bored with, had found a new home in a dimly-lit cottage on the sand-blown Cape Flats. For a moment, I lost my bearings in space and time. I felt like a child who had wandered from home and then returned as an adult to find that nothing had changed. For years, Katie had polished, burnished and buffed all these treasures in my mother's home, and then adopted and nurtured whatever my mother jettisoned. As I completed my visual tour of this shrine to my home life, I caught Katie's eye. She smiled at me, her eyes expressing gentle pride mixed with anticipation. I told her that her home was beautiful. Then she brought out the tea tray.

Over cups of black tea and her superb chocolate cookies, Katie told me that she'd been feeling unwell for the past few months and that she'd been to one of the public hospitals for "tests". I had almost completed my surgical training by then, and her symptoms sounded ominous. I asked that she mention my name to whichever doctor was seeing her, and request that he contact me once the test results were available. That was the first and last time I saw Katie in her own home.

Katie was diagnosed with inoperable stomach cancer and I last saw her alive in a hospital bed. By then she was emaciated but still managed to light up her face with that wistful smile which had offered me so much comfort and reassurance in earlier years. She passed away without ceremony at the age of 50. When my first daughter arrived the following year, Shelley and I named her Jenna Cato, in loving memory of a quiet, remarkable woman who could cook better than my mother, grow plants better than my father, and gave me whatever my parents could not give.

My Two Mothers

Written by David Bass in 2025

The chapter above is from a book called; **The Day I Met Socrates** a memoir consisting of esssays, monologues and poems written by David who grew up in Cape Town.

It is available on Amazon Books via the following link:

https://www.amazon.com/dp/1049217268?ref

Posted on the CHOL 'Share Your Stories' Site, in February 2026