CHAPTER 1

APARTNESS

I may as well set the record straight right from the get-go that my name really is just Ronni. Not Veronica. Not Rhonda. Not Rona. And not Ronnie with an 'e'. It's not hidden inside any other name. After my two older sisters, my father had wanted a boy very badly. Ronni was the name he had chosen for that boy, and when I was born, the name Ronni remained. I liked it. I felt interesting. But it confused people too. Growing up, I always had the sense that my name challenged people somehow, because a girl was standing in front of them, not a boy. In my early business life, people often sounded a little taken aback when I was the voice behind the name Ronni Kahn. They were expecting to find the expertise of a respectable man whose full name, perhaps, was Ronald. (Or an Indian prince called Raj Khan!)

Despite me being an unexpected third daughter, my parents adored me, as did my sisters, Pamela and Margie. Being ten years younger than Pam and five years younger than Margie, I was the spoilt baby of the household and, I like to think, my father's favourite. (Sorry, sisters!) Even then, I had a sense that I had him wrapped around

my little finger. Maybe because I was the baby, he spoiled me more than he did my sisters. He'd often get in trouble from my mother for indulging me with chocolate bars and other treats. He used to lovingly call me his *feigele*, which means 'little bird' in Yiddish. My parents had grown up in small villages in South Africa that spoke English and Afrikaans, the two official languages of the South Africa of my childhood. But their parents were European immigrants who spoke to them in Yiddish, so we grew up speaking English, with Yiddish words smattered throughout. We all learnt Afrikaans at school, because it was compulsory, but I never connected with that language.

I don't know whether there is any correlation with my boyish name, but I was instantly a tomboy. Maybe I wanted to play this out for my dad in some way, to try to live up to my idea of the name. He certainly went all out to provide me with the stereotypical boy things of the time. He would build go-carts out of soapboxes for me and the neighbourhood boys. This was not what the other little girls on our street were doing. I had so many smashes and crashes. I broke my arm and scraped myself continually, climbing trees with the boys. I'd pee standing up in the hydrangea bushes, because that's what the boys were doing. The tomboy thing really worked for me; I had so much fun.

But when night-time came around, it wasn't so much fun. I was so afraid of the darkness in my room that, even now, just thinking about it, I can feel the fear in my body. To deal with this crippling fear, my father gave me his wooden walking stick to put beside my bed. That stick really helped. If I had bad thoughts, I could always 'touch wood'. It worked. The smooth smell of the wood, the feeling of my father's strength; for a few seconds or minutes at least, they made everything okay. I know it's a common thing for kids to be afraid of

the dark, nothing unusual there. But I tell this story because I think there is something a little sinister in this memory. This stick was also there in case I needed to use it. It was a real weapon, one that a small child could use against a genuine threat. Outside my window, on my street, in my suburb and in my country, things were pretty ruthless. Every night, I was prepared, with my whole mind, to use that stick. This was life under apartheid in South Africa.

It's hard to believe you can grow up with brutal injustice in front of your face and carry on comfortably living your life. You can. To this day, my sisters and I struggle to believe that we grew up with that numbness. There are covert injustices everywhere we look in our lives, within our countries and within our local environments. But under apartheid, in 1950s South Africa, there was nothing covert about the injustice. We grew up seeing everything, and noticing nothing at all. When you are born within a system, you take it as a given. You don't have another reference point.

Apartheid is the Afrikaans word for 'apartness', and in a nutshell that is exactly what apartheid was—a system to keep us all separate, according to the colour of our skin. Although racial segregation has a long and devastating history in South Africa, in 1948, a few years before I was born, apartheid became enshrined in the law. Supported and institutionalised by the National Party government, this rigid racial policy officially mandated the segregation of all racial groups in South Africa. Although white people were the minority, apartheid espoused white supremacy, and set up all its laws to benefit only white

people. Any race that wasn't white was repressed in the most brutal way. If you were black or Asian or mixed race, you were forced to mingle exclusively among your own racial group; you were evicted from your home and obliged to live separately from all other racial groups. You were forced to comply with curfews. You were required to use separate buses and trains from whites, walk through separate doors from whites, have no friends who were white, have no ability to vote, have no sexual relationship across racial lines. You were offered no proper education. The legislation was absolute and had fearsome, state-authorised, institutionally controlled consequences to punish any who disobeyed. It dictated all our lives, whether we were benefiting, suffering or indifferent.

One of my strongest childhood memories is seeing clusters of black people on street corners. I never knew what they were doing there. As an adult, looking back, I suppose street corners were all they had. They had no spaces of their own in which to congregate. If they were looking for work, they had nowhere to go in the 'all-white' suburbs. They just had to gather around and sit on kerbsides, because there was nowhere else for them to sit. If they needed to buy something—such as food—they had to find the odd corner shop with a side door that said 'Non-Whites'. God forbid they might walk through the same door we did! This was absolutely against the law. They had to find their 'Non-White' doors and their 'Non-White' buses and their 'Non-White' trains. Their homes were hours away from ours, and their children were somewhere 'out there' with their grandparents. They were made socially separate from us in every way possible. If I close my eyes, I can still see their forlorn faces on those street corners, can still hear the incredible melody in their voices.

I consider myself lucky to have had parents and grandparents who believed all people were equal. They had come from a religious Jewish background of rabbis and scholars and had been brought up with pristine values. But it was complex, because even if you believed in equality, it was whittled away by a system that didn't allow it. And that's the part that is so insidious. My parents were immersed in a system that gave them little opportunity to act any other way. It was embedded in the law. Although they believed in justice, and tried hard to raise us with notions of morality, they were ultimately prisoners of this society. I'm not trying to justify their inaction, but I do understand it. They were very conventional people. They did not have the sort of brave and courageous constitution that would enable them to fight the system. They simply closed their eyes to it, as most people do. I wish their sense of humanity had been able to overcome this stark reality. Others did. Even then I knew that this was possible. But I have never blamed them.

Everything about life in apartheid South Africa was a contradiction. Blacks were not to be trusted under any circumstances. Yet we trusted them with the most valuable of treasures: our lives. They raised our precious children; they made our food; they drove us around, polished our valuables, kept our homes sparkling and beautiful. And yet they were not to be trusted, in no way, not ever. The irony was insane, absurd. It was right in front of our eyes, and yet we couldn't really see it or feel it. Our whole world revolved around the colour black and the colour white, as if this was woven into the very fabric of existence. But, of course, while you are steeped in it, nothing is as visible as when you step out of it.