01A Every evening, after dinner and a story, Roya and her little sister were sent to bed. Dad: Lights out!...See you in the morning....And not a moment before....Goodnight, you two.

01B But Roya couldn’t sleep. It’s not that she was scared of the dark, exactly. Things were slightly more complicated than that.

02A Roya counted specks of dirt on the wall. She counted water stains on her ceiling. She counted in hexadecimal. She watched the lights of night flicker across the wall.

02B She tried counting sheep. This didn’t help. Roya: One, two, miss a few, ninety-nine, a hundred.

03A Sometimes she crept gingerly out of bed, down the hallway, and listened to the sounds coming from the living room. Mum: Roya, we can hear you, you know. Roya: Can’t I stay up later? Mum: Growing girls need sleep...You’ll be tired at school Dad: You’ll fall asleep at your desk. Mum: Or on the school bus. Dad: Again. Mum: You’ll miss your stop. Dad: And end up goodness knows where!

03B Roya made her way back to bed but she refused to hurry about it. Mum: And don’t wake up your sister with all that sulking and shouting and foot-stomping fanfare.

03B Fanfare...

04A These summer evenings stretched on forever and ever. Outside, the world bustled on as usual.

04B If only the food market would return, with the right kind of night-time bustle.

05A One by one the lights went out. But some were still not ready for sleep.


06A One quarter of a wink and the cat was gone.

06B Off to dress for Midnight Feast, no doubt.

07A Midnight Feast! That explained the occasional sound of cutlery on crockery coming from the kitchen very late at night. Dad: Is there any food at all? Mum: Nothing to comprise a Midnight Feast....There are some cold chips, and somewhat rheumy mustard. Roya: Gold whips and kumquat custard! Dad: Let’s open that last can of fava beans.

08A In bed and wide awake, Roya listened to the rumbling of her stomach. She tried not to think of the Midnight Feast going on in the kitchen: the one to which she was NOT invited.

08B So she dreamed instead of the cat and his cronies.

09A Morning. The kitchen table looked just the same. Not a crumb remained from last night’s feast. Little sister: I love eggs. Roya: You can have mine. Roya: Be careful. There might be a baby dragon inside. Little sister: gaaah! Roya: You’re such a gobemouché.

10A Roya doubted any amount of reasonable appeal would work, but there was no harm in trying. What if she were to ask in a semi-whisper? Roya: May I stay up for Midnight Feast? Just the once?

11B She was sure they’d laugh their socks off. /She was sure they’d laugh their heads off.

12A Dad: So, you’d like to stay up for Midnight Feast, eh? Mum: Sounds like fun! Dad: I don’t see why not. Mum: Well, you have been getting better about bedtime lately. Dad: Besides, there’s no school tomorrow. Little Sister: Me too? Dad: Not this time, Afya. This is Roya’s treat. Mum: Never mind, little one. Exciting things happen when you’re older. Little sister: I never get any older.

13A When Roya got home from school that afternoon, something waited on her bed, ready to be opened. Roya: Hmmm. What’s this? Invitation: Dearest Roya, You are cordially invited to join us for Midnight Feast this Friday evening (that’s tonight). With love always, your mother and father. Cross cross.

13B She felt like royalty.


14B This allowed plenty of time to reimagine the interior décor.

15A She listened as her mother talked to Auntie. Alack and alas, nothing juicy was revealed. Mum: I know. Mmm. Indeed. Tell me about it. Really? That’s hilarious. I haven’t seen them around in ages. Okay. Oh, right. I did not know that. Oh dear. I’d try baking soda and vinegar.

15B Mum: John, we’ll need napkins, and lots of them. Mum: Crystal glasses, shined and polished. Mum: Have you seen to the silver? Mum: Send Jeeves to direct the carriages. Mum: Don’t allow the savouries to come out cold. Mum: Sorry. I seem to be in quite a flap.

16A Darkness drew in. Still no sign of excitement.

17A Her mother and father danced in the living room. Roya preferred the hallway.

17B At about nine-thirty she peered into the hole of her father’s guitar. It wasn’t as she had expected. It was better.

18A The dancing continued...

18B ...and midnight never drew near. Until suddenly it did. At last!

19A Mum: Here it comes! Midnight Feast. I hope you’re ready for this. Mum: Ta-da! Mrs Chen said you may borrow her special plate. Mum: So you’ll have to pop next door first thing tomorrow and say thank-you. Dad: Check this out, Roya. The bread got squished in transit and now it vaguely resembles the shape of the letter ‘R!’ Roya: Capital. Dad: I can toast it for you, if you like. Freshen it up a bit. And cut it into soldiers? Dad: Next up, a soft-boiled egg! Dad: Do you like its sad little face? Mum: Bubbly white milk! In your favourite mug. Enjoy!

19B Soldiers of multigrain toast marched to a dreary beat.

20A If not a five-star restaurant, perhaps a downtown diner?

20B The sounds of Friday night punctured her thoughts. When had she grown tall enough to see out of the kitchen window? She hadn’t meant to see. She didn’t mean to keep looking. Mum: Roya, time for your bath.

21A She prepared for bed as usual. Mindful of the drought, she wasted not a lukewarm, second-hand drop.

21B Deeper and deeper she sank, into a creamy dream. Illusory warmth somehow made her drowsy. Cat: You’re bathing in milk? What a waste!

22A Outside, all was silent. All was dark. Mum: Goodnight, sleep tight. Dad: Don’t let the bedbugs bite.

22B But the dreams continued, on and on, deep into the shimmer of the night.

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