PENGUIN BOOKS

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Other books by Manjeet Mann
RUN, REBEL

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Manjeet Mann

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For the millions of Sammys

366 days before

Everyone is crying but me.
Seven days since she passed.
Seven days, eleven hours, forty-three minutes and sixteen seconds.
Counting the days, hours, minutes,
to stop myself from drowning.

Everyone is crying but me.
Dad squeezes my shoulder.
Be brave, Nat.
I walk towards the front of the church.
Seven days, eleven hours, fifty-three minutes and
nine, ten, eleven, twelve . . .

Everyone is crying but me.
I'm trying to remember how to breathe,
my desert-dry mouth,
hands trembling,
I swallow sand.
It feels like an eternity before I find my voice.

Everyone is crying but me.
Tears stream down Dad's face –
he's given up wiping them away.
His voice c r a c k s
as he reminds everyone of who she was.
Katherine. Kate . . . Kitty . . .
her laugh joy for life mermaid
wonderful mother beautiful wife . . .
activist big heart . . .

my mum.

Everyone is crying.
Everyone,
even **me**.

Me and Mama have lain here on
the cold floor for hours
or seconds.

It's hard
to know
anything
right now.

I lie next to Baba,
his warm hands
turned cold.

I want more than anything
to breathe life back into him.

Baba was fearless
in a country ruled by fear.
I wish I was like you,
I would say.
My son the stargazer,
he would say.
You are perfect just as you are.

Mama moves in waves,
her body undulating,
a crash of howls.

I am a rock.
Unresponsive
to her swells of emotion,
as she beats her chest
and folds into
half the woman she was.

His blood seeps
into my shirt,
staining my skin.

I breathe into the
holes
in
his
chest.

Our salty tears
mix with
his iron blood,
which soaks into
our skin,
our hair,
our guilt,
that we live
and he

doesn't.

Mama looks at me.
In this moment
she is still
and serious.

I can't hide you forever, Samuel.
It is time.
They will come for you ***next****.*

336 days before

I should have taken more videos of her.
I should have recorded every moment,
caught every breath,
savoured every laugh.

I touch the screen,
wanting to grab hold of her –
to reach through my phone and

pull
her

out.

I wish she was still here, Dad.

I know, love, I know.

Dad's desperate to keep it together,
but he's b r o k e n,
w e a l l a r e.

We've kept our distance
these past few months,
keeping our sharp edges to

ourselves.

Getting too close
could cause a puncture
and then we'll see it.
The emptiness.
The grief.
It'll leak out,
or pull us in.

Either way,
there'll be no
escaping
it.

My heart shifts a little,
knowing we'll
never
be the same.

Knowing we won't ever
fit
like before.

Mum was like
winter socks.
She knew how to keep you warm.
She knew how to hold you.

Dad's like fingerless gloves.
He tries, but he doesn't quite
reach your edges –
the important bits –
the bits that really matter.

'Watch this, Nat! Watch me!'
We stare at the screen as Mum
cartwheels straight into the sea
and then emerges, coughing
and laughing,
trying to catch her breath.

That laugh, Ryan says, smiling,
and he's right.

Mum was small,
but she was a powerhouse.
Big laugh.
Big smile.

Big heart.

Ryan slides his finger across the screen
so we can watch the scene play out
again and again and again.

She was so passionate, wasn't she, Dad?
Like about everything.

She was, Nat, he says. *She cared too much, your mum.*

You know what she'd say to that, don't you?

What, Nat?

There's no such thing. You can't care ***too much****.*

Too much *time has passed.*
I trace Baba's face on the screen with my fingertips.
I memorize his voice.
Eritrea is a country traumatized by war.
I want to feel his skin.
This once free country is a military prison.
I whisper his words.
The world's biggest prison.
I pause the recording.
I stroke the face on the screen,
wishing it was skin.
I press play and the recording restarts.
I wonder if this video
is the reason
he's no longer here.
First the Italians.
I study Baba's face.
Then the British.
I watch how he uses his hands.
Then came Ethiopia . . .

I mimic his posture.
Years of war . . .

Baba is animated.
He gestures wildly with his hands,
his eyes bright,
his speech slow,
picking up pace
as he captivates his audience.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror.
I look into my eyes.
I examine my body.
I study my breath,
desperate to see him
in them,
in me.

There are many ways to be brave, Sammy.
Most are small, simple acts of courage.
You will find yours.

Baba's courage
was in his words.

Never be afraid to speak up for what is right.

It's too hard, Baba. I feel hopeless.

It's never hopeless, Sammy.
Never. You know why?

Why?

Because no matter how dark it gets
there are still stars in the sky.

He lived by these words.
Even after Black Tuesday –
the eighteenth of September 2001.

The day seven independent
national newspapers were banned.

The day the Eritrean press
died
and a fully militarized country was
born.

Baba mourned this day
every year.

Eritrea, our beautiful country,
has descended into the abyss, Sammy.
It is my job to tell people the truth.

But aren't you scared, Baba?

We have to face our fears if we are to be free, Sammy.

Mama tells me
he showed no weakness
when the soldiers came for him.
He looked them
straight in the eye
as they
brought
him
down.

I'm not brave, Baba,
You were brave.
Why aren't I?

***Why aren't I** more like her, Dad?*

You are, Nat. You're the spitting image of her.

She had a big heart.

Yours ain't so small.

I feel like my chest has been stamped on.
When's it gonna stop hurting?
Dad?
Dad?

You want the truth?

Always.

*Dunno if it does, Nat. I dunno if it ever **does**.*

***Does** the pain ever stop, Mama?*

One day . . . it will get easier.

Baba was the sun.

And he still shines.

Nothing lives without the sun.

Why are you talking this way, Sammy?

I am nothing without you both.

You are more . . .

I am dust. Nothing but dust.

Yes you are, Sammy.
Stardust.
You are the most precious gift of ***all****.*