

⊕ MEMOIR EXTRACT

# WOMAN ON FIRE

*By Amra Pajalic*

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This is an extract of my memoir *Things Nobody Knows But Me*  
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It began two months ago when my mother took me to visit Muamer for the first time. He lived in Footscray, in a narrow street built for horse-drawn carriages. His house was a white weatherboard with a tin roof and wraparound-porch. After we arrived he led me back out the front door.

'Over there's a park,' he said, and pointed down the street. 'You go there and play.' I sullenly walked to the park. I was seven; old enough to understand why I was sent away. When I returned, Mum and Muamer were not in the living room where I'd left them. I ran through the hallway in panic. Hearing them talk from a closed bedroom door I pushed it open. Muamer was standing beside the bed in a dark blue silk robe that shimmered over his potbelly. The short robe barely grazed his thighs; his hairy legs stuck out of the bottom of the robe. He looked embarrassed when I walked in. Mum didn't move from where she lay. Muamer picked something up from the bed and headed for the door.

'What's that in your hand?' I demanded, my eyes caught by the stealthy way he crumpled the cloth.

'My socks.' His face turned red. It was his underwear, black cotton briefs. After he left Mum looked at me.

'Get out,' she said, her green eyes glowing. As I closed the door I saw her stand up, her pale-fleshed body nude. It wasn't the first time I'd caught her in bed with a man.

Soon, life became unpredictable and strange. Mum met Muamer on the rebound and leaped into an ill-fated relationship. Muamer was not her type or age appropriate. She never found out his age because he'd scratched out his date of birth on his driver's licence. Mum was twenty-nine and exercised every day to maintain her figure. Muamer was possessive and there were daily fights. Soon he found that he could use his strength to control her.

Muamer's house was old, and had no inside toilet; instead there was an outhouse in the small, concrete enclosed backyard. At night I was too scared to go out. Mum's solution was for me to pee into a bucket that she flushed the next day. Each morning I stared into the bucket, my urine a dark yellow mixture with bits of toilet paper weighing it down, the strong smell wafting up my nostrils.

I was waiting for breakfast while Muamer and Mum shouted. They'd been arguing all morning. Muamer pursued her doggedly around the house, accusing her of flirting with some man or another as she tried to make breakfast. Mum tried to go to the kitchen, but he grabbed her by the arms and wrenched her back.

'You are my everything.' His voice was full of pain. I watched from the doorway in my pyjamas as Mum pulled away from him. 'Just tell me you love me,' he pleaded. He grabbed her again but she managed to throw him off. She picked up the pee bucket and tossed it at him. Urine soaked his hair and chest, bits of toilet paper stuck to his cheeks and shoulder. 'Run.' She yanked me down the hallway and out the front door.

We ran down the street to the house of a Bosnian family we knew. I kept looking behind us to see if Muamer was following, but he was nowhere to be seen. Mum told the neighbours about the fight, her voice loud as she barely stopped for pause. Her tongue got thick, her speech

slurred. The neighbours exchanged looks of concern as they listened to her. They gave me toast to eat and sent me to the living room to watch television while they remained in the kitchen talking to Mum.

Eventually, there was a knock on the door. The woman of the house answered, leading in Muamer. He looked sheepish, his hair wet.

'He keeps following me,' Mum shrieked. 'He thinks I'm having an affair.'

'Now, now, calm down, Senka.' Muamer's calm voice was a stark contrast to Mum's accusations. 'There's nothing to be upset about.'

'You never leave me alone,' she shouted. 'I have no peace from you, accusing me of cheating, calling me a slut!'

I snuck to the doorway and saw Mum bunched up against the wall. He was reaching his arms out to her, like she was a wild animal that needed to be contained. The Bosnian couple watched the spectacle.

'Ask Amra.' Mum pointed at me. 'Ask her how he torments me.'

The wife was moved from her inertia and quickly ran over to me, tugging me away.

'Mummy,' I called out and began crying. 'I want Mummy.' I tried to push the woman away, but she held onto me as Muamer and her husband led Mum out of the house.

Mum was admitted into hospital. After a few weeks of heavy sedation and occasional visits, Mum stabilised and progressed to weekend visits. On Friday night Muamer picked her up from the hospital, and on Monday morning, he would drive her back.

I was used to fending for myself. Mum had frequent mental breakdowns as a lifelong Bi Polar sufferer, and I'd ended up being cared for by various family friends across the years. With Mum becoming a weekend parent, I settled into a new life during the weekdays. The playground became my second home and I played there after school until it night. I made friends with other feral neighbourhood children.

It was during this time that I met Lucy. Lucy lived a few streets away, but had found her way to our park and it became her daily haunt. She was about my age and we grew close quickly, as children do.

Lucy was always reluctant to go home. I stayed out all afternoon, but still when darkness stretched across the playground, Muamer shouted my name from the front porch. While home wasn't a joyful place, it also wasn't a place I dreaded. Many nights when I walked toward the shining light on the porch I looked over my shoulder and saw Lucy on the swing, her face etched in sadness as she delayed going home. Muamer didn't allow any kids to visit. My friendships took place in the park and nowhere else.

One weeknight when I finished playing and just before Muamer came to call me, Lucy asked me if I wanted to sleep over at her house. I'd never had a sleepover at anyone's house and this seemed the most exciting thing that could possibly happen. We ran together to Muamer's house. I yanked open the door and yelled out asking permission to sleep over. I'm not sure

why he said yes. Perhaps he didn't understand the concept of a sleepover, or maybe he thought I was asking to visit. It didn't occur to me to pack anything, such as a change of clothes or a toothbrush. We flew off the porch and ran into the darkened streets. Lucy didn't live far, just a few winding streets down. When we got to her house her mother had visitors so we retreated to her bedroom. Her house had threadbare carpets and the walls were flaking. I didn't get the chance to visit many other girls' bedrooms and was intensely curious. Lucy's bedroom was used as a storage area for her mother's things, and there was barely enough room from the bed to the door to walk. On the floor were clothes and she didn't have many toys.

Quickly, the house filled with adults. Music was turned up loud, and the smell of cigarettes permeated the house. At some point we left the room to eat and entered the crowded living room.

'There's my girl,' her Mum drawled, holding a beer in one hand and cigarette in the other. Lucy made her way through the bodies that were seated on the floor and every available piece of furniture until we reached the couch where her mother sat. Her boyfriend was beside her. He scooped Lucy up and put her on his lap and tickled her. Lucy didn't look happy, but she didn't get up. After a few minutes of enduring the conversation around us, Lucy stood and took me to the kitchen where we made ourselves a sandwich from stale bread.

We returned to her bedroom and ate, and then got ready for sleep.

'You have to take off your underwear,' Lucy said, slipping off her panties under the doona and throwing them on the floor.

'Why?' I asked, finding this strange.

'You just do,' Lucy said and closed her eyes. Lucy fast fell asleep, untroubled by the sounds of shrieking conversations as drunk and stoned friends of her mother fought to be heard over the throbbing music. As I lay beside her, the unfamiliar feeling of bed sheets tickling my private parts, I couldn't settle as I processed all the strange things I'd seen and heard. Eventually exhaustion dragged me under.

When we awoke the house was deserted, with remnants of the party strewn all over the living room. Lucy warned me to keep quiet, as her mother would be in a bad mood after a hard night. We had a silent breakfast and left the house.

As we walked to the town centre Lucy pointed out a house with garden beds neatly planted with plastic tulips in colourful rows.

'Let's get one,' Lucy dared.

I looked back at the house. Something about the way the plastic flowers were symmetrically rising out of the garden bed touched my heart. There was a beauty in this display and I wondered at the person who arranged this. Seeing Lucy's wicked smile I realised she didn't feel this sentiment and so I nodded. We jumped over the fence and each grabbed a fake tulip and ran as we laughed fiendishly. When we reached the end of the street Lucy threw her plastic flower on the grass. I hesitated before following suit, remembering the empty space in the flowerbed.

We spent the day window-shopping. At some point we ended up in a toy shop and I looked at all the toys I didn't have with envy twisting inside me. I picked up a Cabbage Patch Doll and gently caressed her chubby, plastic cheek.

'Do you want it?' Lucy asked.

'Yeah, but Mum can't afford it,' I said, regretfully returning it to the shelf. Cabbage Patch Dolls were expensive and I'd coveted one ever since I saw the first commercial on television.

'Who said you needed your mum?' Lucy asked scornfully. She looked craftily around us.

'Get ready to run,' she whispered. She grabbed the doll and ran to the door.

I hesitated for a split second, shocked at her cunning. Realising I was an accessory, my survival instinct kicked in. We ran until we were again in the quiet streets of suburbia.

Lucy eventually stopped. I caught up to her and we were both bent forward as we fought to get our breath back. 'Here,' she said, a big smile on her face.

I took the doll gingerly. I'd dreamed about the moment when I would finally have my own Cabbage Patch doll for so long, yet now that I finally held one in my arms, it felt tainted.

We spent a few more hours out and about and when dark approached Lucy asked me again to sleepover at her house.

'I'll have to ask Muamer,' I said cautiously.

'No need,' Lucy said. 'If he said okay once already, he wouldn't have a problem with another night.'

This logic seemed to make sense and so I agreed.

'We can't take the doll home, though,' Lucy said.

'Why?' I asked, hugging it tighter.

'Mum will want to know where I got it.'

Something in her face made me not ask questions. I left the doll on a bench and as dark descended we walked to her house. This time it was quiet with no party, however her Mum and boyfriend were in the living room wrapped around each other. We went to bed, again removing our underwear and slept.

In the morning I awoke with my stomach twisting with hunger. I hadn't eaten much the day before and was feeling it. We went to the kitchen, but there was no bread, no milk, no cereal.

Lucy's mum came in, her face wan.

'Mum, can you give me money to buy something to eat?' Lucy asked.

'Shut the fuck up!' Her mum exploded into rage. She picked Lucy up and threw her against the wall.

My body burst into motion before my mind had time to process the action. I ran all the way home to Muamer's house, not looking back once. When I got home Muamer told me he looked for me the night before, driving up and down the dark streets of Footscray. He was too relieved that I was back to scold me.

In hospital Mum was seeing a female Muslim psychiatrist. They bonded on the basis of their shared religion, and she was the one who truly triggered a change in Mum. She was so shocked by the weekend parenting arrangement.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ she demanded when Mum explained that Muamer, a man she barely knew, was caring for me. ‘You keep this up and your child will be taken from you.’ These words woke Mum up. She’d once told me that being in hospital was like a vacation for her. Being a sole parent was a heavy burden for her to carry, but when the psychiatrist made her realise what she was risking, she sought release from hospital and came home. To celebrate, she and Muamer planned a family camping trip.

The wind rustling through the trees and the cacophony of birdcalls woke me. I opened my eyes and saw the emerald colour of the nylon tent roof. Through it I could picture the tree branches that we slept beneath twirling in the wind, producing nature’s symphony. I lifted my head and on the other side of the tent lay my Mum and Muamer.

Feeling the press of my bladder I reluctantly unzipped the sleeping bag and slid out, like a critter being born. When I pushed open the tent door a panoramic view of greenery greeted me. We had pitched our tent on a clearing surrounded by bushes and trees. As I walked straight ahead to the trees I could hear the river rushing past behind the foliage.

A few metres from us was another tent for Behija and Eldin and their two sons. Behija was Mum’s best friend. Behija and Eldin used to be tobacco share crop farmers in Myrtleford and Mum had met them when she lived on a farm with her first husband. They’d invited us on this camping trip, their annual family holiday. Muamer wasn’t happy with the fact that Behija and Eldin had a claim on Mum’s affections. He wanted her isolated and vulnerable, and surrounded by friends, she was beginning to show strength.

That night, Eldin and his sons built a fire in the pit they had created away from the tents. We gathered around, adults sitting on foldaway chairs, while the rest of us sat on logs.

Marshmallows, sticks and fire were ready. As we talked, Muamer sipped rakija, a Balkan plum brandy from the bottle he kept at his feet. It didn’t take long for the alcohol to fan the flames of his paranoia, and he started making accusations about Mum’s chastity. He couldn’t believe that my beautiful mother had chosen him and was always on the lookout for betrayal. Her white unmarked skin and thin waistline were a stark contrast to his short tubby body, greying hair and the alcohol-broken-capillaries on his nose and cheeks. A smile exchanged with a male acquaintance or an innocent glance at a shopkeeper became events worthy of an inquisition.

‘Where were you?’ he demanded. ‘You were with someone. Who is he?’

Eldin and Behija tried to intervene, but he pushed Eldin away. They retreated, shocked by this violent outburst, probably fearing for their sons’ safety, and I’m sure feeling some anger at Mum for putting them in this position and tainting their family holiday.

Mum tried to move away from Muamer, but he grabbed hold of her, trying to restrain her. They wrestled, moving closer to the fire, when he pushed her. Her arms flailed as she fought to catch her balance. The fire behind her rose bigger and brighter, lighting up her frightened face. A scream trapped in my throat as I watched her fall.

Eldin rushed forward and pushed Muamer back. They argued while I wrapped myself around Mum's shivering thighs. A few minutes later Muamer drove off in a rage, tyres throwing up earth and gravel as he sped off.

He stayed away that night and came back the next morning. We packed up our tent and went home with him. Mum had a lot of time to think on the trip back. Muamer pulled up in the driveway of his house and got out of the car to open the gate, leaving the engine running. While he unlocked the gate, Mum jumped over the gear stick and sat in the driver's seat. She threw the car in reverse and burst onto the street, the car veering as she sped away from Muamer. We had nowhere to go, so like a swallow in spring, Mum returned to the only home we'd ever had, the house my father bought and renovated, and that his death insurance had paid for. It was being rented by a distant female cousin on my father's side. The woman greeted us at the gate. We stood like beggars speaking to her through the bars. In the end she agreed to give us shelter and the gate squeaked as she opened it and let us inside. We pitched the tent under the branches of mulberry tree I climbed throughout my childhood. We lay in the tent, the nylon shushing from the wind, as the branches above us rustled in the wind. I curled against Mum's side. 'It's my birthday tomorrow,' Mum said, tears in her voice. 'I'll buy you a cake,' I said. 'Thank you my baby.' I fell asleep, but my slumber was disturbed by tremors. I forced my eyelids open. Mum was crying silently, her chest heaving as she held in her sobs. I fell asleep again while the wind witnessed Mum's silent tears. It was her thirtieth birthday.

I snuck out before she awoke. I'd slept in my clothes. Mum's purse was on the tent floor. I opened it and took out two gold coins. I walked two blocks to the milk bar where I picked out a birthday card and roulade cake. When I got back Mum was still sleeping.

'Happy birthday to you,' I sang softly.

Mum sat up in the sleeping bag, her hair dishevelled, her face creased from pillow.

'Happy Birthday, Mummy,' I said, handing over the card and the cake. I didn't have a pen, and the card was blank.

'Thank you,' Mum said, hugging me and kissing my head. Her tears dried in my hair.

'Woman on Fire' is an extract from my upcoming memoir *Things Nobody Knows But Me* to be published by Transit Lounge in 2019.



## Author Biography

I am an author and teacher. My debut novel *The Good Daughter* (Text Publishing, 2009) won the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature's Civic Choice Award, and was a finalist in the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature Best Writing Award. Prior to publication it was shortlisted in the 2007 Victorian Premier's Awards for Best Unpublished Manuscript. I am also author of a novel for children *Amir: Friend on Loan* (Garratt Publishing, 2014).

I am co-editor of the anthology *Coming of Age: Growing up Muslim in Australia* (Allen and Unwin, 2014) that was shortlisted for the 2015 Children's Book Council of Australia Eve Pownall Award for Information Books and was selected by the Grattan Institute for the 2015 Summer Reading List for Prime Minister. I also wrote the teaching notes published by Allen and Unwin.

I have had short stories and non fiction pieces place in competitions (Ada Cambridge short story competition, Glen Eira Literary Awards), get published in magazines (Big Issue, Woman's Day), journals (Etchings, The Emerging Writer) and anthologies (2004 and 2005 Best Australian Stories, Wordlines, Through The Clock's Workings).

I have appeared on panels at conferences and literary festivals including at the Wheeler Centre, Melbourne Writers Festival, Williamstown Literary Festival, Reading Matters Conference Panel, and the VicTESOL Conference. I have delivered workshops and presented at various library and community organisations, and have judged short story competitions at the Melton Literary Festival and the Glen Eira City Council 'My Brother Jack' Awards. I am listed with speaking agency Booked Out. I was funded by Artists in Schools to be an Artist in Residence in 2010, 2011 and 2012 in high schools.

I have also written three romance novels under the pen name Mae Archer.

I was born and raised in Melbourne's Western Suburbs where I work as a high school teacher at my former high school St Albans Secondary College.

