

Chapter One

Just two weeks after my family moved to Ajax, I saw my parents glued to the television. At first, I thought they were watching a movie. People were rushing out from a tunnel. A man in a heavy coat led out a lady wearing what looked like a gas mask. It was caked with thick white dust. I wondered what the lady's face looked like behind the mask. Was she crying, or were her eyes closed in fright? Then the scene shifted to a red double-decker bus. It seemed to have been smashed with a giant hammer.

“There is nothing sadder than smoke,” my father said. “It always marks the end of something.” Dad usually spoke like this. Quoting the dead

poet Shakespeare, or saying things only he could understand.

Mom placed a finger against her lips to silence Dad. On the television, a woman was sitting on the pavement. Why wasn't the woman running with everyone else? Then the camera focused on a small body beside her. I waited for a commercial to come on. Then I asked, "What's going on? Where's this happening?"

"In far-away London," Mom said in a sad voice. "Terrorists have bombed three subway trains and that bus." After a while, she added, "What's happening is madness."

"Can something like that happen here?" Allison, my sister, asked.

My mother looked through the balcony door. I wondered if she was considering all the places she had lived. First of all, Uganda, in

Then, after seven years, Napanee, in Ontario, where Dad got a job at a mill. And finally here, Ajax, a bit east of Toronto. “Who knows, dear,” she said softly, as if speaking to herself. “But not in Ajax.”

During the following weeks, I got a good idea why my parents felt so comfortable in Ajax. Everything seemed squeezed together. We could walk to the library, the hospital, the schools, the lake, and the shopping malls. Everyone seemed to know each other, and the parks were usually crowded with old people walking about or chatting on benches.

One day, we were driving through narrow streets with old wartime houses on either side. Mom pointed to the signs and said the streets were all named after the sailors from some old battleship. “No one is ashamed of their past here,” she said.

Mom felt that Canada was the most perfect place in the world. All the bad things happened elsewhere. She pointed this out to Dad whenever he began talking of his boyhood in Uganda. Dad would answer that “his people” were nomads. His great-grandfather had moved from India to

Uganda, he and Mom had moved to Australia, and now they had moved to Canada. His favourite saying — when he was not quoting Shakespeare — was, “Everything is temporary.”

I really hoped that Dad was wrong and that our stay in Ajax would be permanent. I was sad when we moved from Fredericton and I had to leave all of my friends behind. Because of that, I made few friends in Napanee. I did not want to be disappointed again.

Ajax was different. We did not live in a small house, as we had in the other places, but on the tenth floor of a high-rise. From the balcony, I could see the playground and the hospital. I believed that if we stayed in Ajax, I would finally make some friends. I had to. Everyone was squashed together. Sometimes I pretended that everyone in our high-rise — the men, women, and children I spotted on the elevator or in the parking lot — belonged to one big family. After all, we lived in the same building.

Yet, only five months after we moved to Ajax, Allison told me something terrible. Our parents, she said, were thinking of moving once more. She hoped they would pick Toronto.