

Rewriting My Future

When she went from straight-A student to serial dropout, novelist *Shubnum Khan* ditched the doctor-lawyer-dentist (and good wife) expectations – and wrote her own.



CHRIS LAURENZ, STYLIST: JANINE DYDEN, HAIR AND MAKE-UP: ALANA-JANE O'MALLEY FROM MAKEUP YOUR MIND, TOP: HAPPY SHOP, JEANS: WOOLWORTHS, BOOTS: SHUBNUM'S OWN, BRACELET: WOOLWORTHS, EARRINGS: STYLIST'S OWN, BOOKS: EXCLUSIVE BOOKS AND STYLIST'S OWN, FOR DETAILS, SEE SHOP GUIDE, LOCATION: FREEDOM CAFE, # 081 309 4434.

THOUGH I DON'T remember it, I know my first encounter with not fulfilling expectations occurred at the moment of my birth. You see, I was the fourth girl to be born into the Khan family. My parents keep telling me they felt only happiness that I was healthy, but I am sure that after eagerly poking around, they were slightly disappointed to find yet another baby lacking the necessary accessory.

As the years went by and I grew older, I became better acquainted with this concept of failing others. But I experienced it most intensely when I was 17 and fresh out of high school. I was armed with a report card full of As, and my family and friends had high hopes for my future.

Their optimism proved to be premature. After just a week of studying architecture, I knew it wasn't for me, and deregistered. Six months later, I was doing a degree in fine art, which I also gave up after two weeks. The following year, I started a visual-arts degree. This time, I managed a year before I threw in the towel. Some people had a lot to say about my indecisiveness: "A bright future dashed," "Another spoilt child who couldn't commit to her studies" and "She gave up on something like art." I felt hopeless. All around me, friends were well on their way to becoming dentists, accountants and other important cogs in the machine of life, while I was wasting away the most important years

– with nothing but a giant charcoal sketch of a peach to show for it. Yes, I enjoyed drawing and designing, but studying it formally didn't feel right somehow. I vividly recall sitting on the couch one evening, tears streaming down my cheeks, wondering why I didn't know what my purpose in life was. I wailed with anguish over my uncertain future.

My exasperated father suggested that I "take a break," so I began volunteering at the local library. That period in my life gave me space to breathe. The library offered peaceful consistency during a time of restlessness. While I scanned barcodes and wheeled the trolley of returned books to be packed on dusty shelves, I gained

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a unique kind of knowledge. And I reignited my long-forgotten passion for the written word, which dates from when my eldest sister read me Enid Blyton's *The Magic Faraway Tree* as a child. I gleaned stories and lessons from the books themselves, but also from the library visitors. I considered which type of books were frequently borrowed and had waiting lists, versus those that remained on shelves for years in their sticky, thick plastic sleeves; saw the books I had read and returned as a child, with my tea stains still in them, that were now being borrowed by a new generation; watched schoolgirls wander around looking for books for their projects (or boys as their projects); and acknowledged the smartly dressed unemployed man who came to read newspapers every day. And as I observed and read, learning about life and people, I unconsciously learnt a little about writing as well.

The more traditional members of my family thought this period was a good thing, that I would finally settle down to learn how to cook and clean, and prepare to be a good wife. But I am not easily domesticated (just ask my mother). And my stint at the library helped me realise there was a world of learning still waiting for me. So, a few months later, I enrolled at university again, this time for a degree in media and English. My new quest for knowledge, combined with the fact that I was determined not to fail myself again, gave me the courage to see the course through to the end. It went so well that I did my honours, and started writing my first novel in a creative-writing class, which

I subsequently completed as part of my master's degree.

If you had told that sobbing girl that in six years' time she would have a master's degree, a completed manuscript, and publishing contracts with a local and an international publisher, she would never have believed you. It is only now that I can look back and piece things together: Failing my studies led me to the library, where my love for words and knowledge was stimulated. My degree paved the way to the creative-writing course during which I began my novel. Looking back, I can say that failing to meet the expectations of others gives you a particular kind of freedom. After I dropped out, no one bothered me with their grand visions for my future. After a while, I was left alone to explore the things I wanted to. Those "lost years" gave me time for necessary introspection. Sometimes you simply have to stop to inspect the foundations before you begin rebuilding your life. Then just do what feels right for you.

For years a good friend of mine wrote articles that fought against injustice, selling them to any paper that would take them (not many), even though he hadn't studied journalism. His career was in such a state that, as an adult, his mother gave him a tongue-lashing about his "badly organised life and poor job." Today, less than a year later, he is working for an international news company as an online journalist, and has released his first book in South Africa. I am sure he never saw that coming, but through it all he still continued to write and research his interests. Steve Jobs, the

co-founder of Apple, talks about doing what "feels right for you." He left university because he couldn't see the value in the subjects he was studying. Then he dropped in on classes that seemed useless but that interested him, such as calligraphy. And 10 years later, he was using that "pointless" knowledge to design the beautiful typography used by Macintosh computers. He is convinced that if he hadn't failed – and followed his heart – he wouldn't be where he is today.

I firmly believe that each of your decisions and experiences are preparing you for a future you can never imagine. If I had taken to heart other people's judgments, I would never have continued with studies of my choosing. You have to drown out the sound of others' opinions to listen clearly to what your heart is telling you. Did I think I would actually have a career I was passionate about? No. But I went about doing what felt right anyway. I never believed I would be an author at 25, especially considering my haphazard, uncertain education.

And that's why I don't think failures are negative. They each fit into the big, complicated puzzle that is life. Some disappointments push you to work harder, others make you stop to reflect. They're just success stories waiting to be written.

And yes, I may be the fourth girl in the Khan family, but I also realise that if I weren't, I would never have been able to write the kind of story I did. The position of being a beloved sister and daughter provided me with a unique, sensitive and strong base to shape my perspectives of the world. And that's something I will always be grateful for. **Q**

*Shubnum Khan teaches creative writing and media studies at UKZN. She is a cartoonist and has had illustrations published in Mail & Guardian and Al Huda. Her debut novel, *Onion Tears*, was released in May 2011.*