

Betrayal

1.

Some things go in circles and never end. Rani, her hair piled under her baseball cap, skirt tucked up around her thighs, swept the yard. A pall of dust hung over the tiny space, making her sneeze. I watched her, had always enjoyed watching her work, and waited until she had to put her broom down, sneezing four or five times in a row, before I swung myself out of the window and on to the fire escape. It had been a stupid thing to do. The narrow black brick courtyard swung vertiginously beneath me, the so solid metal beneath my feet feeling like it had disintegrated under me. I felt I would plummet into an abyss hidden within the dusty, paper-thin floor of the courtyard. I closed my eyes briefly, clutching onto the rail, and then spoke.

“Bless you.”

“Oh. Hi.” She picked up her broom and leant on it, watching me as I made my shaky way down the metal steps towards her. I sat down on the final flight, facing her.

“Cigarette?”

She looked guiltily towards the back of the shop, then shrugged. “Why not?”

She took the offered cigarette and let me light it, joining me on the steps.

“What’s Lena doing at nursery nowadays?”

“Reading. Words. All that. It seems a bit advanced, if you ask me. Did you ever do that at nursery?”

“Not that I remember. As far as I can recall, nursery was all about sticking two buttons and a pipe-cleaner to an egg box and calling it a face.”

“Yeah, well, not now. Now it's all about learning. These are serious times we live in. You've got to get ahead of the opposition.”

“Learning. Poor Lena. Where’s all the play disappeared to?”

“It keeps her grandparents happy. And they're the ones that are difficult to please.” She peered into the little sliver of electric light revealed by the open door. “I'm surprised mum isn't out here demanding to know what's taking so long. There's probably still boxes of nappies or whatever waiting to be shelved.”

“Your parents always struck me as being pretty laid back.”

Rani snorted. “You don’t have to live with them.”

“Oh come on. They're okay. They’ve always been okay with you. About Lena, for instance. They could have been worse.”

“What, and actually sent me to the leper colony?”

“Well yeah. You can't blame them. They only wanted the best for you. As I'm sure you do for Lena.”

“But it's that goddamn tyrannical ‘best’ that gets me. The best meaning what they think is best. It doesn’t seem to matter what I think.”

“And what if Lena gets pregnant in her first year at university?”

Rani laughed. “I'd wring her neck, the stupid bitch.”

We leaned back to stare up at the sky.

2.

Darkness was falling, the sky deepening from a faded yellow in the West to an inky blue overhead, framed by the silhouette of the flats. The intricate metal framework of the fire escape closed like a complex cage overhead. Far up, the trail from an aeroplane caught the dying rays of the sun and stretched out in a gaudy peach line.

“Seriously, though, I do worry. I mean, she's got a boyfriend already. She's *four*.”

“I remember having crushes at four. Nadia Comaneci - you know, the gymnast. Elaine Cole...”

“Elaine Cole?”

“She was in my ballet class.”

“You did ballet? When you were four? I never knew.” Rani laughed. “How fucked up is that? I should tell mum. She won't think the way I'm bringing Lena up is so bad after all.”

“I had to wear tights. Thick black ones. And I can still remember all the positions.”

“Were there any other boys in the class?”

“I don't remember. All I remember is Elaine Cole...”

“Maybe Lena having a boyfriend isn't so bad, then. But, I mean, you had crushes, right? Lena's got a boyfriend. It's just that tiny bit more sexual. They know that they're supposed to *do things*, they just don't know what sort of things these are. That scares me. They're following the pattern of everything they see around them all of the time.”

“What can we do? We can't cocoon them away from everything. And if sex sells, which is so blatantly does, then surely this is how everything is going to end up...”

“You know, everyone talks like you until they actually have a child. Then it changes. You suddenly wonder what sort of a fucking world it is and how you're gonna change it, except you're too busy with nappies and Teletubbies and cut knees.”

I smiled, staring across at her as she looked up into the sky. Lights from the flats shining back as stars in her eyes. “Long may my ignorance continue.”

“It'll happen to you anyway. Only you'll be older. At least I've got it out of the way young.”

“No plans for any more, then?”

She snorted. “With whom, exactly?”

I didn't answer.

3.

“Have you seen Kaye recently?”

“Kaye?”

“Dom and Sarah's kid.”

“Oh, her. You used to bung her a tenner a go to baby-sit Lena. And she would eat all the biscuits.”

“Her.”

“No.”

“You men. You miss what's under your noses. She's what, fifteen, probably. You know she used to be all gangly? Maybe you don't, but she was. Well, all of a sudden, she's changed. Or so it seems like all of a sudden. I hadn't noticed, and the suddenly wham! She's *beautiful*.”

“Even if I had seen her, men can't say that sort of thing about fifteen year-old girls.”

“It wouldn't stop you from thinking it. And it doesn't stop the boys, either. They're like moths to a candle flame. Even the eighteen, nineteen year-olds. She's loving it, too. And she used to be such a sensible girl. Every time I see it happening outside the shop I want to run out there and swat all those boys away. She's heading for a fall.”

I looked at her curiously, her face just shadow, touched about with reflected light. “Is this some kind of admission of regret?”

“What, for my golden years? You wish.” Rani stretched out her body in the gloom. “You've got to enjoy it while it lasts. It doesn't come back.”

“Says you. And you're how old?”

“That's got nothing to do with it. I just know that for a while, when you have it, it's like magic falls from your fingertips. It's not something you can help. And then when it's gone, it's gone. In my moment, I could have chosen anyone.”

I looked into the gathering shadows. “I know.”

“You don't think it's going to end but it does.” She shrugged. “You do the same things as you did, make the same moves, but it's not there any more. But for the time you have it, it's irresistible.”

I thought back over her boyfriends. “Then why did you waste it with people you did?”

“Oh,” she smiled, a little curve in the darkness. “What else do you do with something God-given? You waste it.”

“Obvious, I suppose. Why didn't I guess?”

“You don't understand the power in it. It can turn the whole world upside down.”

“I'm just a regular guy. I never had any magic to waste. I've always hoped that if I did my best and was a decent enough geezer...”

Rani shook her head. “Who would want that?”

Aeroplane lights twinkled overhead. I sat pondering.

“Anyway,” Rani said after a pause, “I don't know what you're getting so gloomy about. I thought you were dating.”

“Who told you that?” I asked, surprised.

“Mum.”

“And how would she know?”

“You brought a different brand of shaving cream.”

“She noticed that? Shit.”

“That's mum. So then, are you or aren't you?”

“We're not - exactly - dating.”

“But enough to warrant shaving cream.”

I shrugged. “We're...friends. She's interesting.”

“*Interesting?*”

“Yeah.”

“Well then. Do I get any details?”

“She’s like you. She's got a child... young. Older than Lena, but still...”

“Like me?” Rani gave a strange laugh. “A woman like me? Oh. Oh dear. We're trouble.”

4.

“Yup,” Rani said, eyes on the last fading patch of light, “we're trouble all right.”

I had known Rani since she was a kid. I was several years older than her, and I felt I knew parts of her life better than she did. I remembered her learning to walk, going to nursery; I remember walking along with her on her first day at school. All the fights and the pretend shared secrets we had that she claims now to have forgotten. I developed a crush on her when I was about 11, and it changed the way I treated her for good. Suddenly she became a fragile thing I couldn't touch; I mixed up my words or was struck dumb in her presence, embarrassed by the physical pain that would lance through me. She shrugged me off - an encumbrance anyway, she needed girls of her own age to be friends with - and I spent a year in the pits of desolate love, not understanding why things didn't work, why I couldn't have what I wanted and be happy, before I changed schools and found more interesting girls to throw myself after.

Several years later, Rani had flowered; she had not exaggerated in her description. It happened in the year before I went to university. Suddenly, I found myself noticing her again, this woman, trailing my dreams in her wake. My desire reawakened, only this time more guilty, accompanied by furtive sexual fantasies which I learnt to sublimate, to hide, and I learned this time how to talk to her, rebuilding our previous friendship. But she always seemed to bear the mark of my earlier failure, something she harboured for me alone, warning me off however hard I tried. Later, when it didn't matter, when Lena had been born and Alex ejected from her life, she let me more into her confidence. “I always loved you for never having chatted me up,” she told me. “Everyone else did, but you didn't. You don't know how much that means.” I suffered her praise in silence.

I missed most of what she dubbed her “golden years.” I had been away at university; reluctant to go, wanting to stay here waiting for the chance that I knew would never come. I initially wrote her long, dreamy letters to which she never replied but, whenever I would come back home for whatever reason, she would encourage me to keep sending. I fell in love at university, almost inevitably, and the letters dried up. I got laid, got dumped, and the pure ferocity of that first love drifted away, like the heat of breath fading into the night.

What I did see of her was over the holidays, in between my shifts at the Post Office, thinking of the letters I used to write, handwritten envelopes, tiny carriers of dream engulfed by the tide of business post and junk mail, that deadness of printed words, the spew of commerce surely drowning out everything else. They seemed worlds apart. I would sometimes sit in the Pakenham Arms, ostensibly with her but actually withdrawn, nursing a pint before my night shift, watching her as she played pool with the lads, smoking and flirting and laughing at the attention. We would walk back together, parting at the Post Office entrance; her face soft and her eyes alight. I had nothing left in common with her, nothing left to say, all the shared evenings, the Christmases and

summers become as nothing, esoteric little pictures as meaningless as the letters slipping through my hands.

She left for university when I started my final year. I didn't hear from her for three months, and she didn't come back at Christmas. Her mother came over to deliver me a Christmas card and, feeling sorry for her parents, I spent a joyless Christmas Day at their house, watching them go through the motions of a day they only celebrated anyway for the sake of their daughter.

At Easter I was surprised to see her back. She took me out to watch *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* at the Boleyn cinema near Upton Park. I remember watching the film, less than entranced, with Rani next to me seeming to stare straight through the pictures on the screen. I wondered why she had chosen this particular film, what I was meant to infer from it. In the story, a character played by Shah Rukh Khan discovers after the death of his wife that he loves an old friend who he had always taken for granted. Sitting through this, I felt within myself the long years of lost love, experiencing a numb horror seep through me, but also a secret hope. Maybe, divorced from her familiar surroundings, she'd had a revelation, uncovered a secret chamber within her heart. Extraordinary things happen, I thought to myself. *Kuch kuch hota hai*. If it wasn't so, we would all die of despair. After the film, we sat in a pub up the road and, in the only conversation outside class I had ever held in Hindi, she told me she was pregnant.

5.

“Oh yeah, we're trouble,” she repeated again.

“Well, any hint of that from her and I'm off. I just don't have it in me to be messing with these sort of things anymore.”

“What, even if it was from me?”

“You're different.” I gave her a fond look in the darkness. “I know you. Her...” I shrugged.

“Us single mothers. You've got to give us a little more leeway than most. We've all got our problems.”

“You mean you've all got your Alexes.”

“Maybe.” She laughed. “Probably. There's a reason why we're single and dreadful men are pretty high up the list.”

“Well.” I shivered. “Her husband died of a heart attack. So maybe she's just been, you know, mourning. At least, so I like to think.”

“You're up against a dead man? Shit, that's bad.”

“At least he won't come back.”

“It's worse; he never goes away. *Everything* is the dead man. At least, if she loved him.”

“Oh yeah, she loved him.”

“You think she'd choose you if she'd been married to a man like that? Someone that she loved? That she'll have this picture of? You'll never match up.”

“She didn't *choose* me. Nobody chose anybody. We're just friends, like I said.”

“Well just take it as a warning. People don't change. Not deep down where it matters.”

“Oh great, thanks. So you're saying I don't stand a chance unless I get her pregnant and head off into the sunset? And what's the point then?”

“Just don't say I didn't warn you.”

Mrs Lal came to the back door, patterns on her sari glittering in stolen light. She squinted out into the yard. “Are you still there?”

“Yes mum.”

“Is the floor swept?”

“Yes mum.”

“Well don't be long. Lena needs putting to bed and there are still a hundred tins of beans to be put in the storeroom.”

Rani rolled her eyes. “I told you,” she told me under her breath. “Okay, I'm coming. There'll still be food on the table,” she added, “if you'd rather the company of mum and dad over the dead singer. Personally, I'd find it close call.”

“It will have to be the dead singer,” I replied. “I've got stuff to do. Love to Lena and your parents.” I waved to her and climbed the fire escape back up to my room.

6.

Popstars. Old people. Men in suits. The grating prose of a newspaper. All shit. Sold us down the river, and for what?

He had listened to them talk, crouched just by the lip of the yard, hearing Kaye's name and compelled to stop, his blood burning. He had it eased into the shadow by the dustbins and the crates of rotten stuff, pale with rage as he heard them talk about her as if she was an animal, as if they could watch her and know what she was going to do. Fools and hypocrites, he thought at as he traced his tag on to the wall by the bin. One more thing to remember.

He hated them for thinking they knew how everything would turn out. Trying to trick him and everyone like him out of their hopes and dreams, negate his reality, suck the colour out of his future. They acted like they were clever, like they knew everything, but they were the ones who had fucked up the world, sold out and sold everyone else out with them, taken the money and run, leaving behind a clockwork world, no freedom, conform or die, put on the right clothes, talk in the right way and do the same as everyone else, an automaton going through the motions, dead inside. All the other options had been criminalized, or were open only to the rich or the insane. He wanted none of it. This old, petrified world.

He ghosted out before they had finished talking. There are two different moralities, he thought to himself. There's the one people talk about, and there's the one people do. All the talk was freedom, opportunity, society; and all the doing was crackdown, CCTV, the choking pressure to act just like everyone else. He twisted through the maze of narrow passageways, listening to the music spilling from open windows, the sounds of TV conversations, lives piled one on top of the other. Up by the side of the Post Office, transport depot bathed in dusty arclight, trucks rumbling in from

unknown destinations, the air full of shrill warnings as they reversed, air brakes released in staccato sighs. He turned right and followed the rear fence to Farringdon Road. The restaurant at the Holiday Inn was packed: sweating men in suits crouched over enormous meals, red-faced women talking urgently over a cluster of white wines. The occasional lost soul stared dreamily from the windows at the pallid glare of the Post Office, or the molten trails of light slithering down Farringdon Road.

He crossed into the elided Borough of Finsbury. Stucco smeared with dirt, paint peeling, yellowed net curtains and cheap cars, the odd light here and there glaring through threadbare curtains. Cathode ray colours infecting room after room. We're clones, he thought. Fed what they want us to want, on billboards, television, radio. Heroes put before us: footballers and freshly packaged popstars with no drugs, no controversy recording contracts, the fake rebellion of major clothing labels, the stitch-up of politics. More of the same, more control, safe jobs in the service sector with monitored toilet breaks and morale-boosting away-days. The world burned.

They actually think we believe their shit.

He climbed the hill towards its crest. At Lloyd Square he vaulted the railings and crossed the little private green, clambering easily up into the lower reaches of one of the trees. He sat with his back pushed against the bark, staring westwards across the undulations of the city, the last marks of rivers now gone, Finsbury and Bloomsbury dropping away, the maze of streets and squares glittering with streetlights, secret lives beneath the jumble of rooftops. The ground rose again, a slow swell of buildings towards Senate House and the alien green dome of the old British Library reading room, washing still further up to Centrepont, surprisingly naked against the sulphur glare of the night-time sky, a blade of light pushed up in a show of defiance.

Everything will change, he thought. Everything has to.

7.

I had used the past tense too many times when talking about my parents, and something must have connected in Yasirah's head. It was the first time we met, so I suppose it didn't matter; we were unlikely to ever see each other again. She asked me if anything had happened to them and so I told her.

Around us, snaking far to the front and far behind, was a river of banners, placards, socialist worker slogans of old bits of board, vast trade union flags I remembered from TV footage in the Eighties, people masked with nasty caricatures of Bush or Blair, black flag anarchists, the distant crackle of a loud hailer, drums. The children alongside us, shepherded by veiled, chattering women, kept chanting:

“George Bush, we know you
Your daddy was a killer too”

Endless leaflets for revolutionary causes and bickering socialist propaganda were trampled underfoot. A helicopter hovered overhead, leftist newspaper sellers mingled with the rows of police staring on, the tourists and shoppers behind pausing for a moment, blank-eyed and threatened, the occasional chap in tweeds and a bright scarf trying to take issue with some of the young Muslim men. The massy buildings of

Piccadilly squatted on their haunches and frowned at the shouting, the drums, the sloganeering, the scruffy unlikely alliance protesting about this peculiar return to imperialism.

“Do you still think about them much?”

“On and off. The worst thing is when I have dreams about them. Suddenly, all the things I can't control bubble to the surface. Otherwise, it's easy to just pretend it hasn't happened, it never happened, whatever.”

She nodded, looking away from me at the lines of police, the march stewards in their bright orange jackets. “My husband died,” she told me. “It's much the same. Sometimes you dream...”

We had met maybe two hours earlier, chatting idly as we waited for the march to begin. I had thought there was something funny about her eyes, and now I knew what. I recognised myself in them.

“Sometimes,” she said, “I feel that if at that moment I could open my eyes, it would bring him back and he would be there in the room, in front of me. If only it was a barrier we could cross in anything but sleep.”

I watched the bright, fragile world in front of us. In its unreal colours and strange sounds, the flickering advertisements at Piccadilly Circus, the eerie cosiness through which we marched, protesting about distant wars in cold deserts, the logic of dreams felt all too possible.

“I wish that I could,” she added, when I didn't reply.

“It's been a long time, in my case.” I said. “It's mostly okay.”

“I've got a son, and every day I see his father rising from out of his skin.” She pushed a strand of hair back from her face. “Sometimes I feel I'm used to it, and sometimes it just seems to take me by surprise.”

“I sometimes get that suddenly with objects or places.”

“Yes. When I'm making dinner sometimes, I don't know, strange little memories or a phrase he used to say. That's what catches me: the small things. Sometimes I just stand there and cry...”

“I still live near to where I was born, and sometimes little details, a patch of bricks, a bridge, certain sounds seem to make my parents form out of the air in front of my face, like ghosts.”

She smiled strangely. “Perhaps it's the suddenness of them being taken away. You have no time to prepare, or get used to it. You have to do everything from the future, looking back at your memories, the things you should have said, the actions you never made. My husband had a heart attack as he was running for the tube. It turned out that he had a heart condition for years. He hadn't told anybody. Not even me. And then suddenly...”

“It takes a while to accept it.”

“I wanted the world to stop and it didn't. I had all these stupid routines that I had to carry on with anyway. Making food, taking Tariq to school, going to work. That's what saved me, I think.”

“What about your family?”

“They've gone back to Pakistan. This place just got... too much. My husband's family never left. They want me to go over there with Tariq but...” She looked out at the looming buildings, five-star hotels, exclusive offices. “It's not something I know.”

It seemed an odd phrase. “So it has just been you?”

“Yes.” She shrugged. “Life goes on, after all. Even if I didn’t want it to.” She gave another smile. “That’s why I’m here, I suppose. It taught me the value of life in a way that I think nothing else ever could.”

“I know. And then to witness politicians dealing with it so casually.”

“All politicians.” She emphasised her words with a peculiar, angry chopping motion. “Sometimes I think that, more than anything, I’m marching for sanity. For our right to be respected, heard, taken seriously. For our dignity in the face of this – this *betrayal*. Because it’s a thing I would hate to happen to anybody else. Not if it doesn’t have to. Life seems to have become too cheap. And it’s not. It’s the most expensive thing.”

“But you’ve coped? At home, I mean, after your husband’s death?”

“After a fashion. Having someone else to look after helps. You have to pull yourself together for them. It wasn’t easy. You get used to having someone to share the load and then suddenly... But then, when you look at it in comparison to what is happening *there*,” gesturing to one of the placards, “or almost anywhere, it’s nothing. I still have a roof, and food, and a job. Nobody’s trying to bomb me just for being here. At least, they aren’t just yet. Maybe if our leaders get their way and they have their war...”

“Let’s just hope we can stop it. Not that anybody’s going to listen to us. At least not the people who matter.”

“Do they ever? Half the time I believe they have decided on a course of action anyway, and all this – this *diplomacy*,” she spat the word out, “is a farce, dressing it up for the common people and for the media stage, so it looked like they tried to be reasonable but the other side...”

“...were just fanatics.”

She nodded. “Don’t you think that’s how we’ll be portrayed? People trying to stop this have already been described as appeasers. We’re either that, leftwing loonies or Muslim fundamentalists.”

“As long as we don’t play into their hands. As long as we don’t burn flags, riot, all of that.”

“What, and keep this nice and safe? Nice and impotent? An inside column in *The Guardian*, not even mentioned at all elsewhere, the police halving the attendance figures.”

“And if we do riot, then what? They won’t let us march again, or maybe curtail our freedom protest even more, like with the May Day protests. Sometimes, I think you have to play by their rules...”

She laughed. “Oh, don’t worry, I’m not for rioting. Look at me!” Spreading her arms and mocking her diminutive frame. “Besides which, I’m a school teacher. There’s some things you just don’t do.”

“You’re right in one thing though, and that’s what can we effectively do? Nobody wants this war, nobody agrees with it, and yet it’s going to happen. I tried writing to my MP and guess what?”

“He supports it.”

“Worse, he’s a government whip. So, whatever the views of his constituents, a fair proportion of who are Muslims, he’ll toe the government line anyway. For his career, his job, whatever. And damn whatever we think.”

“That’s democracy.” I smiled at the passion I felt raging just under her skin. I tried to imagine her as a wife and mother, but couldn’t. “And what happens in return. However many poor Iraqis get to die as a sacrifice for his job. No wonder people don’t vote. I wouldn’t myself but...I like to think that one day I’ll get my kicks out of revenge.”

It was there, in the shadows of Piccadilly, following a long long line up towards Hyde Park, that I thought I had fallen in love with her.

8.

The dead singer was said to have rented the flat where I then lived, and according to the landlord, this was also where she died. She took a fistful of sleeping tablets and her liver failed. They didn't find her for a week, and when they did it was only because the neighbours had complained about the smell.

Such a quiet girl, they had said. We couldn't understand why she did it.

None of her stuff was in print. I had even gone into second hand shops, record fairs, the bargain bins in charity shops looking for these ghosts of her, but nothing. I trawled the net and found a few cybershrines, scant on details and with grainy photos, a bad pirate of her Top of the Pops performance. I had watched it, her body little more than a blur, the camera close-up revealing blank ovoids where her eyes should be, mouth hanging open like a rotten fruit. The music echoed out from murky depths, unrecognisable.

She had got to number one with her very first single. She had only been 16. God.

Where do you go from there? I try to imagine it, but can't. The sudden iconography, staring at her own face on television, on posters, hearing her own voice echoing out of doorways and car windows. These false reflections of herself, reducing her, making her themselves.

She disappeared, of course. Reinvented herself, her image, her music, her voice now under her own control, the record contract junked, the major label told where to get off. Her fame absconded, the money ran dry, but she had the success she wanted: she had regained control over herself.

It was at this point that she rented the room. She was 18, slightly naive, hard as iron. Knowing where she wished to go and what she wanted to do. I had only been living a few streets away at the time, and I remember the rottenness of the area: the abandoned warehouses and empty offices, boarded-up housing, disintegrating flats populated by prostitutes, dossers, junkies. Death spreading from the inside outwards, the corrupting touch of decay, a sense that there was no way back. The Specials' *Ghost Town* dogging my memories of this time, a sound track that seemed to hang over whole years of my life. I must have seen her; I would have been eight or nine at the time, and the idea haunts me, a buried image I feel I can almost remember. But it hadn't mattered then. Nothing had. “It’ll just be for a couple of months,” the landlord had reported her as saying, “until I find my feet.” She never did, at least, not the way he told it.

She could never remember not wanting to be a singer. All of her life, it seemed to her, had always been focused on this one thing. Her parents, assuming it was something she would grow out of, indulged her in the way most parents would, paid for her singing

lessons, watched and applauded the shows she put on over the holidays. She diligently studied and did well at school, but when the opportunity arose at the age of 16, having just finished her exams, they suddenly discovered the indomitable heart within their daughter. Despite their pleas, protests and threats, she abandoned her education for a dream they had always thought would die. It seemed that their hopes for her, all their efforts and desire and careful nurturing counted for nothing after all. She ate at their table but she was her own woman. Worse, despite their prophecies that it would come to nought, the band were an instant success. A bastardised, strange avatar of their daughter was *everywhere*, smiling an alien smile from posters on the street and from the television. She didn't know what she was doing, they argued, she was being manipulated, she was cheapening their culture. She didn't care: it was her life, her dream.

After a flurry of early albums she disappeared for years. The websites variously attributed this as “a sabbatical” or her “finding herself.” I’m not sure what to imagine: I have never done such a thing, never been solely at leisure, facing myself. I’m afraid, possibly of bogus answers, of false revelations. She, it seems, had no such doubts. She returned after half a decade, with a set of works that were more complex, her voice more rich, traditional song structure giving way to a sense of cultural inheritance, the ancient power of drones. She received much critical acclaim, and fewer sales, but she was happy.

She decided to tour. A new experience for her, tasting the thrill of expectation, the dizzy triumph of the dissimilarity between one night at the next, the music and the relationship of her voice to it shifting constantly. She was addicted, pushing herself further and further. She didn't realise that she was beginning to unravel.

I have no idea how it started. Perhaps the nervousness of singing live before expectant audiences, or the relentless dates night after night, driving herself to the point of exhaustion. Maybe the alien environment, hotels, different towns and different food, long road journeys up and down the spine of the country, dates in Europe, America. She started to find her vocal range diminishing, notes at either end of the spectrum escaping her, her voice cracking. Finding it impossible to let people down - not just the audiences, but the musicians and the road crew and everybody else who relied upon her - she had struggled on anyway, completing the tour and then returning to the studio to record her new album. Her voice grew so painful that she could only sing for one hour a day, and then she would hurry back to bed, forcing what recovery she could before the next day. Finally admitting that she was not going to recover, she visited a succession of medical specialists, all of whom found nothing wrong. Eventually, by dint of persistence, she was diagnosed with rhinitis, a hard wad of skin having formed at the back of her throat. Faced with the utter ruin of everything she had worked for, the terror of losing herself, she took her chances with an operation to try to remove it, and for the next few months she crawled her painful way to recovery.

It had not worked. If anything, her voice was worse, shattering into a painful husk after only minutes singing. She felt herself unravelling, losing herself as she lost her voice, all the long years of discipline peeling away, no point to it anymore, no future. She turned to alcohol as a means of blotting out the constant agony, the shame of words scraping out of her ruined throat, the constant reminders of songs on the radio, tunes and harmonies that would form themselves in her head, waiting for her to shape them into sound. Haunted, plagued by insomnia through the long still hours of the night, she began to take sleeping tablets, closing down at even the smallest of thoughts. She pinned her

hopes on a second operation, pulling herself together enough to cautiously dream about a new album, a cathartic experience, rising like a phoenix from her own shattered self. But again, the operation was not a success, reducing her voice beyond the point where she could sing at all.

The end of all these years. She felt like she had barely begun, had barely expressed anything. And now it was over, the gift rescinded. She was 35, the whole meat of her body focused about a kernel that was no longer there. She could not forget. Walking, talking, the commerce of everyday things, the bricks and mortar and streets and smells that reminded her of what she had been, they all seemed to contain an unbearable sheen of memories, mocking her with the impossibility of a return to how things had been. She sunk back into the numbing arms of drink and pills. Days blurred together, painful stretches of time that she tried to obliterate.

It had to end. A single moment of clarity, waking in a pool of her own vomit, her hair hanging like a shroud over her face, awful light leaking through the holes in the curtains, smell like a bad colour rising against the cheap wallpaper, the pictures on the walls leering down, music echoing in from one of the other flats, the lilt of reggae over snarled traffic, aeroplanes overhead like the roaring gods of Valhalla splitting the sky. She remembered walking into a recording studio for the first time, 16 years old, a world of infinite promise stretching out before her. This fragile clay thing. She stared at her hand, the impossible city of her life carved indelibly upon it.

Calmly, deliberately, she took all of the pills, one by one.

9.

Sunday evening, the light yellowish, colours faded with dust and heat radiating up from the asphalt. I watched with pleasure at the streams of people heading down from the station, many carrying bags of food, rugs to sit on, drinks. Yasirah's local council were holding a Proms party in one of the local parks, promising live music and fireworks. I was glad to see so many people turning up, justifying the council's optimism. I ambled down from the train station with the rest of them, enjoying the dusty sunlight and the sense of anticipation.

In a move I hoped was significant, Yasirah had invited me along to witness it with her and her son. It was the first time she had done such a thing, and it perhaps displayed an increased confidence in me. I wasn't sure. It probably won't amount to anything anyway, I remember telling myself.

Yasirah was early. She was a pathologically early person. She sat on an elegantly patterned rug, a little hamper next to her and Tariq sat on the other side, trying to pretend that he wasn't there at all. As ever, when she felt no one was watching her, the set of her face was dull, sulky, lower lip pushed forward and no life to her eyes.

“Adaab.”

She looked up and broke into a smile, a shock like summer lightning transforming her. “Adaab. What's that you've brought?”

“Nothing much. Crisps. Dips. Fruit juice.”

“Well, Tariq will like the unhealthy bits, at least. Won't you?”

Tariq nodded, shooting me a look that was half miserable and half conspiratorial. He took the magic masala crisps that were offered him. "Dreamt up in Leicester, made in India and then transported back halfway around the world for me to buy my local shop. It seems mad," I told him. Tariq just ignored this salvo, glaring out over the park.

"It's not that he hates you," Yasirah had recently said to me, "it's just that he doesn't know where to place you."

"I don't know where to place myself," I remember replying.

She hadn't answered.

Yasirah gestured for me to sit down next to her and I complied gingerly, aware of Tariq's eyes on me.

"It's good to see it so full," she said to me. "And more people keep on coming in."

"It's a good idea. It's got something for everybody. And let's face it, we all like a good evening out. Just look at them all."

Everyone from the surrounding area seemed to be present, from the Punjabi grandmothers to white kids in their obligatory sportswear.

"All to listen to some dead Western music. Funny that."

"Funny," I agreed.

Tariq wanted some more food. Yasirah gave him another packet of crisps and he seemed happy enough.

"I sometimes wonder," Yasirah said, "whether there is anything left of Western culture that isn't either dead or so mercilessly flogged that it has lost all identity, like rock music has. What have you got? Nice safe youth rebellion on one hand that's just a sucker for capitalism, a way of selling dolls or clothes or whatever, and on the other a veneration for dead things: dead music, dead philosophers, dead heroes and politicians..."

"Oh, right, I'm picking up this *you* thing here. That always says to me that you're going to talk about religion."

She laughed. "At least in Islam we have something of the original still about us. You know, that fire and morality. We still haven't completely forgotten it, and in ways we still try to live by it. It's still in the culture. Sometimes I feel, when I'm walking around London, that the spirit has been drained from the place. It's all money, gun violence, graveyards, museums, nothing else. Nobody actually *lives*."

I looked at her, amused. "I'd be inclined to agree, apart from the heroic *we* that you use cuts me off. Because I know that your *we* comes together with a *you* that you lump everyone else together under, and that I don't much like the sound of."

"And you think that I would put you in this latter group?"

"Yes. Despite whatever principles you know I have, and the things that I believe in and that I think are worth defending. Half the time, because I lack your rigid moral code, because I don't have the Word, I suspect you think I'm really one of *them*."

"Well, the moral code is important. As St Augustine said, even though the elect are the elect and can do no wrong, and the reprobate will always be the reprobate, it is still important that the form of a good, moral society be followed. We must seek the best life on earth for the best number of people, everyone must be given an equal chance of finding heaven. The only way we can possibly do this is to follow the laws of God."

"So when did you become a Catholic?"

She laughed. "As if. But he's right, though. The form is as important as the meaning. Because we don't know the reprobate from the elect, we have to treat all people equally, and the only guide on which we can hope to form a judgment is the laws of God. It's the only way we can measure justice."

"The laws of God? *Which* laws of God?"

"You know very well."

"And damned be anyone who makes an equal claim."

She shrugged. "I'm of the opinion that it doesn't matter, as long as you believe truly and faithfully. It's the atheists, and the polytheists, who I have difficulty with." She grinned, possibly only half joking. "Idol worshippers and relativists, the lot of you."

"Thanks."

Her smile was rather fond. "You know I'm right - Tariq, oh no..."

Tariq, thoughtfully staring after some girl or other, had managed to upset the orange juice, which pooled about his trousers and rapidly sank in. Yasirah dabbed at it ineffectually while he grew angry and started to shout at her, finally storming off to hide somewhere in the lengthening shadows. Yasirah bit her lip and looked to be on the verge of crying. "Maybe we weren't paying him enough attention," she said.

10.

Tariq went to sulk in the dance tent. Yasirah stared fretfully in its direction.

"I don't like him being in there."

The dance tent had been set up for the specific amusement of the local youth. Various local crews took their turns at the mic, all muscular attitude, lyrics spat out at astonishing speed over hyperactive bass-heavy beats. A gang of kids crowded the stage, trying their best to reflect the attitude of the crews in front of them.

"Do you want me to fetch him?"

She shook her head. "I don't think it would help matters."

"Okay then. Shall we try to enjoy the music instead?"

"I'm sorry." She gave me a wan smile. "He'll come back soon, anyway. He'll get thirsty or he'll want some food... He's not very good at playing the rebel."

"Thank your lucky stars for that."

"I know. I'm always terrified that he'll develop an attitude like-" she nodded her head towards the tent.

"Some kids are just not that way inclined."

"But even so, this area has a bit of a reputation. And he doesn't have a father. I get worried that he'll choose some older kid as a role model. There's only so much I can do."

"You do fine, really."

"It shouldn't have been this way." She turned her face to the sky, staring at unknown shapes. I thought she was going to cry, but she just sighed and then looked at me with a strange smile. "His father was a good man. I hope that some of that stuff, I hope it's like a thing that's born in people, inherited perhaps, like a core that maybe won't be touched by everything that builds up around it. You know, you see a young child grow

and it just seems completely incapable of evil. But this stuff seeps in anyway. What can you do?"

I laughed. "Your best, I suppose. And hope that's better than the bad stuff."

11.

Tariq returned, still aggressive with shame but at least compliant. He sat on one corner of the rug while everyone else, mostly over 30 or under 10, got on with enjoying the music. Yasirah, visibly relieved, relaxed into the swing of things, cheering and waving and clapping her hands to the music. She joined a long line of people all heroically kicking to the can can, and even Tariq laughed as this outlandish chorus line puffed and staggered its way to the finale. Cheers roared out at the end and, barely giving the crowd time to breathe, the orchestra launched full gallop into the Charge of the Light Brigade. A sort of loose conga formed and snaked madly across the grass, people giggling and laughing to the music. "It's the 1812 Overture next," I overheard Yasirah telling Tariq. "That's the one with all the fireworks."

It didn't happen. As the Charge of the Light Brigade came to a halt, the compere climbed back on to the stage. He wore a big false smile. He coughed uneasily, tapped the mic and then spoke. "Sorry ladies and gentlemen, but due to unforeseen events we're going to have to cut short this year's celebration. We are terribly sorry about this, but due to an incident, we have been advised by the police not to continue."

The crowd groaned, and initially nobody moved, clinging to the belief that somehow this hadn't happened. The orchestra reflected the crowd's bemusement, picking at bows and music stands, not ready to leave.

Tariq looked disappointed. "But I like fireworks. 'Due to an incident'. What does that mean?"

"It means someone's been up to no good," Yasirah said. She began to pack up their stuff, her mouth set in a hard little line.

It didn't take long to find out what had happened. At the edge of the park, where the dance tent was, we could see police tape wound round both entrances, and several officers within, bending over a patch of ground. Tariq stared, goggle-eyed, at the place he had so recently been. It was like something from TV had burst through the familiarity of these surroundings. The big outside, the deaths and drug dealers, Hollywood films and ITV dramas, hip hop soundtracks, the sheen of seductive menace, of the extraordinary, suddenly pitched into his little world. The streets of terraced houses, the tree-lined avenues and indulgent shopkeepers behind the counters of their friendly stores, all this was the same but suddenly searingly banal, different.

Word got around, jumping from group to group like the spreading of fire. There had been a stabbing, some kid seriously wounded and now in Newham General, the perpetrators fled.

We headed tiredly back towards Yasirah's house. False stars winked overhead. Cars occasionally raced past, music booming out. We could see into front rooms, TVs casting lurid colours across net curtains.

“There's always one,” Yasirah said, half to me and half to Tariq. “Whatever it is, there will always be someone wanting to ruin it.”

“Why?” Tariq wanted to know.

Yasirah looked to the sky and laughed. “How to be honest?” she said in Urdu. Then in English: “some people don't think about the other people around them. They don't care if what they do spoils everyone else's fun. They're selfish. Self-centred.”

“Then why do these people get let in? Surely you can stop it.”

Yasirah uttered a low laugh. “It's hard sometimes to know who is and who isn't. Sometimes you only find out when the party's ruined.”

“That's not fair.”

“No.”

We reached Yasirah's house, a neat little redbrick terrace with a garden going wild at the edges. I hung back, watching Yasirah and Tariq advance. She looked round at me. “Why don't you come in for a coffee or something? I would welcome the company. It's been... rather anti-climactic.”

I nodded soberly, not showing the delight that burnt at my chest like coal. “Okay. If you don't mind.”

“My pleasure.” She held the door open for me.

Inside, her house was much like I had expected: very restrained, very tasteful, bare floorboards and subtle colours, a minimum of mess and clutter. Only in the kitchen was it different, with the unwashed plates from several meals, mugs containing half drunk coffee, various glasses of squash or water. I made the coffee while she busied herself finding fresh bedclothes for Tariq.

Finally she came back through, looking to my eyes oddly pale and haggard as she appeared in the doorway, running a hand through her hair. She stopped and grinned, instantly appearing more familiar. “At the best of times, he's never easy to get to bed. Throw in a stabbing...”

“He won't be the only one.”

She sat down opposite, gratefully accepting the mug of coffee. “Those little shits. I could strangle them.”

“Not so little shits, most of them. Did you see in there?”

She nodded. “Doesn't it make you feel old? Disapproving of the music your children listen to, thinking how it will corrupt them. When I was Tariq's age I was busy buying any record with sex in the title, mostly just to annoy my mother. I thought I was invulnerable to it but now I don't know. I remember the BBC banning *I Want Your Sex* because of the title. Now that just sounds tame.” She took a sip of coffee. “That bloody dance tent.”

“It is pretty aggressive music. Peace and love it ain't.”

“Aggressive? Did you see the way the kids in there were behaving? Supermacho, strutting up and down, overloaded on testosterone. Maybe that's just boys, but as I see it, walking round like you expect trouble usually invites it, and they seemed more than keen to have it along. To think that's how they feel they have to behave...”

“Well what alternatives are there? Boys are constantly told that they're stupid, that they can't do anything right, and whatever they might feel is somehow wrong. The only thing left to them that they're actually good at is being bad. And who wants a future stuck in an office job? At least their heroes seem to offer a way out, a way to step outside the

white middle-class culture that just seems to exist to keep them down. I mean, there's no class liquidity, where you're born is where you stay, we all know that, even if it isn't said, so the only way out is to make it as a DJ or a footballer. That's hardly enough to give anyone much respect for the society they live in."

"The devil has the best tunes, as always. What they need is a good role model, even a macho one maybe, like Mohammed Ali. But there isn't one. Everyone good is also so bland... But certainly something has to give them hope. Something has to stop them being the centre of their own worlds."

"You would, I suppose, suggest religion?"

"To a certain extent, any religion. Anything to provide a framework of morals."

"And never mind the excuses it gives for bigotry and racism. You know, like the Crusades, whatever. All this crazy absolutist shit of somehow having an answer that the other lot don't."

"It's a danger you have to watch, yes. But what's the alternative? Drifting in this non-Copernican haze, the self at the centre of the universe? It can't go on. We seem to be imploding under this relativism."

"But that's all there is. That, or absolutism."

"Well, neither are good enough."

"That, at least, I agree with." I grinned.

She smiled back. "Thanks for coming along today. It takes the pressure off me a bit, with Tariq always there. I can't be everything for him, all of the time."

"You shouldn't have to be," I told her gently.

"Well thanks for coming anyway. Pity about the fireworks but..." She looked at me long, and seriously. "Maybe next year."

"Maybe."

12.

It got late. We sat huddled over the kitchen table talking politics, which to my relief proved far less fractious than religion. Every so often, coming to a logical stop in the conversation, we would lapse into long silences, charged with the clicks from the boiler, white-static road noise, distant sirens, the colossal groan of passing aeroplanes. Drunk with warm night air, I watched her fingers curl around her coffee mug, intense desire crushing me.

"You'll miss the last train," she said gently.

"That's true; I should go."

"And I've got an early start tomorrow. Tariq's on a school trip. Colchester. They're doing the Romans."

"Surely London Wall would have done? Hauling a whole class out to Colchester seems to be a little excessive."

"They're doing a recreation. I don't think that would go down too well with all the suits in the City, screaming kids everywhere trying to bludgeon each other with papier-mâché weapons. It's a day out, as well. Coaches and all of that. It just makes it that little bit more special."

“True. I guess I was just thinking more from your perspective.”

She smiled, a private little twist of her lips. “My perspective? That's not something that gets aired too much. What's good for Tariq...”

“At least you actually care.”

“True enough.” There was a hint of mockery about her voice. She looked up at me, shrugging off whatever mood threatened to steal over her.

I could smell sweet, coffee-scented waves of her breath. Her voice was cracked and soft from too much talking, too late. Strange details held me; strands of her hair, the spots on her left cheek, the creases in her lips.

“Well,” she said, “thanks for coming. I'm glad you stayed. We may not have mended the world, but...”

“It was a damn fine attempt, at any rate.”

That smile again. I got up.

“I'll see you to the door.”

We whispered farewells in the hall, fearful of waking Tariq. As I took hold of the door, she reached up and kissed my cheek. It was an action swift with sudden resolution. I just stood, unsure what to do, before letting out a smile from where it was hidden, eyes catching hers.

She stood in the gloom, watching, having stepped back slightly. Her eyes glimmered.

“I'll see you soon,” she said.

13.

It was one of those moments. He was sauntering absently along the corridor on the way to his next lesson, staring about him abstractedly. He noted the girl coming down the stairs without really watching her, the body, the shift of the hips, the fall of the hair. It was only when she reached him at the bottom that he looked. It was Kaye. He felt his heart clutch and his blood freeze, like the shock of seeing her for the first time.

Really seeing her, not like when somebody is just an object, filling up space. That sudden moment when everything changes, when a form takes on meaning, when the heart sings just to watch.

He hoped it didn't show.

“Kaye. Hey.”

She gave him a reserved smile that she saved for people she didn't quite trust. It drove him mad. Why can't you see? he thought. What is it you don't understand, don't like?

It wouldn't last. When she understood him.

“Hey.”

“How's things?”

“Oh, yeah, you know. You?”

“Same.”

They walked on, him slowing to her pace. He tried not to stare, guessing it would look kind of weird. Act uninterested. He'd picked that up somewhere. "What you got next?"

"French."

"Oh. That. Voulez vous couche avec moi. All that."

She pulled a face. "Everyone says that one."

"Okay. Ou est le gare?"

"That's a better question, at least."

"Where you headed?"

"D block."

"Right. Me too. Here..." He held open the door for her and she nodded amusedly. They walked out into the playground, busy chatter from hundreds of tongues rising into the bright bell of the sky. Kids crossed in long untidy trails from building to building. He blinked. "Bright."

"Very."

"Can't you wait to give this up?"

"What?"

"School."

She looked at him. "There's years and years yet. At least if you want to get anywhere."

"Anywhere like where?"

"Anywhere that makes a difference. Don't tell me you don't want that?"

"By the time you're done learning, you don't want to make a difference anymore. You want to keep it the way it got you there. It's like governments. They're all noise in opposition, but then..."

"So what will you do?"

"I don't know."

She laughed. "That's not a very good start." She held the door of block D open for him. He walked in, bemused. "What lesson have you got?" She asked him.

"Maths."

"You enjoy it?"

"No."

"You'll pass?"

"Yeah."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't give it up. Sometimes, you know, it's the best thing some people have to trade on." She pushed through the fire door and headed up, a weary sort of trudge he had seen most girls do. He always found it slightly sluttish.

He allowed himself the luxury of watching. What did she mean? he wondered. Crushingly disappointed that she seemed to have dismissed him. Heart of stone, a dismal, impotent rage sweeping over him. He shrugged his shoulders, trying to convince himself, that it didn't matter, but knowing he would revisit her words endlessly for the next lesson at least. Trying to work out anything, everything he could have done better. Playing imaginary conversations in his head. Girls. He headed on to maths.

14.

After school they hung about close to the viaduct. Traffic hurried overhead, while below the road echoed in dismal emptiness, smeared with sodden cardboard boxes and dirty plastic packaging. Further down, metal rattled as the shutters came down on the car yard for the night. Students from the media college waltzed past, enclosed in their own little bubbles of cool.

He was still pondering the question Kaye had put to him: “so what will you do?” He still had no answer.

Len laughed. “What the fuck? How should I know? It all looks like a sack of shit to me.”

Anton agreed. “You jump through all these hoops. Then what? They get you jumping through more hoops. All for what?”

“All for what, man? Pussy. What else?” Len came back with. “If you've got no car, no pad, who's gonna want you?”

“Would you change it?”

“What?”

“This. You know. That we can't do anything unless we're lawyers or something? Don't you think it's wrong? Don't you think we should have an equal say?”

Len: “about what?”

Anton: “shit man, that's heavy. Leave that stuff to the lawyers.”

Len: “what, man? What?”

He stretched back, watching the sky. “You wanna work?” He said to Len.

“Shit no.”

“Then what?”

“Whatever comes, I guess.”

“Shit.” He spat it out, a harsh sound. He swung himself back upright, staring at the clutter of graffiti, the accreted junk from the print shop. The plastic wrapping stirred in the breeze, reaching out translucent tentacles towards him. “It's not right. Unless you're a high-powered somebody you're not anybody at all. Something's got to change this. It's just not right.” It sounded pathetic in his own ears.

15.

I didn't see Rani for over a week. Finally, I went into the shop on the pretext of buying some toilet roll. I waved at Mrs Lal who was gossiping regally on the phone, and she pointed me to the back of the store. Rani was restocking one of the freezers.

“Oh. Hi.” Her smile was abstracted. “I've been meaning to call. Sorry.”

“That's okay. How's tricks?”

“Well...” She looked back along the aisle towards the figure of her mother. “Look, can we talk later? Maybe go for a drink? Mum will let me off at eight.”

“Eight? Okay, see you then.”

I spent a disturbed few hours sitting with the ghost of the dead singer. I put on some music to appease her, cleaned the flat, ate a sparse meal.

I had supposed Rani's life to be tranquil now. The split with Alex had wounded her so deeply that I could not imagine her falling in love again. There was some image that I had in my head, the friendship I had with her sailing easily on, undisturbed, towards a hazy horizon.

But people are never quite as you think of them. And just because a woman has kids doesn't stop her from having the same urges as the rest of us. It was difficult to comprehend, this alien life that was in so many ways just the same as my own.

The dead singer listened with interest. She had never explored this part of life and she was keenly aware of its absence. I felt her presence pervading the flat, a cloying despair as I turned up the music and scrubbed hard at the work surfaces, trying to empty my mind.

I met Rani at eight and together we walked down to the Apple Tree - an old haunt - talking about nothing in particular, the way people do who are holding something in reserve. Thursday nights in the Apple Tree were always noisy, boozy affairs, a mixture of lawyers, new media survivors and post office staff, everyone hitting the bottle as if tomorrow would never come. Rani found us a quietish corner while I got in the drinks.

"Isn't that Kaye?" I asked her, nodding towards the front of the pub. I set the drinks down and sat opposite Rani.

She squinted. "Yeah."

Tiny skirt and long boots, make-up trowelled on. She was smoking, several empty bottles in front of her, talking with exaggerated coquetry to a group of lads at least 10 years her senior.

"Bad crowd by the looks."

"Not the best."

"What's she doing? What are they doing with her? She's 15, for chrissakes."

"That's old enough," Rani told me darkly. "Don't you remember how it felt?"

"The feelings, yes. The actual details have faded. But it's still pretty shocking to see. It makes me think that maybe one of my Muslim friends is right. Maybe we need a more stern moral code."

"People have a right to try things out for themselves. How else can you say what's right and wrong? We should trust people more, not less. If we don't, what impetus have people got to prove themselves? Nothing will ever change. The only way people will be able to escape from being turned into brainless drones, just accepting whatever authority, would be by rebelling. And all that would lead to would be the development of every generation arrested in adolescence."

"Well," I told her with a grin, "I still don't like them, whatever you say."

Rani shrugged, looking awkward. "Who's this Muslim friend?"

"Just a friend."

"How's that going?"

I leaned back and gave a smile, bewildered. "I don't understand anything. Maybe it's all perfectly clear to her. I don't know."

"Maybe you should take the initiative?"

"God, Rani, no. I couldn't. It would be a disaster."

"Why?"

"She isn't the sort."

"Then she probably isn't the sort for anything."

“Thanks.”

“Well, really, as a friend...”

“How come you're asking me? What is it with you? You drag me out to tell me something and then start by giving me the third degree.”

“It's only polite.”

“Smacks of altruism. Which is you all over, giving when you should be taking.”

“Says you, wasting all this time over a woman that won't have you.”

“You don't know that.”

“It's written all over you. If you don't dare even try, you're picking up on something pretty damn negative.”

I waved my hand. “Well enough of me. I'm boring even to myself. What about you? What's enough to get us in a pub together for the first time in, well, God knows.”

She stared at me, suddenly inscrutable. “Alex has been in touch.”

“Alex?” I frowned. “Shit. What does he want?”

“To see Lena. Or so he says.”

“You don't have to let him.”

“He is her father.”

“Maybe he should have thought of that before he did what he did.”

“But. Well, you know, maybe it wouldn't be fair on Lena not to say yes. I mean, he is her father. Imagine if it was you.”

“What? Father or child?”

“Either. Both.” She looked at me urgently. “I don't know what they think.”

“Have you talked to Lena about it?”

“No. I've wanted to, but I don't know what it will do to her. She's so young...”

“Does she ever talk about him?”

“No. But then, she's probably realised that I don't.”

“Yeah.”

We lapsed into silence. I watched her face, so familiar across all these years, a soft black light in her eyes.

“Would it be a bad thing if he just came, disrupted everything and then disappeared again? I mean, how would that make Lena feel?”

“He says he wants to be a good father. He wants to try.” She raised her hands. “If he did, it might be good for Lena. You know, she's not dumb, she must be aware that there's just this hole where there should be a father.”

“It might be good for her? Learning from a waster, a scrounger, a philanderer, all the things he was ever good at?”

“You're talking about the man I once loved,” Rani said softly as from elsewhere laughter rattled over the pub.

Kaye and her friends were getting loud. Too much alcohol, and the conviction that they were better than anybody outside it all, immortal. I watched that look in them, the disdain held by those with everything to waste for those who had wasted it. Always certain that the future offered them more.

“Yeah, well, and don't forget that he left you, Rani. He left *you*. Don't you remember all those nights afterwards?”

Putting Lena to bed and then just crying hysterically. I would sit, patience worn thin, not able to say anything. But remaining there, nevertheless.

“I haven't forgotten.” She looked at me in a way that said many things. “But that was never all of it either.”

“No,” I agreed, but reluctantly. “It wasn't.”

16.

There are some things so terrible that you can't put them into words. When my parents died, I didn't tell anyone. The process of putting it into words seemed too painful, too reductive, and I dreaded the clumsy sympathy it would bring from other people. When the way I had behaved was finally uncovered, I was sent for psychiatric assessment. I've never changed my view: there are simply some things that you never say.

It had taken Rani a long time to tell me that Alex was sleeping with other women. Men know other men in some ways that women never will. It's in the clothes, the haircut, the way of walking, just little details that establish themselves long before he opens his mouth. Men know those men who cannot be redeemed, not ever, and I knew that of Alex within a second of seeing him. So when Rani told me, I was not surprised, but that's one of the things you don't say either.

I don't know what it is about men. Or rather, I do, every man does, every man has that little bit of darkness within him, but it's impossible to explain, impossible to put into any words that won't belittle it, that won't make it seem merely seedy and pathetic and desperate. To even try, to even hint at it is to demean it. But we all have it and it moves us to action in a way that nothing else ever will. I shouldn't be so hard on Alex; when I started courting Yasirah I was still half in love with Rani. I'm still half in love with Rani now, such is the slippery, treacherous nature of my heart. I don't think it will ever change.

But Alex nearly destroyed Rani. She loved him, and she loved him in every tiny detail of everything that she did. She cooked for him, she cleaned up his mess, she gave him money when he wouldn't find any proper work but tried to form a band, be a writer, an artist, any childhood dream to keep the adult world at bay. He would casually drop remarks about not liking this or loving that and Rani would remember them all, commit them to heart and act upon them. This is not to say that they didn't have fights, that Rani didn't come round to see me swearing that she hated him, but she dreamed dreams about him, she had somehow crystallised and his was the image trapped within her forever.

I don't think Alex ever thought about what he was doing. If he did, he'd probably view Rani's actions as a method to blackmail him into never straying. But Alex always just took what he wanted; he was like a child; that was part of his charm. He was not going to turn down an offer from a pretty girl just because of Rani. He had never asked her to be like that, after all. So he did what he did and Rani, quick-witted and observant, must soon have discovered.

I don't know how long Rani knew before she told me, but it was long enough for her world to have disintegrated into utter despair. She threw herself into winning him back, using everything he had ever loved, but he still came back with different scents upon his skin, too-bright eyes, the casual generosity of the traitor. Preparing her face for the world every morning, playing out a charade in front of Lena, her parents, me, desperate with the agony of losing the one thing she had set her heart upon keeping. Every action became imbued with the impossible tragedy of loss, reminding her

constantly of better times, of hope, of what it felt like to be loved and to return that love. She would find herself crying hysterically over the washing, over rows of tinned food in the store like potted memories, something physical she could claw back from this nightmare world. Her head would echo with phrases from earlier days, simple little catchy things Alex would say. She knew the crushing pain of realising that whatever she said, whatever she did, whoever she became it would not be enough to win him back. But still she tried, perhaps fooling herself that if she kept him physically, his spirit would eventually return. Eventually, of course, having taken everything she gave him, he left.

When someone leaves you like that, they leave you with nothing. You have ruined yourself in trying to keep them, in trying to be what you cannot, in the perpetual rejection of everything that you are. You are suddenly confronted with an unimaginable void, not wanting anything but what you cannot have and with no idea of how to move on. This happened to me once, and I resolved that it never would again, but with that resolution you die a little, you will always hold a little of yourself in reserve, hidden away where it will never be found. Rani, in the long dark hours after Lena had fallen asleep and her parents gone to bed, would creep up the fire escape and enter my room by the window. She would cry; hours and hours of crying, shattered and defeated, and I would comfort her, dreading another day ahead without any sleep, thinking of the dumb, senseless ferocity of this pain. My love for her, her love for Alex, the dead singer's soaring voice: stripped and removed of meaning, just actions, senseless squiggles against infinite night.

Maybe it's just this room, I remember thinking one night as I held her and listened to her cry. That she should suffer like this was unbearable to me, as was the idea that it was Alex who had caused this. Maybe outside, I had thought to myself, maybe somewhere else, it will make sense, have a meaning, a reason. Maybe this room with its tragedies, the ghost of the dead singer and the spectre of my parents, is the only thing that makes it feel so meaningless.

Maybe I really believed that then. If I did, I was wrong.

17.

He saw her first kiss. She didn't know that, but he saw it.

He had been sitting with Len and Anton under the bridge. They had made a fire from some old boxes and some foul shit they had found outside the reprographics shop, they didn't know what but it burnt well and sent up thick, choking smoke. They had watched it the way one always watches fire; reverentially, with a tinge of awe. It was everything they were not.

Len had been moaning about going to the pub. "We look old enough. We'd get in."

"Fucking pubs. Waste of fucking time."

"What've you got against them?"

He spat into the flames. "What do you do? Learn how to piss your life away."

"It's a laugh, isn't it?"

“A laugh?” He looked at Len, disgusted. “Aren’t there enough arseholes already reeling around town? You see what they do, what they say? Nothing good in it.”

“Jesus. Fucking lighten up.”

“Go on. Go on then, if you're so interested. I don't see me stopping you.”

Len made no move. They all three watched the flames licking at the corners of the box like something wanting to get out.

There was the scraping of heels some way down the road. He turned. A woman, coltish, with a taller man. She led him round the corner from the pub, away from the splash of radiance cast by the streetlight, and in the gloom he watched her half-topple back against the wall, pulling the man forward by the shirt. They kissed, a fierce sort of hating in the way their jaws moved, arms closed about each other.

He put up his hand to stop Anton from whistling. One look, just one look and they sat stock still, skin plastic in the firelight. They watched the man and the woman, the intent passions, motionless bodies rippling with lust. The man's hands moved to cover the girl's breasts, mouth reaching down to her neck, and she laughed abruptly and pushed him away. They talked then, in voices too low to hear, before she gave him a more formal kiss, lingering just slightly over his lips, and then they walked back onto the road, hand in hand.

He returned his gaze to the fire, watching the forms within it like it was a television set. “That cunt.”

“Who? That was Kaye, wasn't it? The slapper.”

“I didn't mean her. I meant the bloke. Hands all over her like that. Some fucking romance, eh? Grabbing her tits down here, with all the boxes and what not. And us to watch. It's not the right way to treat a girl.” He glared at the fire. “It's just not right.”

“Who is he?”

“Dunno.”

“Not from school?”

“Not from the look of him.” He fed the flames some polystyrene, watching it catch and flare. “But I tell you what. He's got to be from round here.”

18.

Yasirah wanted to do more exercise. “I'm putting on weight,” she told me over the phone, “like the fat old widows you see in films.” She liked the idea of running, “put some iron in my soul, see?” but thought she was too soft on herself. Would I be interested in accompanying her?

“I can leave Tariq with a friend until we get back. If we go after work. I'll cook you dinner afterwards, as a sort of bribe.”

“Where did you have in mind?”

“Memorial Gardens in West Ham. Where the football team used to play, you must know it. It's on the way home for me, and I'm sure you wouldn't find it too difficult to get there. Then afterwards home to mine for dinner.”

“What will Tariq think about all this?”

“He’ll get used to it. Deal?”

“Deal.”

So I found myself at Memorial Gardens, having come out on the District Line, and Yasirah up from work on the Jubilee. A few kids were playing football, others roved with some golf clubs and ball, commuters plodded their weary way home. I felt like a fool, kitted out in an old Can t-shirt and some threadbare tracksuit bottoms. Yasirah stood resplendent in brand new gear, surveying the park and smiling broadly. “How many laps, do you reckon?”

“It’s large, and this is our first time. One.”

“Two.”

“One and-a-half.”

“Deal.”

She set off, way too fast, ponytail bobbing back at me. I creaked into action several paces later, admiring the fluidity with which she ran.

Something to chase.

We didn’t talk much. Yasirah tried but ran out of breath. I found it sort of peaceful, listening to our footfalls and the sound of breathing, rush-hour trains rattling past, the hoot of the express as it thundered through the station. Crows sat in the middle of the playing field pecking at the grass, magpies chattered, Canary Wharf winked as it loomed over the horizon; a science-fiction backdrop, a bad drawing over the untidy low rise squalor of Canning Town.

I overtook Yasirah by the graveyard wall near the end of the first lap, and then watched her bounding like a kid off to one side, trying to get the better of me, never giving up. We sprinted the last straight and ended dead level at the gate, laughing and gulping for air.

“I don’t know whether that was fast or not,” Yasirah said as we headed back to the station. “We should take Tariq with us. A sort of yardstick.”

“I’m not sure I could take the humiliation. It’s enough of a shock discovering how much of me there is to drag around.”

“You? Look at you!”

“I dunno. I guess I still feel that I should be able to bound about without any sort of effort. Without having to think about it. I don’t think I’ve ever got used to my body ageing, being less resilient than it was when I was 16.”

“Well it wasn’t *bad*,” she prodded me.

“Yeah. Okay.”

We got the tube back to East Ham. Watching people watching. It never stopped, this game, this curiosity, all wrapped up in skin, cotton, grease paint and newspapers. That judgment and fear and hunger. At the station we trekked up the stairs with everybody else, hundreds of unfamiliar bodies all doing the same thing, all heading home, through the barriers and out on to the high street, the usual line of traffic waiting for the lights to change while pumping the usual filth into the atmosphere. These fascinations, these needs, constantly changing but always the same.

“It makes you feel relaxed, don’t you think? You watch all these people crawling home from work and you think yourself that you’re already one stage on from that.”

“Yeah, it’s good,” I agreed, letting the high street drift past, adjusting to her pace. “We should try to make a routine of this.”

“Well I didn't just mean it to be the once. Here we go, Burges Road. Let's hope Tariq has been good.”

On reaching the house, Tariq emerged but his friend did not. Yasirah stood on the step talking to his friend's mother in rapid Urdu, leaving the two of us, man and boy, like strangers before this fluent otherness she had so easily slipped into.

Tariq rolled his eyes. “Mothers' stuff. It doesn't end. Same things, every time.”

“You understand it all?”

“Some of it. You?”

“Some of it.”

We grinned at each other.

“Do you think that if we walked off, she would come?”

“If she didn't, then what? She's got the keys.”

“Good point.”

We waited, not quite sure what else to say to each other. At last Yasirah brought herself away, looking well satisfied. “Home, then.”

“What do you talk about for so long?”

“Important stuff. That's where the important decisions are made: on the doorstep, between women.”

“Right,” Tariq said. “Not in Washington or anything. On the doorsteps of East Ham.”

“Where else? Do you hear Washington talking about things that really matter, like how your kids are doing at school? I don't think so. Now, home. I'm cooking dese food tonight.”

“Aw, mum.”

“We can't have pizza every night.” It was settled. She marched us smartly through the tree-lined avenues.

19.

I had the slightly surreal experience of showering in someone else's house, surrounded by Yasirah's soaps and potions, her unfamiliar smells and fastidious tidiness. I was careful to clean up after myself, unable to resist staring at the things she bought and wore, microcosmic worlds opening up before me, all these other possibilities I had never before explored. I descended to the kitchen heavy with a new knowledge, this alienness overwhelming me with its difference. I felt I was struggling to reach beneath her skin.

The table had been precisely laid out. “It feels almost formal,” I said to Yasirah.

“Good. We don't want you getting too familiar. It would spoil the occasion. Tariq darling, light the candles, dinner's almost ready.”

The food, when it arrived, looked and smelled exquisite. Tariq killed the lights and we sat down in our appointed places. Yasirah sighed and looked across the table.

“This is how it should be,” she said.

“I would still rather have pizza.”

“You'll turn into one, the amount you eat.”

Tariq pulled a face and started ladling out the chana.

“How was school?”

Another face. “Religious studies.”

“Oh. What this time?”

“Christianity. *Again.*”

“Well, it's important, I suppose.”

“Is it? I don't see it anywhere. All this stuff. Love thy neighbour. Do not covet thy neighbour's wife. Does anyone act on that? Do the Americans act on that? Like, I don't think so. I don't see it anywhere.”

“It's still what this society is based on, somewhere.”

“Is it?” Tariq looked over at me for support.

“I suppose.” I waded clumsily in, using the wrong words but encouraged by his appeal. “Historically, it's interesting to see how the Church became separated from the state in this country, how God lost His legitimacy to rule by the Word alone, and how the laws, and therefore the way we live, followed this. Everyday life and God became completely separated; one was business, the other was only conscience. I don't think it means that much now. No-one seems to have that sense of duty, which would make the Bible still mean something.”

“We don't do anything but buy things anyway.”

“Exactly. Maybe our idea of religion is changing anyway. If you look through history, the biggest buildings have always been forts and temples. What are they now?”

“Office blocks.”

“So what does that say? Maybe we believe now that money will make us happy, maybe that's where people's faith has been transferred. Maybe we see buying as a sort of duty, like praying used to be.”

“Not everyone is like that,” Yasirah said. “For a start, most people in the world haven't got the money. They live in poverty, remember? No food, and no justice. Who else are they going to appeal to but God? And what about the spiritual void here in the West? What do these people put within them in the place of God? Nothing but themselves. It's hardly ideal. Why is it that with so much comfort there is so much violence and fear over here? It should be a Utopia, but of course it isn't because there's always something missing.”

“That's just human beings. We'll never get rid of that.”

“My point precisely.” She raised her hands. “That's why we have to have God. Now please, both of you. There used to be a rule about not talking politics at the dinner table. I think I'm going to have to bring it back. Eat your food before it gets cold.”

Grinning at Tariq, I obeyed.

20.

The next morning, I had watched from my window as Alex arrived. Stepping out from a taxi, Alex was greeted effusively by Mrs Lal and Lena, slightly more reticently by Rani. They headed into the shop in an excited cluster, chattering loudly.

Another suicide bomber had blown himself up in Tel Aviv. Israel responded by launching an attack on Ramallah, bulldozing homes and shops, killing a dozen people. Pictures of the Israeli dead were in the newspapers.

I went to work in a bad mood.

In the evening, I came down to talk to Mrs Lal, wanting a bit of filling in before I tried speaking to Rani.

Her face beamed as she saw me. "Lovely day! Sunshine!"

We both stared up at the inscrutable blue. "I hope it stays this way."

"Oh yes! It would be a good sign."

Surprised, I looked at Mrs Lal. "You mean for Rani and Alex?"

"You saw him arrive?"

"Yeah."

"Well, a child needs its father."

"Not all fathers. Remember last time?"

"Maybe he has changed." Mrs Lal looked at me softly. "People do change, you know."

"It would take a lot for Alex."

"You're not the one who has to forgive."

True enough. I nodded slowly.

"You should come round for dinner."

"With Alex there? I don't think so."

"Really, you should." Mrs Lal gave a sage smile.

"Okay. Yeah. Why not?"

"See. That wasn't so hard."

"How did his arrival go this morning?"

"Lena was pleased to see her father. Rani - well, I don't know. I don't know what those two talked about. But they were nice enough to each other in public."

"And you?"

Mrs Lal shrugged. "I would rather see my daughter happy than not."

That seemed to answer my unspoken questions.

21.

I tried to talk to Rani the next day, but she was out. Gone to the zoo with Alex and Lena. I felt a distress that seemed to sap the oxygen from my blood. After all Alex had done, he could just come back in, be accepted, loved even, just for coming back. Whereas I - I had never even gone away. It seemed a subtle betrayal of all the care and attention I had given her.

It may have been spite, I don't know, but I phoned Yasirah, interested to see what she would make of this. Interested to know if it was right talking to her about this.

Her first words were guarded, professionally and blankly polite. To be able to dissolve, I thought to myself, and listen to how she addresses others when I'm not there. The insurance salesman, work colleagues, distant relatives of her dead husband. For me,

as soon she recognised me her voice became warm, open. The other women within her vanished.

“How's Tariq?” I asked.

“Fired up with your militancy. He's too young for all this. Lighten up next time, yeah? He can make his own mind up when he's old enough.”

“Sorry. I was just happy to get a response from him.”

“Yeah, well, you're not the one who has to live with him. Especially when he gets in one of his moods. You know, you try to nurture your kids like flowers, careful careful all the time, and then...”

“It was a bright remark of his.”

“Oh, he's a bright kid. But you know, every radical movement is full of bright kids, inspired by someone that they think has all the answers. What bothers me is why nobody will allow these bright kids to make up their own minds.”

“Because radicals always feel they have the truth to impart.”

“That no one else has seen, or else has deliberately obfuscated? Exactly. I don't want these people filling his head.”

“But what about religion? Surely...”

“As far as I see it, that's a nice conservative thing where plenty of people have gone before him, and have done so with dignity, integrity and honour. How many radicals can you say that about? I can only do my best to teach him the right things.”

“I'm sure any radical would say just the same thing.”

“No. This is different. It's a total way of life. It's morality. All of those things that make life not the thing you described it as over the dinner table. That's not any special insight; it's not Messianic lunacy. It's the way of millions of people.”

“And the world's still fucked up.”

I heard her sharp intake of breath, and felt instantly sorry. “Well, I guess I can't begrudge anyone a belief in something to make it better. We all need that.”

“Exactly.”

“I'll, er, ease off the politics in future.”

She sounded amused. “If you would.”

22.

What made me so sure I was right anyway?

I left work and ambled down to Oxford Street. People hungrily stalked between shop fronts, the sun hanging low in the sky and burning the distant reaches of the pavement into gold, windows blazing like walls of fire. I shaded my eyes and walked west, watching people emerge out of shadow.

How benign were these processes? Slender women arrayed in window displays much like Amsterdam prostitutes, the latest music, big video screens, lantern-jawed mannequins. Goods mass produced by American corporations in tax-free enterprise zones of the Philippines or Indonesia, cheap labour working 16 hour shifts and living in squalor. All for what? To make us look good, or rather, to line the pockets of anonymous shareholders and executives while pretending to make us look good. What else were we

in this game? How much did Yasirah's ideas of morality and integrity stand up to the desperation of this day-to-day grind, the dripping cynicism of every advert, the intellectual vacuity of daytime TV.

Pick any of those strands. Adverts are designed to lie, hamming up benefits while ignoring downsides. Distorting the knowledge any free market supposedly needed to run correctly. Mobilising huge efforts of capital and communication just to exhort us to buy: more washing powder, a new car, a drink full of vegetable oil but boasting a vast array of vitamins, food chock-full of saturated fats, beef tallow, colourings, growth hormones. Was this actually good for anyone, if this was the basis for economic growth? If growth meant the richer countries (the minority) poisoning themselves with shit, deceived confused and obese, feeding off the talent, energy and hunger of the poorer countries (the majority) to the misery of the many and the full-fat pleasure of the few. How could this be justified? Where was this economic growth taking us? Certainly not to Utopia, as more people starved or died through gluttony, more people got Aids, overdosed on luxury drugs, died in floods and searing heat. As more people worked in factories, lived in shanty towns, bought refrigerators to store pre-packed coloured processed food. Was this the way we ought to be heading?

But if not, where?

I don't believe in some kind of Pre-Raphaelite agricultural Elysium. There is no going back to a mythical golden age of *whatever* belief. But I do believe that the needs of the few - no, worse, the *desires* of the few, the petty whims, the childlike indulgence - should not so effectively command and shape the lives of the labouring many. I hate these political oligarchs, the free-market technocrats, insisting upon free trade not in the sense of their oft-repeated "even playing field" but rather in the sense of biggest bastard wins, relentlessly stacking the odds in their own favour, relentlessly turning their own people into nothing more than consuming automatons, providers of free speech so long as that speech agreed with their ideas, their world view. They have caused a kind of death, a joyless life-sucking vampirism that is close enough on the surface to the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity for many to confuse the two, indeed for the two to share some similar ideals. But this is not it. This is about control, dehumanisation and degradation, profit.

I suddenly understood the profound despair at the heart of Yasirah's morals. They existed not to strangle herself, or Tariq, not as dogma to prevent them from thinking and questioning the world themselves, but as a sort of last-ditch defence against the greedy, calamitous, all-consuming monster that oozed all about them, a hideous blob of bastardised Christianity, of soulless consumption, of limitless freedoms to be the same, void of all cares, void of all woes, comfortably numb in a fog of advertising jingles and blue jeans.

And a little voice nagged at me, asking if it could be any other way.

The rest of the telephone call to Yasirah had gone well. I had talked about Rani, wondering how Yasirah would react to this sudden, intrusive presence. She seemed even-handed, philosophical.

“He might have changed, you know. You have to allow him that chance. If we don't hold that hope, then what? You're damned forever the first time as a kid you're caught stealing sweets.”

“Yeah, but surely there has to come a point where you think 'this guy ain't ever gonna change.’”

“You'd be daft not to. We can't all be martyrs. Some of us have got to live.”

“Well that's where Alex is at. He's had his chances, God knows how many. Rani is mad taking him back.”

“Is that what she's done? He's come to see Lena, you said.”

“Yeah, well, we all know where that leads.”

Yasirah laughed. “Maybe. And maybe not. You're very accusing.”

“And you don't know Alex.”

“True enough. Just try to be forgiving, yeah? It's easier, really.”

“Ah, I used to. But after a while of being knocked right down every time you get up, it starts being a little difficult.”

“And if we are not optimistic, what then?”

I laughed. “Talking of optimism, do you still want to run this Friday?”

“Yes, I can almost move my legs again. Not good. So Friday. Just, afterwards, leave the politics from the dinner table.”

“Yeah, okay. It's a deal.”

“Good! See you Friday.”

“See you.”

I put the phone down and muttered the final words I had wanted to use. Different words, slightly wistful. I kept them in my heart.

24.

Leaving school seemed an impossibility. What to do? It loomed before him, an impassable obstacle.

Let me count the things I don't want to do, he thought to himself:

1) 9-5, pen pushing. It filled him with horror, everything about it. 40 years of what? The grinding routine, bus and tube, the same little tasks awaiting him, the same fake importance. It seemed like death, doing whatever shit for some firm selling whatever.

2) Further study. Ug. Learning to think in all the same little boxes as everyone else. Learning to conform, to become part of *it*, institutionalised.

3) Manual labour, the same thing day after day after day. Like pen pushing in its relentlessness, the hunger that it had for his time, his age, his thoughts.

It was, he knew, a defining moment. Get sucked in and is there any way back out, or is that you forever, having compromised yourself, having absorbed the thought processes, having become it, helping to perpetrate the horror of it.

Or could you play it, come to some sort of victory?

I'm better off out, he kept thinking. Better off not touching it, not getting stained, bad karma, the cycle of samsara. But.

But he didn't know what else to do.

25.

He had been avoiding Kaye. A sick sort of sense when he saw her, memories of her kiss up against the wall, a strange aura of adulthood clinging to her. Not sure how he could ever say to her what he had to say.

How do you say it anyway? Gibbering "I love you I love you I love you" like a moron. These emotions, they were him; they went straight to his core. Words were just - he didn't know.

It happened of course that eventually they ran into each other, an unavoidable meeting of eyes and then he had to say something. He had decided against going to his maths lesson and had slipped behind one of the huts with a view to sneaking through the fence. There she stood, glaring down at her phone and thumbing the keys with furious concentration.

She looked up and he froze, as if shot. He wondered if she could see the picture of herself kissing played over his retina. The retention of the last image seen when alive. She smiled. "Hi."

"Hi. Uh, don't let me disturb you. I just came this way because, well, it's on the way out."

She shrugged. "I've finished, anyway. Crappy fucking message, too. Not worth nicking off just to read. Fag?"

"No thanks."

She shrugged again. "Suit yourself." She lit her cigarette and they stood together in relatively companionable silence, staring at the shabby fence, the Peabody flats beyond. Net curtains fluttered in open windows.

"You still with that bloke?"

"Darren? How did you know?"

"Saw you at the pub."

She looked at him doubtfully. "And they let you in?"

"I was passing."

"Oh. Well maybe when they let you in, you can buy me a drink."

"I've never understood it."

"What?"

"Drinking."

"Drinking? Jesus man, it's fun. Why else do you think people do it?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't sound like much."

"It's what people do."

"It's not what I do."

"Well, you're not -" she stopped.

"Not what?"

She sighed. "Darren, you know, he's got a job. He works. That's living. Not like *this*."

"This ain't living, that's for sure."

She glanced at him. "Still can't wait to get out?"

"Yeah."

"Into what?"

"Something. What does Darren do?"

"Computers."

"Computers? A big shot?"

"Oh. He'll do."

He wondered at her then, as she looked. "He'll do." It wasn't an idea of being with someone that had occurred to him before. He shivered. He felt the weight of the unspoken emotions within him, fragile as glass.

26.

I was able for a while to ignore Alex and marvel at the food. Even by Mrs Lal's usual standards it was lavish. Plates of starters, huge bowls of daal, pakoras, aloo gobi, steaming meat dishes, fragrant lime rice. Rani served, starting with her father and moving round the table.

Both Rani's parents seemed delighted. They beamed like household gods, watching their daughter's good grace with evident pride. Lena burred away to Alex, who wasn't listening. "Well, cheers." Alex cracked open a bottle of beer without waiting for Rani to finish serving.

I touched my unopened bottle to Alex's. Alex took a great gulp of liquid and sighed contentedly. "It's been a long time. We should have started that band, you know. We would have hit the big time by now."

The band. One of Alex's pipe dreams. Nothing but that, although he had persuaded himself otherwise. "You ran off before we could." I tried not to be too pointed about it.

"Ah, yeah. Well. Nothing like the present time, eh?"

"Things have kind of changed in my life-"

"He means he's got a girlfriend," Rani said, dishing out the remains for herself and then sitting down.

"Really?"

"No. Well, kind of."

"Woah. Sounds tricky. But you can't let it get in the way of the good things in life. You know, just chilling, making music, all that."

"She's a single mum too. He doesn't have any time for that anymore. We're a labour intensive species."

Alex: "too right."

Rani sat in a mock huff. Alex leaned back and guffawed. “Don’t you love it when she does that?”

“I think it's something she reserves for you.”

“Ah, man, you're flattering me.” Alex laughed again. “Seriously, man, over this woman thing. Don't let it control you, cos then, you know, there would be no joy in your soul. You would just resent her. And then you would lose that thing that all women go for, that joy. If you lose that then you ain't got nothing.”

“Maybe that's why I spend so much time single,” I said, rather dryly.

“You are killing me. I mean, come on. I know you. You're a joyful person.”

“I wish someone would tell the girls.”

“Just let it flow, man.”

“Right. Yeah. I'll remember that.”

“I was serious about the band.”

“I was serious about being too busy.”

“Hey, well, no worries.”

“I think Lena wants you.”

“Oh, she'll be okay, won't you, Daddy's little button?”

Lena's face split into an insane grin and she nodded wildly.

“So how long are you staying?”

Alex frowned, piling rice and murgli on to some naan and chomping it absently.

“I don't know yet. I haven't made up my mind.”

“So you haven't decided to stay?”

“I want to be a good father to my daughter. And Rani, well...” His gaze was appreciative.

It was a long time since I had seen Rani looking so animated, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling. She had dressed carefully, precise little touches of make-up accentuating her face, her hair tied up in an elaborate bun. A freedom about her motions as she laughed and chatted with her parents. I could understand Alex wanting to stay. It must be better than wherever he's come from, wherever he would go next.

I tried to bury the bitter disappointment within myself.

“What did you get up to, all of these years?”

“This, that.” Alex swallowed another enormous mouthful of food. “Finding myself, mostly.”

“You don't regret what you did?”

“Why, no.” Alex look round him at the smiling hubbub of the Lal family. “What’s there to regret?”

27.

Slightly drunk, I was trying to explain to Alex and Mr Lal that the West was finished.

“This age. It's still the old European imperial age. What are the Americans but misplaced Europeans? They have the same old colonial views: we shout, you jump. They don't have any ideas but domination.”

Alex laughed. “So who would you rather have doing the jumping?”

“The thing is, us here, we're always accusing the Americans of being dumb, insular, not understanding anyone else. But nor do we. We're still in this imperial fantasy. You know, we tell the world what is right and what is wrong like it just is, like there isn't any other point of view.”

“Well, shit, I'd say that flying a plane into a building is pretty much a black and white thing. It's wrong, period.”

“You can't just look at the act. You have to look at what causes it. We say we do that, but we don't. We're only care for getting our way. It's worked in the past, but now things are changing. You know, countries are standing up for themselves, people, they're realizing that it can be different, that they can have their own agendas, their own solutions, that it doesn't have to be like Europe, it doesn't even have to listen to Europe. You know, Europe sees itself as this model of civilisation, but you forget all the crimes, all the damage we did to the world just to get to this state of enlightened impotence.”

“Enlightened impotence?” Alex was laughing genially but uproariously. “Oh man, where do you get this stuff from? You should be on TV.”

“Well it's true. We pretend to care, we pretend that we've got it sorted and everyone should be like us, even though we got where we did by crapping all over everyone else. We seem to forget this when we preach. What we may think is right may not do for everyone across the world, especially without our money, and soon we'll have to accept that rather than bombing the shit out of anyone who dares to say so.”

“What the fuck? If somebody tries to blow you up, you don't stand there and try to understand their point of view. Your first responsibility is to yourself.”

Alex appealed to Mr Lal for support, but he looked completely blank. Alex laughed again. “You're a crackpot. If the West's got it so wrong, how come we're so rich, eh? How come everyone wants to live here?”

“We're rich because we shagged over everyone else. And that's the only reason anyone would want to live here. Not because they love it or anything.”

“And what's this about right and wrong? Come on, man. Murder is murder, yeah? You know, like this table is a table, whatever you call it.”

“What I mean is when we say ‘this person is bad!’ You know, like with Mugabe. Saddam Hussein.”

“Shit man, they *are* bad. All that shit with the white farmers. Saddam and the gas. *Bad.*”

“Yeah, okay, they're bad. But so bad we, what, slapped sanctions on starving populations, so bad that we pre-emptively bomb not them but their people just in case they might think of doing the same thing to us? Who's bad? Who had Rhodesia? Who supported Iraq when it was gassing its own population? Whose sanctions have killed thousands of civilians?”

“Well if it wasn't for Saddam...”

“You mean if it wasn't for the oil. Like it bothered us so much when he was our friend. The crap America talks about democracy, all the while propping up the Saudi regime and God knows whoever else, any corrupt shit they can do business with. All for oil, that's fucking in the planet anyway. It's crazy.”

“You say this sort of stuff to your girlfriend?”

“She isn't-”

“You wanna get out more.”

Rani tapped me on the shoulder, breaking in upon the strange secret code of this argument. “Much as I hate to intrude, I need some help with the washing-up, and I think Lena wants to talk to her daddy. So if you don't mind...”

I was grateful to escape the mess I had created for myself.

28.

It was the first time we had been alone since Alex had come back. I didn't know what to say. I looked around the kitchen at the array of pots, pans, serving dishes, ladles, spoons, chopping boards, dishes, knives, every piece of culinary equipment imaginable jumbled over the work surfaces or lying in heaps in the sink. A rich and giddy aroma still hung heavenly in the steamy air.

“It's a lot of washing-up,” I told her eventually. “Your mother made an amazing effort.”

She smiled softly, pouring me out a generous whisky as a bribe. “She's glad Alex came back. She's always been worried about Lena. She's always said that she thinks Lena needs more than just I can offer.”

“So what, they reason that if they feed him enough, he'll be too heavy to physically leave?”

“That's not funny. He's changed, you know.”

“So everyone keeps saying.”

“Come on, you must have noticed it. You've been talking to him all night.”

“Maybe I just get blinded by the surface person, which hasn't changed at all. What do you want, wash or dry?”

“I'd better dry. I don't want you breaking all the crocks.”

“Fair enough.” I ran the water into the sink, dosing it extravagantly with washing up liquid. I took a quick sip of whisky and began.

We worked in silence for a while. I helped dry the cutlery when it backed up.

“So,” I asked her eventually.

“So?”

“Well, you know, did you drag me out here just to wash up?”

“You haven't asked me the right questions yet.”

“Women!”

“Men!”

“Well,” I said cautiously. “You seem to be enjoying each other's company. Whatever that says, I don't know. Every time I've been round...”

She looked down. “I'm sorry about that. I've wanted to talk, really I have.” I felt her lay one hand upon my arm. I felt the skin of her palm burn, a poison flooding into my blood, the unbearable truth of everything that stood between us. The luminous blackness of her eyes held pity, tenderness.

I smiled, bitter, self-deprecating. “You're not really sorry. Otherwise you would have found the time. You always did.”

“It's been a long while, and I felt that I couldn't dilute these moments. I couldn't let myself think about anything else; it might be the rest of my life, the impressions of

these last few days.” She looked away again, possibly trying to spare me the pain. “There’s so much to rediscover about each other. You only remember the bad bits. All this other stuff slowly trickles through. The intimacy. The things you used to enjoy. You know, it’s like rediscovering a favourite food after years. But I’m sorry that I haven’t spoken to you. I am, really.” She stared up at me, and I felt my heart break watching the honesty in her face, the lines of care creased about her eyes, the concerned pout drawn across her forbidden lips, old dreams rising up and pushing hands through the cavity of my chest. I smelled her breath, our faces barely an inch apart, watching each other drawn into the darkness of our pupils.

I could destroy everything. I had a sudden and horrible knowledge of my own power. My breath caught.

I nodded slowly at her and moved back. “It’s serious then, huh?”

“It’s early days. Perhaps it could be, I don’t know. I don’t know what he wants. He only came here because of Lena. Anything else, well, who knows?”

“But you’d like it?”

Rani sighed. “You forget so much. And mum and dad, well, to them it would be right.”

I nodded, drinking back whisky. We carried on with the washing-up, mechanical motions like a couple gone to seed.

“Well, aren’t you going to tell me not to?” She asked at last.

“Not to what?” Alex appeared at the door, grinning and quite the worst for drink. He advanced behind Rani and wrapped his arms round her waist, lifting her up until she squealed and slapped at his arms. He let go, laughing. “I’ve put Lena to bed. Not to what?” He asked again.

“Not to go back out with you,” I told him, staring at him levelly.

“Oh, man. The 10 million dollar question. Well then, Maestro, let fly.”

“I think she’s already made up her mind. I don’t think people ask these questions because they’re unsure.”

“You’re deep.”

Rani folded her arms and stared, looking pained, waiting for me to betray her, to betray myself.

“No, not deep. I’m evading the question, that’s what. I guess that you have to do what makes you happy. It’s a leaf out of Alex’s book we maybe all could do with learning.”

“Right,” Rani said softly. “And to hell with everything else?”

“If it comes to it.” I turned back to the washing-up, unable to look any longer.

Alex grinned, leaning back expansively on the freshly washed work surfaces. “See. I told you I had it sorted.”

29.

I couldn’t sleep that night, a bad combination of grain and grape swilling through my stomach, mouth fugged, unable to get comfortable whichever way I turned. I eventually sat up, opened the curtains and stared out into the night.

A few satellites, planets and stars shone distinctly through the orange haze, serene points staring down at the itchy city, the restlessness of cars crunching through gears on their way up Farringdon Street towards King's Cross, the distant traffic lights twitching between green and red, the shimmer of exhaust, the snaking secret words spelt out in street lights. Lamps from stairwells burning indifferently on, frazzled cathode glare from darkened rooms as insomniacs devoured the listless late night menu, flicking from channel to channel in search of an elusive something, drinking in acres of soft-focus flesh and bad reruns. I imagine Dickens walking with the police patrols sometime after midnight, that furious and haunted energy, the unhappiness that killed him in the end.

Because, for some people, there's no getting it right. Happiness recedes as you advance relentlessly upon it. Tormented by a bottomless hunger, driven to cancel it out, realising at the same time the impossibility of doing so.

Pictures of the dead singer ran through my head. Her brief, spectacular life, her struggle against prejudice, against the fears of her own parents. The soaring brilliance of her voice, the heights she had scaled in her music, in giving to other people. And then the descent, fighting against her rebel throat, failing so utterly that she saw nothing but death.

I'm going nowhere. No talent, no drive, no charm. Sitting here wasting away, too much booze in my belly, not enough brains in my head. The singer had been right. When her voice had given up, she could do more for the world dead than alive. Like so many, I feel my impotence: passing ghost-like through crowds, a near-invisible mark on the electoral register, a disturbance of dust over CCTV. What to do? I have tried so much and have found myself only to be mediocre. Oh, the promise that I thought had been there, in arrogance: all my grand ideas and schemes, come to this, a lonely man in his room, a ghost as around him the world teems and chatters.

I wished then that I could leave Rani, walk out on this. We were not unlike enough for the friendship to be anything other than destructive. I had never fully given her up, never could, the friendship dripping on and on, wearing my soul smooth, small and hard. I could not help but wish her well, could not help but hate Alex.

I should just go, I remember thinking. It's never too late to completely reinvent myself. Just - with years, the growing caution, the conservatism of knowing, comes a slowness, a lack of vulgar originality, a loss of the necessary emotional components for fresh and radical thought, for new life. I was even then part of the old guard, washed up, appreciating too much of the finer things, the indulgencies, and without that fire in my bones. My time was over.

The presence of the dead singer, her sympathy. You have plans, you have dreams, and then suddenly you have nothing. No matter. Pick yourself up, learn to live again, learn to love again. What, after all, was Yasirah?

Yasirah. I closed my eyes, briefly, on the constellations shrouding the city's body. What was I doing? What did I mean? What did I want? Like every human being, I had no real answers to the first two, but for the third question, like everyone else, I wanted warmth against the expanding cold, against the space between stars, the void between bodies. However crowded this city, I always felt the distance between myself and others to be growing, stretching to infinity, freezing and impossible. Reaching towards Yasirah was possibly only my reaction to this, insincere, a game I had to play. But possibly it was more. Possibly, there really was love, there really was a hope of some redemption from

the mess clinging to me like car exhaust. I wondered if I could give myself to it. A woman with a child, watching for something.

I closed the curtains again, turning back into the darkness, trying to get back to sleep.

30.

He saw her in the cafe across from the Post Office, leaning idly back and reading the glossy gossip from some tabloid pullout or other. He wasn't sure how far to believe in fate or coincidence, but he was feeling lucky. He had never just strayed across her like this before, on a Saturday with endless hours in front of them. Anything could happen, he thought. He took his chance, striding in and greeting her directly. "Kaye. Hey."

She looked up from her chit chat mag and smiled, the sun over water, so beautiful it caught at him and almost made him gasp. She gestured to the seat opposite. "Hey. Siddown."

He put his coffee on the table and straddled the chair. "How's things?"

"Oh, you know. You?"

"Yeah. Same. How's Darren?"

Her smile became malicious. "What, do you fancy him?"

Suddenly, horribly, he realised that she knew. A shock like the cracks of electricity that illuminated the sky at night; himself revealed as naked, pathetic, his words just sound, offering nothing. She knows, he thought, and she doesn't care. It was incomprehensible to him. He held his expression, muscles bending to his will. "Just curious."

She offered him a cigarette. He shook his head. She shrugged and lit one for herself. "He's fine, thanks for asking."

They stared at each other. The smell of her cheap perfume just reached him above the coffee scent rolling out in waves from the counter.

What is it about him, he wanted to ask. When he treats you like shit, gets you drunk so he can laugh at you, groping you down dark alleyways, treating you as his own personal whore. Why is that what you want?

"So how are your studies?" She asked him sweetly, like someone would ask a child. The zip of her top was pulled down low to expose her cleavage. He felt himself drowning, desire curling off her skin. Numbers, figures, the way of language, everything melting under the power of his attraction. As if he wouldn't be able to take another breath. Nothing else could ever mean anything against this power. He realised this with a sort of finality, anticipating his future, a slave to a remembered feeling.

"Oh..." He tore himself back from this other world. "Some of it makes sense, and some of it just sort of... doesn't."

"I'm sure the examiners will just be fine if you tell them that one."

"There's more to life."

"Like?"

He shrugged vaguely, uncomfortable. Like all the nothings you know I can never say, he told her silently. All the things that this... *study*... is designed to take away. The

Quixotic, the quicksilver, the pure and vibrant joy in the world surrounding them. Replace it with dull, worthy plodding. Well he wouldn't. Not even if it meant...

"There's time for everything else later," she told him, mockingly helpful.

Night after night he'd seen her scattering the paper flowers of money across the bar; getting drunk; exchanging leering kisses; unsteady legs and wild slurred laughter; the alien heat of her eyes, the anticipation she would display as she left the pub, hand in hand with Darren. This, now, that she pretended to hold out for him somewhere in the future.

"Later's too late."

She turned languid, grown-up eyes upon him. "What's the rush?"

He stared back hotly. "I know the shit that people become. The compromises they accept. All the things that happen to you to grind you down into -" he raised his hands, looking around. Cars sat in a stinking Saturday afternoon jam, litter spinning in a hot fog of exhaust, every face in every car craned robotically forward and waiting for release from an unknown yoke. A beggar squatted under the awning of the Duke of York, muttering to himself and rummaging through ruined plastic bags. The listless passing of pedestrians. People watched the blind windows staring back, the sun falling, the secret beatings, the crying in stairwells, dead-eyed after a long shift, binge drinking, doing anything to shut everything out. This the every day, the life woken to every morning, everyone doing their bit for food, for a roof, dancing monkeys. Kill to be accepted, to be allowed in, to become part of it.

He never wanted this.

"If you let go of your feelings once," he said to her, "you never get them back again. You just get a bad copy. And that's your lot. There's only the one time."

She seemed to think for several seconds, and then she laughed. "How do you think you know so much? Look at you."

"It's true."

She shook her head, a dismissive scorn in her eyes. "No. It isn't. You don't know shit. Just wait..."

31.

Later, after Len and Anton had gone back to their homes, he roamed the streets of his patch. A storm of taxis buzzed up Clerkenwell Road, cars with their single occupants, the beep of municipal vehicles as the streets got hosed, all the sounds that usually soothed him only serving to inflame him more. Down at Turnmills he watched the clubbers leaving, laughing and chattering, pissed or E'd off their faces, skin distilled with a saintly glow. Late night drinkers in the Coach and Horses, the occasional walkers going somewhere, doing something.

Narrow streets cut across the vapid ambient lull like conduits of vitriol, sluices of vomit, the stench of piss and the memory of violence. He walked, desperately dreaming of other times, other ways, anything but this, dragged repeatedly back to the here and now by the familiar bark of trucks pulling into the Post Office loading bay, letters pouring across secret lines underground, all the tales of love and hate, the red letters, the banal junk mail. A flicker of shadow beneath every streetlight, waiting at every corner,

leaning back a supple form in surrender, acceptance, hot keen lust. Whatever she had felt. Whatever she thought she was doing. Appalled, the distant promise of the future coming nearer, twisting out of all recognition as it rushed towards him. All his ideas, his cherished notion of himself, the possibility stretching out from him, seemed to be consumed by this new form. He wanted to be sick, not understanding how it could shift so profoundly, how he could be so wrong.

Lines sliced through meat. Filled with the dumb rage, cars yelling in his blood, clubbers laughing, he put his fist through the glass of a telephone booth. Easy, easy. Blood like black river, precise and angular beauty, the frozen shape of impact, the crystalline sound of destruction. He did it again, the music of the spheres, the breaking of the old order, astonished at his own power. Letting out in fury, he did all six windows and then stood, slimed in his own blood and panting, watching the heap of jewels he had made.

You let go of this, he thought, and you're what? Just a water drop in rain, the ceaseless motion.

There had to be more.

He stood by the skeletal frame of the telephone booth and howled.

32.

It had been our fourth run round the park. We had made noticeable improvement: running more quickly, not gasping like the drowned when we reached the end.

This is it, I had thought. Things slowly improve. Not dramatically, maybe, but inexorably.

So it had seemed to be.

We had certainly grown closer. Now I had learnt how to talk to Tariq she seemed to trust me more, even perhaps to admire me slightly for my efforts. We spent long evenings in her kitchen, watching the sky growl with low clouds and rain, ambling casually over a range of subjects. I could no longer remember how I had spent my time before this, how I had communicated, what intellectual sustenance I had received and from whom. She provided me with a much needed bolster against the suffocating cynicism I still felt over Rani, the way she had accepted Alex back into her life. As I watched them sweep the yard together, or carry in stocks from the van, I would feel an overwhelming sense that Rani had somehow cheated me out of all the physical and emotional support I had given her over the years.

It's given for free, the dead singer reminded me. Always and ever these things are given for free.

I had not replied, watching them cart boxes through the yard. Happy together, obviously in love.

It's a gift you have, the dead singer continued, to be able to give like that. Not everyone can do it. You shouldn't begrudge Rani her happiness. If you're hurt, well, she never meant it.

I shouldn't have invested so much effort.

You couldn't not. What about my voice? Maybe if I'd not pushed myself. Maybe if I'd stuck to pop songs, done what they wanted... But if it's in you, you can't do anything but to give like the sun gives warmth. Just like other people are black holes, and only suck.

So I spend my whole life like this?

Maybe not. There are more people than just Rani.

So true, I thought now, walking back to the tube with Yasirah, admiring the flush to her skin, the rhythm to her steps. The street was strewn with fag butts, crisp packets, other offerings to a dismal god. We talked quietly, watching the orrery motion of the cars. People emerged from the station, cars collected them, and were gone. Cars arrived. People arrived, cars collected them, and were gone.

We entered the ticket hall. "I sort of love rush-hour when there aren't any breakdowns. It's like clockwork. Rather beautiful."

She smiled absently, pushing her card through the ticket machine. "If you ask me, it's the most incredible assertion of one will over another. Nobody wants to be here, nobody wants to be doing this. And yet here we all are."

"More than that, nobody is forcing us. We all do it of our own free will."

"Oh no, not at all." We watched a stream of people spill down the steps from the District Line and rush across the concourse. "Everything in our lives forces us. The fear of failure, of being ostracised, the need to have money in order to eat, to keep a roof over our heads, to find a mate."

"That's it, you reckon? Just fear?"

"And greed." We walked up the steps. A District Line train was rattling away from us, heading to the East.

"And otherwise, what?" I looked to the West. The three towerblocks at Bow, stern sentinels arrayed upon the horizon, and beyond them the slender finger of Tower 42, champagne bar staring out across the flabby spread of the city, and the chubby science-fiction digit of Foster's Swiss RE building rising beside it, like something just landed. "You think if it wasn't for the fear we'd all be sitting at home watching Crossroads and pigging out on TV dinners?"

"Probably, yeah."

"You've got a bad view of human nature."

"I don't think so. What creature isn't indolent when it doesn't have to be? It's a prime example of the will of God, the need we have for such a thing."

"What?"

"Well, the idea that we have to struggle for purity. That if left to ourselves, as indolent creatures, we would just sink. God forces us towards industry and virtue. He forces us to battle for understanding, enlightenment. Without it," she watched the train coming in, her hair blowing across her face, "we would just be trash."

As usual at West Ham station, people didn't move out of the way for passengers to get off the train and there was a little scuffle, both sides huffing and puffing and raising their eyes at the ignorance of others. I ignored the significant look that Yasirah gave me as we climbed on board.

"So you believe that without control, without having barriers set for us and desires given to us by someone else, some higher agency maybe, we would just be a lawless, chaotic mess?"

“Just look around. Think about what happens every day.”

“Yeah, what happens every day, not just here but everywhere, is for the most part absolutely nothing. You think it's for fear alone that we don't all spontaneously riot when a signal failure at Barking ruins our whole evening journey?”

“Yes.”

I shook my head. “There aren't enough police, there aren't enough armies, there aren't enough courts or prisons to stop us all doing exactly what we liked, if that's what we wanted to do. A good example of that is cannabis. It's illegal, but that doesn't stop any one who wants to smoke it from doing so. Which is a lot of people. Most of the time, we don't break the law because we genuinely don't want to, not because we are frightened. I think fundamentally we are by nature very co-operative beings. That's why we can live together.”

She shook her head. “It's all compromise. It's not what we want. That's why we don't just have God as a ready fact in front of us. We have to struggle to reach God. It's something we have to fight for.” She narrowed her eyes in thought. “Or do you not believe we should struggle for anything? Why are good habits so hard?”

“Well, you're right to state that excellence takes struggle, dedication, repetition. Only the fastest, the strongest, the most clever or the most lucky make it, more times than not. But that's nature, it's not God. And it doesn't mean we're all striving to burst out of the straightjacket of common laws. Most people only want to do good. They want to be thought of as good, decent people. The more included into things that we feel, like we're doing our bit and it is appreciated, the better we are.”

“It's for precisely that reason - and no other - that we adhere to laws at all. It is what we really, really want, deep down inside ourselves, that we are terrified of, and that society is terrified of. And rightly so.”

We disembarked at East Ham, wooden detail hanging down from the roof like petrified bunting. Crowds of people swarmed up the stairs around us.

“So what is it then, that you really, really want? The thing that you're terrified of?”

“Me? Oh...” She laughed, staring at me, her eyelids half dropped. In a move that surprised me, I felt her reach over and take hold of my hand, squeezing it tightly. Herself, the living thing poured into flesh, the motion of her like fire, touch burning me. We stood for moments, the crowd heaving about us and cursing, ourselves the only fixed point in a cold and shifting universe, then Yasirah started to her senses and began dragging me up the stairs, my hand still held somewhat awkwardly, people trying to spill round us to either side, and then we both had to stop at the top anyway, fumbling hastily for tickets. People swore, muttered under their breaths.

I waited for her at the other side of the barrier and grinned into her shining eyes. “I think,” she said, “I heard your civil society of law abiders breaking down back there.”

“Yup.” I agreed cheerfully.

We joined hands again and walked out into the glare of East Ham.

Intoxicated, suffocated by a desire that gripped my chest, flooded my nose with scents, blinded my eyes with overwhelming colour. Concentrating on her skin, the human heat of her hand, her rhythm as she walked beside me through East Ham's long, tree-lined streets. Kids in cars thundered past, children played on the pavement under the watchful eye of an elder sister, the smells of cooking tumbling out of open doorways. It was Friday, and the serious-minded were getting in their cars to head off for Prayers.

“So many people that I know,” I said, “have grown out of what they believe. Into something different, that either better reflects their circumstances or at least doesn't entirely threaten the way that they find themselves living.”

“It's hardly surprising. Britain is a nation of relativists. Even the official religion was made to fit a circumstance, not vice-versa.”

“It's more than that. When people get fat and contented, and a bit self-congratulatory, they get afraid of those circumstances altering. They become naturally conservative, and I suspect they also tend to inflate the role they had in their own success.”

“Hitler: my part in his downfall.”

“Yeah. More or less. And they deliberately junk all their old principles. Kind of like, I was stupid then, but now I'm rich and happy, with my house and my car and my wife... Now it's time to bury my head in the sand and pretend everyone else isn't my problem any more.”

“Like I said, this is British relativism. It's the way people are allowed to go. We encourage it by giving them the choice of not caring.”

“It's happened to so many of my friends. Even if they still say they care, they don't do anything, like it's someone else's problem. Sometimes I wonder whether it's me, whether I'm missing some kind of revelation, some vital piece of kit for normal adult life. You know, as a kid, I always got this patronising shit flung at me along the lines of 'of course you're a socialist. Of course you want to change the world. Quite right too. But you'll understand better when you're older.' But I don't. I don't understand at all. I don't understand how you can reach such a level of despair about people that you just don't care anymore about what happens to them.”

Yasirah stared at me wisely. “People are bad. People are wicked. You know, you read in a local paper about a rape that happened in the local park, you see the glass in the bus shelter being kicked in night after night, all this stuff all of the time. No wonder people despair because it will never stop, not while we're on the planet. And even then... But holding on to your hope of change is an admirable thing. Never let go of that, never.”

I squeezed her hand, glad at that moment she had said what I wanted to hear. It sounded like hope. It sounded like justice. “That's almost a vote of confidence. Thanks.”

She would soon have to collect Tariq. “We'd better behave in a slightly more respectable fashion,” Yasirah said quietly. “It's all very well acting like kids when the kids aren't around, but...”

I let go of her hand rather reluctantly and we stared at each other with awkward good humour.

“Tariq...”

“I know.”

“He's got to be brought up well. He's all I've got left of his father, and I don't want to betray that. I don't want to betray his sense of what love is, of what - of what *we* were.”

I saw the tears that she tried to hide by turning away. "I understand that."
She smiled, turning back to me and brushing her hair from her face. "It's never easy, is it?"

"Nothing ever is."

"Struggle." She smiled again, maybe more hope contained now in her eyes.
"See?"

We walked up to the door.

34.

We talked quietly but cheerfully through the meal. I hoped that the private tension I felt bound up within me did not communicate itself; Yasirah's eyes seemed too bright, and she talked too readily, signs I was not sure Tariq would read. Whatever, after the meal ended Tariq took himself to his room to watch television before bed. It left us alone, threatened with a cavernous silence as I wondered whether I should struggle to put my feelings into words, or simply leave it. Yasirah poured herself out another cup of coffee and then regarded me for long moments, the silence stretching out, erotic and immense, pregnant with all the possibilities between us, as if both our futures hung in this little room, waiting upon the tiniest of movements.

"You never did tell me what you wanted, that maybe you were terrified of."

She looked down. "Isn't it obvious?"

A long silence. "Yes."

The house hummed and ticked with the danger, the lunacy of trying. Myself, flesh and blood, all the faults of breathing and being, set against the perfection of a dead man, a memory, a love that could never be recovered. I shouldn't try, I told myself, I shouldn't even be here.

She reached across the table and took hold of my hand, her fingers playing over my knuckles. She was still looking down, eyes hidden by eyelashes, mouth set in an impassive line. "Sometimes I think about what has happened, about how I got here, the web of possibilities and chance decisions, and then it seems that for us to be here like this, having to make this - this decision, is a reality that hangs from such a slender thread that I find it terrifying. You know, I never even wanted to come to London. I was happy in the North West, but my husband... And then I think, well, what might have happened otherwise..." She was crying.

I moved my arm, wiping the long tracks of tears from her face. She clutched my hand to her skin and sobbed.

"Hush," I said.

She shook her head and cried.

I gently brought her face up, watching her bloodshot eyes, the little ruination of mascara sliding across her cheeks, lips hanging open, uncertain. She watched me, strange, her expression unfathomable. I leaned over the table, the hum of the house impossibly loud, scoring my motion like finely choreographed ballet, all the doubts and hopes whirling before me, her alluring skin, her tears. No way back from this. I knew it

even then. She let her eyes close and I felt one of her hands clutching my shoulder. Very, very gently, our lips met, skin hesitating where it touched.

Jethro Perkins
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