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THE HANDSWORTH TIMES:
PART ONE OF A NOVEL IN PROGRESS
WITH SYNOPSIS AND CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION

Sharon Duggal

Master of Philosophy in Creative Writing

July 2013

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Statement:

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....

Sharon Duggal

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Degree: **Master of Philosophy in Creative Writing**

Name: **Sharon Duggal**

Title: **The Handsworth Times: Part One Of A Novel In Progress With Synopsis And Critical Introduction**

Summary:

My submission for Master of Philosophy in Creative Writing comprises an original piece of creative writing together with an in-depth critical introduction to my creative work.

The creative element offers the first part of a novel in progress, entitled *The Handsworth Times*, about a working class British Asian family in inner city Birmingham, set around the time of social unrest in the early 1980s. The family are reacting to the death of Billy, the youngest member of the family. The novel plots how individual members of the family come to terms (or not) with this major tragedy, which also mirrors a less personal but nevertheless impactful social tragedy occurring around them as their neighbourhood disintegrates under the pressure of deprivation and disaffection.

In writing about Handsworth and the impact of living in this environment in this particular period of time on a British Asian family, I am writing about a set of particular experiences that, to date, have had very little (if any) literary representation in modern British prose fiction. This gap, together with critical key issues around representation, identity and authenticity (which have emerged as part of the creative process of planning *The Handsworth Times*) provide the impetus to my research, which is summarised in the Critical Introduction. I explore the impact of these issues on the wider context of British Asian writing and, more personally, on my own journey as a writer.

The Critical Introduction is split in to three main sections: in the first part, I explore the historical emergence of British Asian writing over the last few decades to date; in the second section I consider the 'burden of representation', a phrase coined by Ruth Maxey to describe the complex set of issues that appear to have arisen for British

Asian contemporary writers in recent times (as part of this discussion I consider the kinds of stories about multicultural Britain that are accepted and/or celebrated by mainstream publishers, booksellers and critics, and whether there is a direct relationship between these choices and the issues emerging around current understandings of British multiculturalism); in Section 3, I explore how this context has impacted on my journey as a writer in terms of technical, aesthetical and political decisions. I indicate the ways in which I have drawn from experience and output of others and set out how my creative writing will offer an alternative and original contribution to the field. This contribution includes:

- Developing a novel which focuses on the working class experience of a British Asian family during the 1980s. Thereby writing about a group of people whose particular set of experiences is underexplored in contemporary literature
- Using the Handsworth Riots as a framework for the narrative
- Offering a reflection on urban social unrest, brought about by economic deprivation and struggle, through the eyes of British Asian characters.
- Using strong female characters to populate the creative work, addressing themes of gender and race.
- Interweaving the popular culture of a particular group of people (in this particular period and setting) throughout the narrative.
- Representing a layered reality where British Asian characters respond to the world around them rather than being looked in upon, and offering a number of viewpoints to achieve this – including an occasional omniscient narrator

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Introduction

My novel, *The Handsworth Times*, is about a working class British Asian family in Birmingham. It is set amongst the diverse inner city communities of the Handsworth area in a period of disaffection which resulted in the Handsworth riots of the early 1980s. In writing about the Handsworth riots and about the impact of social unrest directly on an Asian family, I am writing about a set of particular experiences that, to date, have had very little (if any) literary representation in modern British prose fiction. This gap provides the impetus to my research, which is to explore and examine current literary representations of British Asian experience, to consider their value but also their limitations, and in this light, examine the deep contexts that have driven my own creative writing.

As part of the creative process of planning *The Handsworth Times*, a number of key critical issues have emerged around representation, voice, identity and authority that I see as fundamental to the terrain of writing from the experience of a social minority. With these issues in mind this Critical Introduction will explore how British Asian writing has emerged historically and the ways in which the development of British Asian writing has impacted on my final creative output. Specifically, I will explore the issue of representation in the contemporary British literary scene and will consider how it has arisen that the most successful texts appear to share dominant narratives heavily reliant on themes of 'culture clash', albeit in a number of varying ways. I will consider the kinds of stories about multicultural Britain that are accepted and/or celebrated by mainstream publishers, booksellers and critics, and whether there is a direct relationship between these choices and issues emerging around current

understandings of British multiculturalism. I want to question whether there is an acceptable face of British multiculturalism in contemporary literature, and whether there exists, in contrast, some less cohesive but more challenging and diverse literary voices. I will suggest that some more recently published works reveal small but significant shifts occurring at the fundamental level of identity negotiation and that the identities of working class British Asians, as represented by current cultural output, may indicate a more fluid position is emerging than had previously been permitted.

In the Critical Introduction I refer to texts by British Asian writers I consider to have attracted significant critical attention in recent years. These are: *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Hanif Kureishi (Kureishi, 1990), *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali (Ali, 2003) and *Londonstani*, Gautam Malkani (Malkani, 2006). I will also consider *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Nadeem Aslam (Aslam, 2004) and *Life isn't all Ha Ha Hee Hee*, Meera Syal (Syal, 2000). I will look at the differing positions these writers assume when presenting issues of identity in their work and will go on to explore how this context has impacted on my journey as a writer facing technical, aesthetical and political decisions in the approach to my own practice. However, as will become clear, I have also drawn on my own experiences as a British Asian woman developing as a writer within a specific moment in time, and on my experience of working as an arts professional between 2001 and 2008 in the field of literature development as part of Centerprise, a radical and inspiring development project for emerging writers in East London. I hope to show how these contexts have led to me developing a unique set of experiences which influence my creative writing and in turn enable me to offer an alternative and original contribution to the field.

Representations of British Asians: A Brief History

Britain has had an Asian community since before the Second World War with immigration from the Indian sub-continent rising considerably from the 1930s onwards. This peaked between 1948 and 1962 when the British Nationality Act 1948 allowed workers from British colonies to migrate to Britain without restriction (Partnership, n.d.). The estimated percentage of the population in England and Wales describing themselves as Asian or Asian British in the 2001 Census was 4% (Office for National Statistics, 2001). In the 2011 Census this had risen to 8% (Office for National Statistics, 2011). These Asian communities began to emerge from the shadows in the 1970s and 1980s when a small number of performers, primarily actors and musicians, began to seep into the public consciousness through the realm of popular culture and broadcasting in the UK. Now, some forty years later, a good number of these are very definitely established as having been or as being 'household names'. These include comedy writers/actors Meera Syal and Sanjeev Baskhar; musicians Nitin Sawhney, Apache Indian, Jay Sean and Freddie Mercury; actors Ben Kingsley, Art Malik, Parmindra Nagra and Dev Patel and broadcasters, including Hardeep Singh Kohli and Krishan Guru Murthy. So where are the fiction writers in this mix? Literature is a natural conduit for exploring questions of multicultural identity which preoccupy commentators on diasporas and immigrant communities in post-war Britain but, to date, only a handful of British Asian writers have made any significant effect on the literary map of Britain in this 50 year period (in either a popular or a critical sense), nowhere near enough to represent the percentage of the UK's population which describes itself as Asian or British Asian.

In the 1970s writers from the Indian Diaspora including RK Narayan, V.S. Naipaul and Anita Desai were applauded across the world, making an impact in

publishing terms in both Britain and the USA. But this was Indian writing in English, predominantly set in the Indian sub-continent or within long established Indian diasporic communities in the Caribbean or East Africa, and did little to reflect the experiences of Asians in Britain. Interestingly, by contrast, in Britain during this period new Black British voices began to emerge including Linton Kwesi Johnson, Buchi Emecheta, and Beryl Gilroy amongst others. Here were writers choosing to write directly about the experiences of immigrant communities of African/Caribbean descent living in the UK, exploring controversial themes of racism, police brutality, yearnings for home, displacement and culture shock. In many ways immigrants of South Asian descent shared these experiences yet they did not appear to write about them to the same extent, at least not publically. There are undoubtedly complex sociological reasons for this (including issues around language, script, education and variances in immigration from the Indian sub-continent compared to the Caribbean) but a full examination of the sociological reasons for this lies beyond the remit of this paper. One notable voice did emerge from the vacuum in this period - that of Indian-born playwright and screenwriter Farrukh Dhondy who began in the 1970s to establish himself as a writer of children's books centring on themes of multi-racial Britain from the perspective of a British Asian writer such as the prize-winning *East End at Your Feet* (Dhondy, 1976) and *Come to Mecca* (Dhondy, 1978)). Dhondy went on to become Channel Four Commissioning Editor for Multicultural Programmes 1984–1997 and continues to write today as a columnist and author.

By the 1980s two phenomenally successful British Asian writers did burst onto the literary scene. The first was Salman Rushdie, who, without a doubt, made global impact with his epic novel *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie, 1981) which won the 1981 Booker Prize (and subsequently was awarded the Booker of Bookers (BBC, 2008), establishing diasporic writing as an international genre. Throughout the 80s Rushdie consolidated his position as a major literary talent following *Midnight's Children* with

Shame (1983) and the controversial *Satanic Verses* (1988). However, whilst Rushdie is hugely important in terms of his influence and impact, his writing is still largely set within the Indian subcontinent and can be loosely situated within the Postcolonial Literature genre which responds to intellectual discussion surrounding the repercussions of colonisation. The other major talent to emerge in this period was Hanif Kureishi who in the 1980s wrote the successful screenplays *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). With these screenplays, Kureishi established himself as the mouthpiece of the new generation of South Asians growing up in 1980s Britain; those for whom the prefix British was increasingly relevant and important when considering notions of self-identity. Kureishi established a shift away from literary responses that emanated from post-colonial discourse towards a literary response that introduced a multicultural Britain that existed as an everyday experience for many. As a result Kureishi opened up a new development in literature emerging from a post-colonial landscape. He did this alongside a wave of African-Caribbean British writers including Mike Phillips, whose *Blood Rights* (Phillips, 1989), explored the impact of mixed heritage on black and white Britons (Wambu, n.d.). The success of Kureishi and Rushdie meant that British Asian writing finally began to develop as a genre of its own during the 1980s and, significantly, to be recognised as potentially mainstream with a possible market value.

During the 1980s British Asian women writers were beginning to get published too. None had the panache and style of Rushdie or Kureishi (few do) but the significance of the worlds they were describing were quickly recognised and sometimes actively nurtured by new feminist and black-led presses. For example, talented writers like Ravinder Randhawa and Leena Dhingra were published by the Women's Press, a feminist press committed to publishing new female writers. In 1988 the Women's Press published *Right of Way*, a collection of short stories emerging from the ground-breaking Asian Women Writer's Collective; a workshop based in London showcasing the new

British Asian female voices which were responding directly to complex issues of identity and displacement. Also worth noting for its publication during this period is Amrit Wilson's *Finding a Voice* (1978), published by Virago. *Finding a Voice* documented the cultural and social experiences of Asian women in Britain through a series of interviews. It was commissioned by Virago Founder and Director, Ursula Owen as a response to the lack of platforms for stories emerging from female Asian immigrant communities. In spite of these interventions, the lack of wider interest from mainstream publishers remained, possibly indicating that Asian women's writing was still very much viewed as writing for a niche market by the wider book industry - feminist and semi-autobiographical rather than an internationally relevant literature from the South Asian Diaspora like that of Rushdie.

The 1990s begin with Kureishi's first novel *Buddha of Suburbia* (Kureishi, 1990) which gives a central role to immigrants from India and to their British-born descendents for the first time in post war British literature and thereby sets a benchmark for reflecting on life in British Asian communities. With *The Buddha of Suburbia* and later *The Black Album* (Kureishi, 1995), Kureishi expanded on the concepts of multiculturalism he had begun exploring in the decade before, largely through his writing for screen and stage. In doing so he established the territory of what would later come to be casually talked about as multicultural fiction i.e. fiction that is set amongst and emerging from ethnically and culturally diverse urban landscapes of a modern post colonial world. In talking about Kureishi, journalist Sukhdev Sandhu says:

If there is one figure who is responsible for dragging Asians in England into the spotlight it is Hanif Kureishi ... he has represented their lives to mainstream audiences with unrivalled wit and candour. (Sandhu, 2003, p. 230)

In the 1990s female voices finally began to break through, possibly as a result of the impact the Women's Press and similar projects on the publishing world in terms of

identifying both a definite market and a pool of talent. Meera Syal stands out amongst the crop of female immigrant writers who emerged at this time and her broad appeal over the years (as a television writer and actor as well as a novelist) put her in a unique position of being one of the most popular and prolific British Asian writers within and beyond Asian communities. Syal first achieved prominence as an actor in Hanif Kureishi's *Sammy and Rosie* (1987). She went on to script her own film, *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and write the book for Andrew Lloyd Webber's West-End musical *Bombay Dreams* (2002) before creating and starring in TV comedy series *Goodness, Gracious Me* (BBC 1996-2001) and *The Kumars at No.42* (BBC 2001-2006). Syal has written two novels *Anita and Me* (1996) and *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (Syal, 2000). This prolific output together with her broad appeal position Syal as one of few British Asian commentators recognised within dominant British cultural institutions. Dave Gunning says of her:

She remains one of the most high profile Asian women in Britain and has been able to articulate her views of what being Asian and British might mean from an unusually privileged position. (Gunning, 2011, p. 111)

As a result of the progress made by British Asian writers in the 1990s, 21st Century representations of British Asians entered a newer, broader spectrum, potentially with the opportunity to become more self-defined. A larger number of British Asian female writers (although still mainly published by smaller, specialist presses) started to be recognised and accepted into academic forums and literary circles but remained marginalised in terms of the mainstream book industry. Alongside Meera Syal, two other female writers stand out in this decade for managing to position themselves alongside male counterparts Kureishi and Rushdie, indicating that female as well as male writers of immigrant descent were now beginning to make inroads to the British literary mainstream. These writers are novelist Monica Ali whose *Brick Lane* (Ali, 2003) portrays the position of Bengali women in the large Muslim community of

Tower Hamlets in London and screen writer and director Gurinder Chadha..Chadha like Kureishi, began her career in the 1980's as a playwright, and soon established herself as a director with the award-winning *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) followed by *Bend It like Beckham* (2002), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) and *It's a Wonderful Afterlife* (2010). Her device is to explore the diverse lives of Indians in Britain using comedic elements to subvert British stereotypes of South Asians.

In recent years attempts have been made to diversify representations of British Asians on screen in particular, exemplified by screenplays *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and the works of Gurinder Chadha and Meera Syal including *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), the sitcom *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC 1998-2000) and the comedy talk show *The Kumars at No.42* (Hat Trick productions 2001-2006); the latter three attempting to subvert racist stereotypes and broaden representation through comedy. According to Stuart Hall (Hall, 1997 , pp. 272-273) such representations have expanded '.....the *range* of racial representations and the *complexity* of what it means to be black [or Asian], thus challenging the reductionism of earlier stereotypes'. However, many of these programmes still continue to present very limited representations of British Asians and therefore remain problematic. Farzana Shain illustrates this in her study into schooling of Asian girls and in particular in her discussion of the film *East is East* (1999) about which she argues:

Was hailed as a success for race relations but ... reproduces familiar themes associated with the cultural pathology discourse of domestic violence, domineering fathers, passive Asian women and the East/West culture clashes. (Shain, 2003, p. 4)

Depressingly, not much progress seems to have been made to date, as illustrated by the most recently commissioned BBC sitcom, *Citizen Khan* (2012), a six part comedy series (first screened 29 August 2012) set amongst the Sparkhill Muslim

community of Birmingham. Written and starring radio presenter Adil Ray, *Citizen Khan* offers a depiction of British Muslims which harks back (in both content and style) to the dim days of racial stereotyping as the butt of the joke in 1970s sitcoms such as London Weekend Television's *Mind Your Language* (1977-1986) and Thames Television's *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972-1976).

A recent and more interesting development is the number of creative non-fiction books that have emerged from British Asian writers and commentators since 2005. These are often presented as memoir and focus on the conflicts and confusion of growing up as a second or third generation South Asian in Britain between the mid-sixties and the 1990s. Recent notable examples of this genre include *Greetings from Bury Park* (Manzoor, 2008) which frames the memoir around the author's relationship with the music of Bruce Springsteen; Sathnam Sanghera's *If You Don't Know Me By Now* (also known as *The Boy With A Topknot*) (Sanghera, 2008) which explores the author's family's struggles with mental health issues; and Zaiba Malik's *We are a Muslim Please* (Malik, 2011), a funny but complex account of what it means to be a 'good Muslim' in a post 7/7 climate. One explanation for the rise in the number of published memoirs is that there is now a perceived demand for less one-dimensional accounts of British Asian experience and for British Asian writers to position themselves culturally in a way that reflects real experiences.

As British Asian writing has emerged historically so have the ways in which it is debated and valued. Specifically, British Asian writing has become synonymous with conceptual debate around key ideas of representation and authenticity and I will explore the impact of this on British Asian writers in the next section.

The Burden of Representation

When analysing fictions either about or by British Asians a number of issues begin to emerge as concerns for minority writers. Predominantly, the main issue is that of representation and how this affects notions of self identity for individual writers who find they are grappling with the tension of meeting expectations of dominant cultural institutions (including publishers and the media) and the relationships with the communities they are often taken to represent. For the purposes of this Introduction, I am using the phrase *the burden of representation*, as coined by Ruth Maxey, (Maxey, 2008) to define the issue.

In most discussions about minority artists, race and ethnicity are often seen as the markers of identity. However, it is necessary to consider how representations of ethnicity have either influenced or indeed restricted wider, more complex approaches to identity, often as a result of critical debate around the writing in question. In his essay *Representation*, W.J.T Mitchell summarises the issue thus:

It should be clear that representation, even purely “aesthetic” representation of fictional persons and events, can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions; one might argue, in fact, that representation is precisely the point where these questions are likely to enter literary work. (Mitchell, 1995, p. 15)

For British Asian writers this is particularly pertinent as representation and self-defined notions of identity are entwined – rather like the chicken and egg analogy. The key question here is whether self representation of British Asian writers is moulded by what are perceived as expectations of readers and publishers and, if so, is this restricting the emergence of broader literary representations of British Asian communities? Stuart Hall argues this case in his ongoing analysis of the politics of representation. Hall

argues that the methods in which black (and Asian) people are represented under a dominant white ideology result from political and economic agendas which function to construct them as 'Other'. Hall claims that the 'invisible' nature of this ideology leads black people to understand themselves as 'Other':

It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the 'Other' of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge', not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm. (Hall, 1990, p. 226)

To understand how this affects British Asian writers we must consider Hall's notion that identity is not fixed but rather a fluid concept:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact ... we should think, instead, of identity as a "production", which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Hall, 1990, p. 222).

In other words, Hall demonstrates that representation not only affects how ethnic groups are perceived within society but also how they come to view their own identities; identities which are not determined by nature but are derived through social interaction.

Few writers have successfully managed to negotiate the complex issues of identity in their writing. Hanif Kureishi is one that has done so and most notably in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which directly corresponds to Hall's notion of a shifting identity shaped by history and location amongst other factors. Published over twenty-one years ago, it is also one of only a handful of books by British Asian writers to have had a lasting impact. *The Buddha of Suburbia* brought the experience of British Asians to the fore in a time when second generation British Asians were just beginning to negotiate their own identities. Furthermore, it did so in a way that deviated from the self notion as the 'other', instead offering a fluid, complex and organic representation of

identity using fiction to negotiate multiple British identities. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is one of the earliest examples of postcolonial literature reflecting on what it means to identify oneself within a group but also challenging what this membership implies or represents. For example, the characters of Karim and Jamila in *The Buddha of Suburbia* are complex, presenting a new view of what British Asian identity is or is becoming. Karim is the protagonist narrator of the novel: a young, suburban South London actor on the make. His story is about identification - suspended between "*belonging and not,*" between his Indian heritage and assimilating into British society - being an "*Englishman born and bred, almost*" (p.3). His character posits that there is a space for both identities by accepting much of his Indian-ness but also revelling in the cultural world (fashion/music/films/books etc) of a British teenager. Karim's sexuality is also complicated. He has no sexual preference and will sleep with anyone, male or female. This fluid sexuality positions him on a threshold, negotiating an identity which is neither totally homosexual nor heterosexual just as his cultural identity is neither exclusively Indian nor British.

Jamila is the most political and compelling of Karim's friends. She also negotiates with both her identity, through her autodidactic explorations of the politics of race, and with her sexuality, experimenting with sex with Karim and with other men and women. It is through this character that the reader is given a perspective on the constantly shifting socio-political climate of London - identity politics in flux. Karim and Jamila are hybrids – subverting stereotypes – sexuality, masculinity and race – blurring the boundaries in a way we now consider ahead of its time. Karim, Jamila and others in the novel offered, for the first time, a reflection of the multifarious experiences of Asians in Britain as opposed to the rigidly stereotypical perceptions that existed in cultural output previously.

A detailed reading of *The Buddha of Suburbia* shows that Kureishi did grapple with issues of presenting the Indian immigrant family in a way that appeared to be

easily accepted or understood by the mainstream – i.e. focussed around an authoritarian patriarch, unhappy arranged marriages and repressed and subjugated women. Most apparently in *The Buddha of Suburbia* this more typical characterisation is presented via Uncle Anwar, Jamila's father and the maintainer of 'old ways'. However, Anwar is more than a 'facile caricature' as described by Neil Berry in *The London Review of Books* and quoted by Nahem Yousaf (Yousaf, 2002, p. 42) and instead can be seen to represent all that Kureishi seems to deplore i.e. identity as a fixed and rigid notion, looking backwards towards the 'motherland' for cultural guidance and definitions of home rather than a new, shifting hybrid identity which can be seen as underpinning the concept of British multiculturalism.

Wendy O'Shea-Meddour, in her essay on Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, notes a further problem for Kureishi specifically but also more generally for the British Asian writer, highlighted by the limited concerns of the critical responses to *Buddha*: 'Central characters continue to be marginalised and the striking portrayal of women, masculinity, racism and Islam overlooked'. (O'Shea-Meddour, 2008, p. 33). For example, Karim is more discussed in critical commentary than the more subversive (female) Jamila. O'Shea-Meddour concludes that the failure of critics to engage with the more complex characterisations in the novel: '...Only serves to demonstrate the importance of the novels central message: Interpretation is too frequently a reductive affair.' (O'Shea-Meddour, 2008, p. 51). She implies that although writers are moving forward by presenting new and more complex responses through literature to notions of identity and representation of multicultural Britain, critical response remains primarily focussed on that which is acceptable in terms of more general understandings and perceptions of British Asian communities. This can also be considered by extending O'Shea-Meddour's premise to argue that this is not only the case in terms of what aspects of the writing critics/commentators choose to write about but also which writers they choose to focus on. Kureishi is known to have said on a number of occasions that

he does not care about what other people want or expect him to write. The question that arises is whether he is able to maintain this position (of taboo-busting and boundary pushing) because he has not aligned himself to one culture or one ethnic identity but, rather, explores identity politics very much as multifarious with membership to either British or Asian or indeed British Asian constituting a diverse range of experiences, alliances and allegiances. Kureishi's own dual cultural heritage has perhaps enabled him to successfully negotiate such complex issues through his writing and possibly allowed him to do so in a way others, more entrenched in their mono-cultural heritage, have had less freedom to do.

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) has become the highest profile novel to emerge from a British Asian writer since Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (which preceded it by almost thirteen years). Ali and Kureishi have other things in common too – they are both mixed race, London based, university educated and rooted in middle-class England. This is where the comparisons end however, as whilst Kureishi writes about the culturally dynamic, shifting British landscapes to which he is inextricably linked, Ali has chosen to focus in on a specific working class South Asian community with which she has loose connections. As a result, *Brick Lane* appears to present a less successful negotiation of the complex issues referred to earlier. In spite of very mixed reviews of the actual text, Ali has been the focus of much critical attention, illustrating the nuances of critical response towards British Asian writers. *Brick Lane* has been besieged by controversy since its publication in 2003, with two interlinked issues dominating critical reaction and general discourse around the novel: representation of the community on which the novel focuses; and the experience of the writer herself, in terms of her credentials to be writing seemingly from an insider position within this community. Together these issues merge to pose the question that has dominated critical commentary – how authentic is Monica Ali's representation of

the working class, marginalized Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane and surrounding areas of the East End?

Ali came to attention before *Brick Lane* was published when she was included on the Granta 'Best New Novelists' list. Some of the critical reaction to the book can be related back to this pre/ post-publishing hype. It has also been claimed that Ali's 'glamour and relative youth have not hurt the book sales' (Maxey, 2008, p. 220) and perhaps this is part of the reason publishers Doubleday felt she was worth investing in, as a marketable face of British Asian fiction and perhaps more generally as an acceptable face of British multiculturalism, appealing to both a white and a more ethnically diverse marketplace. Maxey's reference to Ali's youth and glamour may refer to Yasmin-Alibhai Brown who says, in her article for *The Independent* newspaper, Monica Ali belongs to: '...a new breed of preferred ethnic writers...mixed race, au fait with Oxbridge, not too dark or troublingly alien'. (Alibhai-Brown, 2009).

Ali is not the first writer to focus on the little-written about Bangladeshi community, there have been others – notably Bangladeshi-born Syed Manzurul Islam whose collection of short stories, *The Mapmakers of Spitalfields*, was published six years before *Brick Lane* in 1997 by Peepal Tree Press. However, Ali is the first British Asian novelist who has been able to make an impact on the book-buying market and thereby pull the Bangladeshi community from its shadow-like existence on the fringes of literary representation onto the bookshelves and review pages of the middle-class novel reading mainstream. As Maxey points out, this forms the basis for a more complex reason for the book's success:

The success of *Brick Lane* can also be explained by a sense of fashionable novelty associated with it, namely a perception – that Ali is exposing a hidden world. (Maxey, 2008, p. 220)

Ali provoked further controversy by being challenged as unrepresentative of the very community her novel focussed on, resulting in protests by members of the Bangladeshi community directed at publishers and filmmakers as well as Ali herself. A group called the The Greater Sylhet Welfare and Development Council accused Ali of misrepresenting their community by stating publically that the book: ‘... is a despicable insult to Bangladeshis at home and abroad’. (Suroor, 2003)

By adopting a broadly realistic framework in the novel, Ali clearly appears to be speaking on behalf of this marginalised community. However, her position as a mixed-race, Oxford-educated, liberal writer complicates this by necessitating a certain level of imitation, as if pretending to be from within that community – a kind of ventriloquism as described by Dr Nick Bentley in a conference abstract on the subject of *Brick Lane*. (Bentley, 2008). This perceived ruse sparked the now well-publicised row between Salman Rushdie and Germaine Greer through the pages of *The Guardian* with Greer offering one of the most vehement attacks on the novel and its writer when she said:

British people know little and care less about the Bangladeshi people in their midst, their first appearance as characters in an English novel had the force of a defining caricature. (Lewis, 2006).

Maxey says that this surrounding publicity for *Brick Lane* has had the effect of putting both the book and its author in the position of having to bear the ‘burden of representation’. She says:

Whenever a text by a minority writer is greeted with mainstream success, its author is placed in the curious role of community spokesperson when, more often than not, she conceives herself as an independent, idiosyncratic artist. (Maxey, 2008, pp. 217-236).

Opinions on the book continue to be polarised both in terms of its literary merit and in its representations of a British based South Asian community. Maxey concludes;

Whatever one's opinion of the text... early critical reception demonstrates that the burden of representation remains firmly in place and that novels such as *Brick Lane* suffer unfairly from the expectations this generates. (Maxey, 2008, pp. 217-236)

As a novel, *Brick Lane* is not perfect. However, Ali's treatment from critics (and the Asian communities themselves) on the grounds of authenticity appears unprecedented amongst her white counterparts. The question arises. whether British Asian writers are being stifled by the expectation, on one hand, to produce novels which fit the marketable brand of culture clash fiction and, on the other, by criticisms of inauthenticity.

Londonstani, a coming-of-age novel set in Hounslow, the debut novel of journalist Gautam Malkani, suffers a similar fate to Ali's *Brick Lane*, if on a lesser scale. Jas, the narrator in the book, is an 18-year old '*Londonstani*' who tries to fit in with a gang of affluent middle-class teenage boys, all of whom pretend to be more ghettoised than they actually are. The novel exposes a street culture where young Asian men struggle with their white counterparts to assert their own brand of Britishness against the backdrop of the divergent cultures of the elder Asian generations. Malkani sums up *Londonstani* in his own words on his website:

Basically the book tells the story of a bunch of 19-year, old middle-class mummy's boys trying to be men – which they do by asserting their cut-and-paste ethnic identities; by blending their machismo with consumerism; by trying to talk and act as if their affluent corner of a London suburb is some kind of gritty ghetto. (Malkani, n.d.)

On publication, *Londonstani* received a very mixed critical reception. Many hailed him as the spokesperson of the new generation of British Asian youth ('Undoubtedly the biggest British Asian novel of the millennium....' *Asiana Magazine*) (Malkani, n.d.) whilst others slated the book for being inauthentic and misrepresentative of British Asian communities in 21st century Britain:

There is a hollow ring to the Hounslow-born, Cambridge-educated, Creative Business editor of the Financial Times trying so self-consciously to appear, ahem, down with the kids. *The Sunday Times* (Malkani, n.d.).

Malkani, includes extracts of almost forty reviews and critiques (both good and bad) on his website - a reflection of the widespread critical interest in the book. The fate of *Londonstani* is, perhaps, down to the fact that, like Ali, Malkani fails to employ effective strategies to circumnavigate the 'burden of representation' and so, instead, becomes both lionised and simultaneously slammed for not being all things to all British Asians.

In a response to this critical reaction journalist Sarfraz Manzoor (Manzoor, 2006) says, in an article for *The Observer*: 'If you are white and middle-class, it seems, you are allowed to be an artist; if you are Asian, you must be authentic'. Alibhai-Brown sees this kind of response in complex racial terms when she refers to Monica Ali as one of the preferred 'ethnic' writers... not too dark or troublingly alien' (Alibhai-Brown, 2009). She would probably put Malkani in this category too. Alibhai-Brown also debates a wider issue around this when, in the same article, she observes that 'the over enthusiastic and insufficiently critical acceptance' of cultural outputs from Black and Asian artists have a two-fold result of burdening artists with 'inflated valuations' and thereby burdening them with the responsibility of representation whilst simultaneously arousing suspicion and scepticism from the communities they are assumed to be representatives of. Alibhai-Brown sums this up when she says in her article:

These critics (...) don't get it when it comes to black and Asian artists. Aroused by encounters with the unfamiliar and the unknown, a visceral excitement overwhelms their critical faculties and they end up giving us inflated valuations, instead of considered, intelligent and scrupulously dispassionate verdicts, which we have the right to expect . (Alibhai-Brown, 2009)

Critical reaction to Monica Ali and Gautam Malkani raises questions about whether there is an acceptable face of British multiculturalism which prohibits the emergence of alternative narratives from British Asian writers. The issue is a complex one as few novels (since *The Buddha of Suburbia*) have emerged that do offer more layered representations of British Asians and, therefore, more successfully negotiate this burden of representation. I will now go on to consider two (alongside Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia*) that do so successfully negotiate this issue, these are *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2003) by Nadeem Aslam and Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999)

Maps for Lost Lovers is a closely observed novel about a working-class immigrant Pakistani community existing in a northern English town. While the author, Nadeem Aslam, like Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*, portrays this community as closed off and isolated, he does so in a way that presents an affecting portrait of a society that is both distinct within its setting but is also suffocating beneath the traditions it clings on to. The story is set in an unnamed town, renamed Dashte-e-Tanhaii (translated from Urdu as The Desert of Loneliness or the Wilderness of Solitude) by its inhabitants. The novel's principal characters are Muslim but they have relationships with Hindus and Sikhs with whom they live both side by side but also at odds, united only by their shared suspicion of the seemingly godless white society that surrounds them. On the surface the book is about the repercussions and aftermath of the shockingly brutal honour killings of unmarried lovers, Jugnu and Chanda. This event takes place before

the novel begins but it is the ramifying consequences of this event that frame the story, particularly through the eyes of Shamas (Jugnu's older brother), an educated, liberal, religious skeptic and his traditional, deeply pious wife Kaukab, the daughter of a cleric who is 'trapped within the cage of permitted thinking' (p. 113). Shamas and Kaukab are totally immersed in community participation but only in their own socio-cultural activities, reducing the potential for meeting outsiders, in particular white Britons. Shamas' and Kaukab's three adult children, by contrast, are integrated in mainstream society but alienated, to varying degrees, from their parents and their community. This provides an ongoing tension in the novel particularly for Kaukab, whose anguish and distress leads to tragic consequences whereby she alienates her sons, bullies her daughter into a loveless marriage, and betrays her brother-in-law in a way that eventually leads to his murder. Kaukab, however, retains our sympathy partly as she is a product of a society restricted by strict religious and moral codes and determined by a constant fear of 'what people will think/say', and where: 'shame, guilt, honour and fear are like padlocks hanging from mouths' (p. 45).

On an even deeper level, the novel is about the confusion and displacement that leads to such crimes as the so-called honour killing of Chanda and Jugnu (by her brothers) being committed in the name of Islam. Ultimately the culture clash in *Maps for Lost Lovers* is that of culture clashing violently with itself as the struggle between modernity and the security of an inherited and ancient religious doctrine culminates to isolate these immigrants from the surrounding white society but also from one another, resulting in a torn and disaffected society. Kaukab is just one of the many victims of this and Aslam presents a panorama of other 'victims', all well drawn characters including: a woman hiding the truth about her abusive marriage; another longing to be reunited with her estranged husband; a man guiltily attracted to a woman of another faith and a couple torn between their love for their murdered daughter and a loyalty to her killers.

Aslam has suggested that *Maps for Lost Lovers* is, in part, a response to the events of 9/11 and that he was inspired to condemn the smaller-scale 9/11s that go on

every day through the novel (Brace, 2004). These are difficult subjects, not easily debated by either Western liberals (for fear of being daubed racist) nor by traditional, moderate Muslims attempting to maintain their faith in a world polarised between religious fundamentalism and the globalised values of the secular West on the other. As Dave Gunning points out, *Maps for Lost Lovers*:

Offers a portrait of a generation far more closed off from Britain, far closer to Pakistani mores and customs, and less turning to Islam than simply retaining an inherited harsh version of the faith. (Gunning, 2011, p. 83)

As such *Maps* succeeds on many levels in negotiating the issues surrounding the 'burden of representation. This is in contrast to the more one-dimensional accounts of a British Asian community exemplified above in *Brick Lane* and *Londonstani*. Specifically, *Maps for Lost Lovers* presents characters that are vivid, flawed and ultimately human, refusing to shy away from confronting the multiple and often contradictory layers that make up human experience.

Meera Syal's second novel *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* is also a text that attempts to offer a more complex account of British Asian identity. Set in the late 1990s the novel depicts a year in the lives of three thirty-something British Asian female friends, Tania, Chila and Sunita, whose lives intertwine in both positive and negative ways throughout the narrative, with moments of close bonding to those of ultimate betrayal. The story is told through the viewpoints of the three women as they embark on diverging lives through career, marriage and other life choices. Tania is single with a successful media career. She is presented as sexy and smart but frustrated by the limitations placed upon her as an Asian woman working in television, continuously being asked to present and represent the 'Asian' interest story. Sunita, once a brilliant and politicised law student, has settled into a life of tedious domesticity with Akash, her university sweetheart. Her husband is unwilling to share

the domestic workload or the burden of caring for young children, challenging her feminist beliefs about the roles of men and women within the family; naive and inexperienced Chila has just married high flying local 'catch' Deepak in a traditional Hindu marriage: ' bagging not only a groom with his own teeth, hair, degree and house, but the most eligible bachelor within a 20-mile radius.' (p.30). As Chila's and Deepak's marriage falls apart (and an affair with Tania is exposed) Chila emerges as the unexpected survivor of the group. She becomes an example rather than a victim stuck with the ' putting up and shutting up' approach expected of Asian women in failing marriages. However, the real explosion that rocks the friendship is Tania's documentary, set among British Asian communities, with a focus on the theme of love and marriage including on the relationships of her friends Sunita and Chila. The documentary commission is one Tania initially refuses because she implicitly understands that it will be littered with crude stereotypes, ridiculing and reducing her community to strange and foreign for the purpose of entertainment and amusement. However, Tania's ambition and frustration, with both her professional and personal life, lead her to acquiesce to pressure and she produces the film with dire consequences.

Life isn't all Ha Ha Hee Hee is about the choices facing women across all cultures – specifically around making the best choices in adverse circumstances. In presenting the narrative, Syal refuses to contain either herself or the reader to a unitary vision of the British Asian woman. She does this partly by presenting the story from the varying viewpoints of the women and in doing so offers an exploration of the rich complexities of British-Asian female relationships including that of mothers and daughters. The story is essentially about female friendship of the 'kind that, refreshingly, believes in a kind of sisterhood which with a certain amount of humour can pull through the worst of times' (Roberts, 2000). Whilst the characters are very much alike in terms of their (Punjabi) cultural backgrounds and their concerns and preoccupations – predominantly relationship dilemmas set against the cultural

distinctions of British contemporary society and traditional Hindu/Sikh culture, the alternative trajectories presented challenge stereotypes:

Sorry, I don't buy that bullshit any more', responded Suki tartly. 'I meet women every day who on paper have no choices, but against every odd, they up and leave their homes, challenge their families, question their communities..We spend all our energy making excuses for not doing anything. Do you know how much effort it takes to stand still and do nothing, blame everyone else for your misery? Much more than it takes to actually change things, change yourself. (p.161)

Both *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* and *Maps for Lost Lovers*, like *Buddha of Suburbia* before them, can be viewed as making significant moves towards a more fluid concept of both identity negotiation and representation of British Asian communities by presenting us with layered narratives, multi-dimensional characters that defy cliché and stereotype but essentially, in very different ways, by offering us good stories, with narrative drive that enable us to move beyond the fact that we are reading about British Asian characters as separate or as an 'exotic' device but rather that we are reading well conceived and well written novels about modern British experiences. Unfortunately, in spite of some interesting developments in British Asian literary fiction over the past two decades, the headway made by novels such as *Buddha of Suburbia*, *Maps for Lost Lovers* and *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, in terms of offering stories that represent the modern experiences of British Asians whilst simultaneously gaining a certain amount of recognition from dominant cultural institutions (media and book industry) as well as a diverse and not insignificant readership, seem to be the exception rather than the rule.

From Hanif Kureishi onwards a number of writers have been lauded with titles such as 'the new voice of multicultural Britain'. However, other than Kureishi, very

few have managed to hang on to the title for long. Part of the problem is that those that are quick to hand out the accolades are also quick to criticise with accusations of 'in-authenticity' when writers are revealed to be middle-class and well educated. It seems that the publishing world wants writers it can promote as being authentically Asian but finds it hard to recognise that 'typical and authentic' is both a big ask and one that seems to be directed specifically at black and Asian writers. It is particularly difficult when the majority of the book industry is in fact populated by the well-educated, white middle-class. On the one hand, mainstream publishing wants to engage with writers that are acceptable (in crudely racial terms - as put forward by Alibhai Brown) but on the other are accused of not engaging with 'the troubled reality of British 'multiculturalism' as M.K.Chakrabhati argues in an article on the online literary forum, *The Boston Review*. He says:

The financial pull of the potential bestseller demands that a writer beset her characters with such familiar, mainstream problems as adultery rather than engage with...the real multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural society that the rest of us do not want to see. This is where the cheat of the successful multicultural novel is laid bare: for all its multicultural packaging, *Brick Lane* is strictly monocultural, "see they are just like us" affair. (Chakrabarti, 2003)

It is worth observing that, perhaps, Chakrabhati, if he was writing a couple of years later, may not have included Nadeem Aslam's acutely observed portrait of an immigrant community as presented in *Maps for Lost Lovers* in this indictment because Aslam's world is very much on the edge of the 'troubled reality of multiculturalism' (Chakrabarti, 2003). The questions remain around what kinds of impact this debate and critical response has on emerging writers who are attempting to tell stories about experiences of being British and Asian? Are British Asian writers hemmed in by this constant reference to authenticity or are we beginning to see shifts in new and

interesting ways in the presentation of content that emerges from straddling two cultures, as illustrated by Syal and Kureishi?

What is the exact issue here? Is it that a story told from the perspective of the middle class gaze (an outsider looking in) is more acceptable to publishers and readers because the offer is an acceptable and predictable face of multicultural Britain? Or is it that the educated and middle class are more able to work within the system and are able to get by on an unstable income and, therefore, are more likely to persevere with writing? Either way there are obstacles, perceived or real, that are preventing alternative narratives emerging beyond the dominant culture clash storylines that have become synonymous with British Asian literary output. An engagement with identity politics is not a requirement for writers, whether or not they identify as British Asian, Black British or postcolonial. However, the 'burden of representation' is often voluntarily assumed and perhaps the answer as to why this is the case is the simple fact that the complexities of multicultural Britain continue to be fertile ground for writers but some writers do it better and in a more forward-facing manner than others.. As a writer within this context this presents both challenges and opportunities: the challenge to offer a fresh and alternative perspective to the culture clash fiction that continues to dominate the British Asian literary output and the opportunity to do this by drawing inspiration from those writers I see as successfully negotiating this 'burden of representation'. The answer seems straightforward - to write about what I know, which, like any writer, Asian or not, is a unique set of experiences and relationships that offer a rich and diverse pool of material from which to draw.

Writer's Journey

The context for an aspiring British Asian writer is a complex one, made more complex through individual experiences and journeys. I grew up in the 70s and 80s in a British Asian family in Handsworth, Birmingham surrounded by the joint values of traditional Asian culture of respect for family and elders and an emphasis on working hard as a means to progressing through life and becoming upwardly socially mobile. However, I was also surrounded by people of diverse cultural backgrounds living in reduced circumstances which contradicted much of the sense of opportunity that was offered as a reward for hard work and conformist, non-challenging behaviour as the route to success. The environment in Handsworth was, and remains, archetypically working class with vast sections of the community either unemployed or in low paid jobs (factory work, shop work, cleaning etc) and the opportunities for social mobility and aspiration severely restricted. In the 70s and 80s it was an exciting and lively environment, with the street central to community life, doubling as playground and as a welcome alternative space to the cramped conditions of the rows upon rows of terraced housing which had survived (or not yet succumbed) to the slum-clearing policies of national and local government. It, like many similar areas across the country, is typified by its diverse communities, where the adults share similar economic deprivations but live culturally segregated lives while their children play out alongside multicultural neighbours with whom they identify on a peer level, sharing popular youth and music cultures. With houses often close enough together to holler across the street to neighbours and friends or to overhear domestic squabbles, a sense of community existed in Handsworth in this period whether you actively engaged in it or not. Within this environment British Asians had their own separated version or extension of working-class community (as did other immigrant groups), based on the extended family-living common to many first generations Asians from India or Pakistan. This sub-

community, centred around core members of the family (many immigrants settled within very short distances of distant relatives or other families from similar religious or caste backgrounds), establishing circles or groups where similar experiences of existing as immigrants in Britain were shared and mirrored. For example: many of the men worked at one time or another in local factories, on the buses or (for those who had managed to arrive with or accumulate a small pot of money) in trying to build up small businesses, mostly in retail or the textile industry.

As an Asian girl growing up in the often claustrophobic, fish-bowl like existence of an immigrant culture within a working-class community, music and books offered an insight into the possibilities that existed beyond the restrictions of home and the limitations of location. It is with this as a context that I began writing in my teens and early twenties, initially influenced by the gritty, working class novels of writers such as Beryl Bainbridge and Alan Sillitoe as well as Orwell, Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, before moving on the Russian, French and South American literature in my later teens and twenties. Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (Allison & Busby 1974) was the first time I came across a book that directly mirrored the experiences of migrants in Britain and had a profound effect on me. However, it was only when I saw Kureishi's *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985) and read *The Buddha of Suburbia* (Kureishi, 1990) that I actually realised that being British Asian, however we choose to define ourselves, presented a completely unique set of experiences and potential narratives.

My journey as a writer was developed through my experience as a literature development activist as part of Centerprise Literature Development Project (an Arts Council Regularly Funded Organisation) in East London from 2001 – 2006. Literature development can be defined as pro-actively exploring gaps in provision or professional development for emerging or aspiring writers of all backgrounds and creating avenues for them to explore their art. At Centerprise these avenues included workshops, access to publishers and agents through 1-2-1 surgeries, working-sharing events with

invited industry representatives and critical reads (e.g. The Literary Consultancy Bursary Scheme). The project also offered opportunities specifically aimed at showcasing work from writers of African and Asian descent via the printed literary journal, *Calabash*, for self-defined writers of colour of all ethnic backgrounds. The editorial aim of *Calabash* was to offer a platform to writers of diverse backgrounds via a distribution strategy that included mainstream publishers but also through relationships with smaller, specialist presses such as Peepal Tree, Allison and Busby and Black Amber.

The struggle of writers of colour trying to get noticed and establish a professional career in fiction whilst simultaneously seeking to explore more complex and layered approaches to identity and representation through their writing was the focus of much discussion via letters and emails from readers of *Calabash*, and via interviews with writers. Monica Ali broaches the subject when talking to *Calabash* journalist Elaine Williams about responses to her work:

‘Being British and Asian doesn’t mean that I can’t write about anything under the sun the same way any white British writer can’. (Williams, 2006)

Literature projects around the country such as Centerprise (including New Writing South in Brighton and Spread the Word in London) continue to mentor and develop new writers of all backgrounds with a focus on underrepresented (in the mainstream) writers. Whilst it is refreshing to see that interventions of the nature are still being made, it is slightly disconcerting to realise that they are still necessary and that (in spite of continued work by literature projects, smaller presses and writers themselves) few British Black or Asian literary fiction writers have actually managed to establish themselves firmly within the mainstream with any real long term success. In my five years as Managing Editor of *Calabash*, of those that have become established (including most notably Andrea Levy), only Monica Ali and Hari Kunzru could be

described as British Asian, and interestingly both are mixed race and firmly rooted in the middle class sensibilities of their upbringings. It is with these complex contexts in mind that I approach my continuing journey as a British Asian writer.

I have returned to writing after a break for career and family and have written a number of short stories including *Vermillion*, which was a runner up in the first Decibel Penguin Prize. Ideas have emerged in these short pieces around issues of identity and the relationship between multiculturalism and class, reflecting on the experiences of my childhood. My characters and some scenes draw on my own experiences and those of the people I grew up around and past experiences, observations and fragments of characteristics of people I have come across meld together to create fictional characters, scenarios and plot. This Critical Introduction is to a longer, more substantial piece of creative writing that I am now developing which seeks to build on these short stories and challenge the limitations (perceived or actual) that face British Asian writers. Fundamentally, I am seeking to do this by writing from the perspective of the characters looking out on to the world around them and responding to the political and social environments they find themselves existing within rather than being looked in upon as a separate or 'other' group marginalised and set apart as exotic or alien by their inability to assimilate or contribute to new and interesting developments in British culture in a way that is meaningful. I have chosen, as far as is possible within this context to negotiate with the notion of the 'burden of representation' by writing about the multi-dimensional range of experiences of a family who all respond to the huge tragedy of losing a son and sibling in very different ways. By presenting a third person narrative varying across the points of view of the individual family members I hope to offer a multi-dimensional narrative rather than one that offers a unitary version of the British Asian experience or response. This is also why I have also chosen occasionally to adopt a omniscient narrative voice too; in my personal journey I have now moved to the outside (I am no longer a resident of Handsworth or indeed of

Birmingham) and I acknowledge that through education I have also had the opportunity to become upwardly socially mobile. Given this transition from insider to outsider, the multiple viewpoints together with a more objective occasional omniscient narrator give me the flexibility to adopt both an insider and an outsider position as necessary when writing from the differing viewpoints. This reflects my own position which continues to fluctuate between outsider and insider, with strong family connections in Handsworth yet a lifestyle that is quite different to that of my childhood or the lifestyles of my wider Birmingham based family. Ultimately, these devices allow me to offer a more authentic tone for the novel.

As a writer I want to write about characters and settings I know to exist and have experience of, understanding that all communities are unique in terms of their shared historical journeys but also as individuals responding to the circumstances they find themselves in. My aim is to convey a sense of this family existing in this setting, at this particular point in time, whilst dealing with more universal themes of loss and displacement through a layered denouement. For example, Kuldip, the father of the protagonist family, is a complex character and the tragedy of Billy's death is one too many for him, reawakening memories and secrets that have been buried for many years under uncertainty and childhood guilt surrounding the unexplained death of his own brother when they were children in India. He begins drinking heavily and this leads to the escalation in his feelings of bitterness, anger and isolation towards and within his family. Kuldip's breakdown is connected to his back story which is partly revealed through the novel, predominantly to contrast his experience as a first generation migrant with the experiences of his wife and children who can be more accurately defined as second and third generation. Kuldip's outcome is linked to the fact that he continues to feel like an outsider and an immigrant throughout the narrative, unlike the other members of the family who are very much part of a newer

community – that of Lozells and Handsworth, their culture extending beyond the homeland to a specific working-class British Asian experience.

'Everything falling apart', Kuldip whispers as they leave. He sits down on the edge of the bed and covers his face with his hands. When the footsteps on the stairs fade away, he feels for the hip flask in his pocket. He unscrews the lid and licks up the few drops of whiskey that shake into his mouth. As the smell of urine begins to permeate the room Kuldip sobs, squeezing the cold metal of the empty flask until his knuckles become white and bloodless. (Duggal, 2013, p. 58)

When Usha, Kuldip's wife, realizes that Kavi, her oldest son, is slipping into the state of disaffection felt by many of the young people in the area she decides to try and change things. She gathers strength through her friendship with Gillian, a local white neighbour. Together the two women join forces with other mothers in the area to lobby for change to try and help their children rise above the difficult economic and environmental circumstances. Again, similar to Meera Syal in *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, I have felt it important to reflect how relationships (and particularly networks of support) amongst women can and do transcend cultural differences. The inclusion of Gillian as a key character in the novel allows Usha to express her feelings as a mother, wife and woman (rather than specifically as an Asian woman in these roles) and this allows her to both reveal her innermost thoughts but also to share common ground with her friend although their worlds are culturally divided on the surface:

Anila kneels silently behind the kitchen door, her ear pressed against it, listening to her mother talk in hushed tones to Gillian in a way that makes her wonder if she really is their mother, not some other mother from some other family. It is the first time she hears her mother talk about giving birth. Gillian

manages to coax memories out of Usha in a way she and the rest of the family cannot. (Duggal, 2013, p. 17)

Anila, the youngest daughter of Kuldip and Usha, is bored by the poverty and lack of opportunity in her surroundings. She finds refuge in the pop culture of the day and after Billy's death begins also to go through a process of change which results in a political (and sexual) awakening. By the end of the novel she begins to see that it is poverty rather than her cultural heritage which restricts her and this journey leads to a appreciation of her unique position of being part of a new generation, born out of the British Asian experience and multiculturalism.

The novel opens with a strong sense of place, depicting the Lozells area of Handsworth in the 1980s. Creating a strong sense of this place, one I know intimately and am aware has little or no literary representation, has become important to me as a writer particularly as I feel this setting is an underrepresented landscape in contemporary literary output. Far from being cut off or isolated geographically within Britain, these kinds of urban landscapes have organically developed into multicultural communities, with the positives and potential negatives (in terms of tensions between the different communities) this brings. Within my novel the family are very much part of a wider community; a unique working-class immigrant culture sitting alongside (although not always harmoniously) bedded in white working class communities and giving rise to many challenges:

Lozells has long been a broken place. The Lozells Road runs through the heart of it and it is the most broken place of all. Cracks in shop windows are taped over with silver gaffer and creased brown packaging tape. Already, even before this night many are boarded over, daubed with the words 'Business as Usual' in jagged spray paint lettering. Any rare shoppers with money in their pockets walk

hurriedly down the Lozells Road towards bus-stops for the busier, livelier Soho Road and on towards the city centre. (Duggal, 2013, p. 7)

As a location, Handsworth itself has provided me with a clear sense of the place I want to explore through my fiction. Whilst music is the life blood of Handsworth, racial tension and social unrest have had the opposite effect and have sapped the energy of the place, creating the tensions which culminated in a brief period of rioting in the summer of 1981 and erupted into bloody violent clashes predominantly between young, black and Asian men and the police after the Handsworth Carnival in the area in 1985. Riots occurred at this time across Britain but most infamously in Brixton, Toxteth in Liverpool as well as in the Handsworth (specifically Lozells) area of Birmingham. Sadly, as illustrated by recent unrest in the same area (2005 and 2011), this is a situation that continues to remain unresolved perhaps (to continue the metaphor) because the causes have been largely ignored in favour of skimming over the symptoms and thus creating a malaise that has been difficult for Handsworth to shake off, as in many of the other deprived inner city areas across Britain.

The Handsworth Times is set in 1981 as the first Handsworth riot erupts in Lozells (in the East Handsworth area of Birmingham). I chose to set the story in the past for a number of reasons including that fact that as a writer I wanted to place some distance between myself and the story so I could have a retrospective eye whilst reflecting on the roots of issues that continue to affect British Asian people today. Creating a sense of place is important to me as atmosphere makes a story come alive for the reader. So, by setting my story in a fixed past I felt that as a writer I could more effectively create this sense of place from the authentic eye of an insider, which I was at that time but cannot claim to be in the same way about the same setting today. Furthermore, a fixed historical setting also gives me the opportunity to write about the place I knew, unaffected and uncomplicated by ever changing technological advances and by world-changing political events that occurred post this fixed time period. Again,

the timeframe allows me to revert to an insider viewpoint as this is what I was within this setting.

The death of the youngest child in the family, Billy, is the catalyst for the action in the novel, triggering intense personal responses from the family but also reflecting a very volatile period of social unrest for the neighbourhood. The tragedy becomes an impetus for positive change for two of the main characters, Usha and Anila, (just as the riots help to bring a wider attention to the circumstances contributing to deprivation in Lozells) in a way that is impossible for Kuldip, whose trajectory is more restricted by his inability to extricate himself from childhood memories. This is partly because Usha and Anila do not feel the same sense of displacement as Kuldip, having grown up in England rather than arriving as independent adults burdened with the responsibility of having to build a new life in a alien society. It is through the character of Kuldip that I am seeking to explore how post-colonial migration can become wrapped up in issues of class, often unexpectedly for the migrant. I also am interested in how this, together with actual location can impact of notions of identity and displacement, potentially placing limitations which may continue to present as second and third generations establish new approaches to cultural heritage and the sense of home. Interestingly, it is also through the inclusion of the character of Kuldip I recognise that as a British Asian writer I have been unable to completely throw off the 'burden of representation' which I have explored in relation to established writers in the second section of this paper. When writing *The Handsworth Times*, I felt pressed by an inner obligation to write Kuldip in a way that would partly represent the crises of identity which often appears as part of the complex legacy of post-colonial immigration experience. For Kuldip, personal and collective memory are tied together through inextricable strands which ultimately lead to his displacement and as such he represents the increasingly fragile connections of old and new worlds for and within the family. For me this felt

politically important to reflect, possibly demonstrating my own inability to entirely escape the constraints of writing about one's own ethnic community.

The riots in Birmingham in the 1980s provide the framework of my story, a period of recent history which is little explored in cultural output. The tragedy that befalls the family (loss of a child as a circumstance of a riot but not as a direct result of the unrest) mirrors the tragedy of a community on the verge of breakdown where the people of the area appear to have little control over their own destinies or the fractured relations with authority. Creative responses to the riots have emanated from within Handsworth: from the home-grown and culturally diverse musicians of the area (most notably Steel Pulse's *Handsworth Revolution*, Island records, 1978, Scientist Sound System, The Beat, Ruby Turner and Apache Indian); also from local poets such as Benjamin Zephaniah and photography through the work of Dr Vanley Burke and Pogus Caesar's documentary style stills which captured the riots as they occurred; and in film, notably *Handsworth Songs* (1986), Black Audio Film Collective's groundbreaking documentary about the riots. As influential as these responses have been, as far as I can tell, all have been from within the Handsworth communities, with little recognition or cultural reaction beyond this.

Wider social unrest across Britain in the early 80s is a period which does have some legacy in popular music including *Ghost Town* by The Specials (Dammers, 1981) and *Guns of Brixton* by The Clash (Simonon, 1979) both with lyrics depicting and reflecting feelings of discontent and disaffection amongst the youth of the time. However, even beyond the Handsworth riots there has been very little in the way of recognised literary legacy about this important period of social history. One exception is *East of Acre Lane* (Wheatle, 2001), the second novel by South London writer Alex Wheatle. Wheatle, a sound system DJ at the time of the Brixton riots, served a term in prison immediately after. Wheatle was awarded an MBE in 2008 for his services to literature. *East of Acre Lane* remains one of the only novels that focuses

directly on the circumstances and consequences of social unrest during the period. It tells the story of a young Brixtonian, Biscuit, his family and the communities of a run-down Brixton estate who survive and exist on the periphery of mainstream society, often hustling and selling drugs to get by and clashing with the Special Patrol Group (SPG), notorious during the late 1970s and early 80s for hounding young black and Asian men by using the search powers allowed under the controversial 'Sus Law' [Vagrancy Act 1824]. In Chapter 23 of *East of Acre Lane, The Brixtoniad*, the riots are described in detail:

Youths were hurling missiles at the police vehicles that were rushing to the scene. A car driven by a black man with a youth in the passenger seat, his T-shirt reddened, almost ran Biscuit over. 'Bloodfire!' he gasped. 'Revolution ah start. (Wheatle, 2001, p. 259)

This gap in literary representation of the riots of the 1980s provides me with an opportunity to write about something I know to have a sustained and important impact on British social development but yet has been little explored in the creative realm. As a writer this is hugely exciting.

Many of the issues surfacing through my storytelling relate to my position as a female Asian British writer and these include questions relating to the kind of story I want to tell in terms of its themes and key concerns but also to my own artistic freedom as a writer of Asian descent. Central to this is the perceived expectation that to succeed as an Asian writer one must fit into an existing pigeonhole or category, slipping neatly under a postcolonial, migration or multicultural banner. I have chosen to focus primarily on the trajectories of the three characters outlined above to allow myself the opportunity to move beyond these categories by exploring a tragic experience through the eyes of three very different characters: Kuldip, a first generation Asian man; Usha, who succeeds at shifting her own trajectory and those of the people around her; and Anila, who, by the end of the novel begins to see that her

restrictions and frustrations are born out of socio-political challenges, rather than strictly cultural ones, and these she shares with her peers of diverse cultural backgrounds. Anila is the closest in age to the age I would have been in this particular time period so whilst her story is not autobiographical it does allow me to use my own memories and cultural references to feed into the narrative thus giving me an approach from which to position my 'insider's' view.

Ultimately, works by British Asian writers that are successful in my view are those that present British Asian experiences as layered and multifarious, defying stereotyping of experiences in cultural terms. This is the position I am attempting to adopt as a writer with a particular journey and context behind me. By choosing a particular framework of the riots for the story alongside a strong sense of place through the use of Handsworth as a location, together with setting of the narrative in the recent past and by using the device of a multiple perspective, I have been mindful in the planning of my novel of the issues that have dominated critical response to many British Asian novels as outlined in section 2 and have attempted to draw inspiration from and employ strategies developed by Kureishi, Syal and Aslam, writers who I feel have successfully negotiated (although not always entirely conquered) issues around the 'burden of representation'.

THE HANDSWORTH TIMES

Synopsis

The Handsworth Times is realistic literary fiction set in the fixed historical period 1981-1984. The action initially is set in the domestic realm of the Agarwal household (a British Asian family) but soon spills out into the urban landscapes of inner-city Birmingham. The genre quickly moves into Social Realism since the day to day existence for family members is very much determined by the circumstances they find themselves living in and responding to, especially in the aftermath of social unrest. The novel begins with a central tragedy, the death of Billy, the youngest member of the family. This sets a bleak tone for the first part of the novel but ultimately the overall tone is optimistic as the tragedy triggers an impetus for positive change in the two main protagonists, Anila and Usha. The bleakness of tone is counterbalanced by an element of humour reflected through the interactions and Brummie banter of the younger members of the family and their acquaintances.

Part One of the novel focuses on the death of Billy against the backdrop of Handsworth and the riots that occurred in the area at this time. It introduces the family members as individuals and in relation to each other as they each try to come to terms with Billy's death and as they are each affected by (and respond to) the environment in which they exist – Kavi through his disaffection, Kuldeep through frustration and alcohol, Nina through physically distancing herself and Kamela through the consequences of her social choices. Part One goes on to set the scene for the emergence of Anila and Usha as the heroes of the story, since they both ultimately allow Billy's death to act as an impetus for change, choosing as they do, to try and improve the world in which they exist. Part One also tracks the descent of Kuldeep, who, unable to cope with the death of his son, is in a state of despair. The tragedy has the added devastating effect of reawakening memories surrounding the unexplained death of his own brother as

children in India. Kuldip begins drinking heavily which leads to the escalation in his feelings of bitterness and isolation instigated by his sense of failure as patriarch and provider. His breakdown is connected to his back story which is partly revealed throughout the course of the complete novel.

Usha, Kuldip's wife realizes that Kavi, their oldest son, is slipping into the state of disaffection felt by many of the young people in the area. She is terrified of losing a second son and by Part Two begins a process of transformation which ultimately saves the family from total breakdown. She gathers strength through her friendship with Gillian, a local white neighbour. Together the two women join forces to help their children rise above difficult economic and environmental circumstances. Usha helps to create subtle but important changes for the women and children in the area whilst simultaneously transforming her own trajectory.

Anila, bored and frustrated by the poverty and lack of opportunity in her surroundings, finds refuge in the pop culture of the day. After Billy's death she begins to go through a process of change which climaxes in abrupt sexual and political awakenings. It is these awakenings which formulate the main focus of Part Two of the story (Part Two is currently in progress under the working title 'Kith' to distinguish the action from Part One which focuses on the family and extending it to more interaction with the wider community). Ultimately, Anila's tumultuous journey leads her to an appreciation of the unique position she holds being part of a new generation, born out of a specifically British as well as Asian experience. By the end of the novel she begins to see that it is the economic and social circumstances (rather than her heritage) which restrict her.

As *The Handsworth Times* closes we realise three years have passed since Billy's death. Nina is back from university and the other children have emerged and grown in different ways, each having found some kind of resolution. A new and more

fervent riot is brewing on the streets of Handsworth, but psychologically Usha and her children have moved on to the point where they are in control of their trajectories rather than victims of their social, economic and historical circumstances. Reunited, the family sit down for a cup of tea whilst, unbeknown to them, Kuldip sits on the toilet sobbing and swigging whiskey from his hip-flask.

PART ONE: KIN

Chapter 1: 10 July '81

Anila, the youngest of the Agarwal sisters, sprawls on the bottom bunk reading *Smash Hits*. The warm air sits heavily in the small attic bedroom which perches on the Church Street house top like a child's crayoned roof. Anila pushes her thick black hair behind her ears, turns onto her stomach, bends her gangly legs and crosses her ankles towards the sky. She follows the printed lyrics of "Ghost Town" with her index finger, mouthing them silently as the song squeaks out in monotone from a paint-splattered transistor radio on the floor beside the bed:

'Do you remember the good old days before the Ghost Town? We danced and sang, and the music played inna de boomtown.'

'Boomtown to doom town', the BRMB disc jockey had said just before the song started; the phrase sticks in Anila's head like the 'Finger O' Fudge' jingle.

Nina, the eldest of the five Agarwal children, is cross-legged on the other end of the bed. Her soft, shapeless body makes her seem younger and more childlike than her sisters. She is flicking through the *Evening Mail* Royal Wedding Lead-Up Special, the second in a series of four.

'How much can they go on about this bloody wedding? It's like there's nothin' else going on in the bleedin' world?'

She glides her fingers over the sketches of imagined wedding dresses: white fairytale meringues next to faded photos of royal unions gone by.

'Yuk!' she says, pointing at one particular one, 'That is not how a princess should look, all horsey in net curtains'.

Kamela, the third sister, taller and sleeker than the other two girls, grunts an indecipherable response from across the room where she kneels under the bright light

of a red angle poise lamp. She holds a small compact mirror in one hand, plucking vigorously at the tiny stubble beneath her pencil thin eyebrows with the other.

The girls don't notice their mother, Usha, nudging open the attic door with her elbow. She carries a tray of tumblers full of syrupy Vimto and a plate of spongy, half moons of apple.

'Have you seen Billy? , Usha says, 'He isn't in his bedroom. I thought he was with Kavi but Kavi doesn't know where he is....I don't know where he is.'

There is a quiver in her voice which makes Anila glance up, it is a momentary gesture.

'He should have been here for dinner but he is still not back. Where is he?'

The words all merge together and are almost indecipherable. The girls shake their down-turned heads, each engrossed by a separate distraction. Usha silently hands each a drink and then she is gone, the faint sound of her tread falling away down the wooden steps. Beyond the open skylight a siren screeches by like a nail drawn down the blackboard of the evening air.

Meanwhile, a few roads away from Church Street, Kuldip Agarwal sits on his own in The Grove Inn, unaware that a riot is brewing on his route home or that Billy, his youngest son is still out on his Chopper bike with Jimmy McKenna and other older boys from the St Silas end of the Street. It is Friday evening, pay day, and the pub is full of drinkers downing pint after pint without a thought for the week's shopping or the mounting milk and paper bills. There is a buzz pervading the smoky air; a good humoured drone interjected with the occasional belly laugh or uninhibited belch. But the drone is suddenly cut through by the crash of saloon doors swinging open and bashing against inner doorway walls. The drinking banter hushes and drinkers turn to see a middle-aged Sikh man stumbling in breathless, his maroon turban damp with sweat around the rim. He bumbles into the smoky room:

'There is trouble at Villa Cross. Police all around, boys throwing things, smashing cars. It is bad, really bad. I advise you go home before the trouble comes this way'.

The drinkers glare at him, shrugging their hunched shoulders before turning away, underwhelmed by the news. Villa Cross is just a short distance away, the top of Lozells Road, they would have heard the trouble if it was that bad, even above Black Sabbath on the jukebox.

Propped up against the red flock wall paper next to the cigarette machine, a large ginger man with doughy skin continues to gawp at the Sikh man. After a moment he says:

'Who the fuck are you to advise me anything? Fuck off....and I don't mean to Soho Road'. He continues to mutter under his breath, spluttering into a cloudy pint of Double Diamond. The games of cards and football chatter continue around him.

Kuldip Agarwal recognizes the Sikh man as Surjeet Singh, a shop keeper from the Lozells Road: the owner of a small, cluttered concern selling everything from *The Sun* to spaghetti hoops. Singh's General Store is next to the Acapulco Café and just a few doors up from the entrance gates to Hardiman's Sheet Metals where Kuldip has worked, begrudgingly, ever since arriving in England over twenty years earlier.

'Oi, Surjeet, Saab, come and drink Guinness with me while the trouble sorts itself out', Kuldip says, slurring his words as he speaks.

Surjeet Singh stares at Kuldip.

'Kuldip, my friend', he says, 'This is bad trouble, the police have weapons and shields and the boys are throwing fire at them, milk bottles filled with petrol. People are going to get hurt. Already the windows are broken in my shop. I had to leave when a group of these hooligans smashed into it. They were taking the cigarettes and sweets. The police are making it worse by calling them black bastards and other such things but they are our boys too, Indian boys. And then they hit one young man with their truncheons, right in front of me. It is a terrible thing'.

Kuldip slides himself down from the bar stool where he has sat since leaving work two hours earlier. His legs buckle beneath him as his feet make contact with the floor. He stumbles across the faded red swirls of carpet towards his friend at the exit doors:

‘Sometimes Surjeet, these things look worse than they are... not to worry, I can get my cousin to sort out insurance for your broken windows. Let us go and see this trouble together. I have to walk through Villa Cross to get to home’.

Outside the pub the sound of sirens is deafening. Black smoke rises up into the air above the houses that separate The Grove Inn from the Villa Cross junction. The smoke is thick and the two men begin to cough uncontrollably, choking as plumes of burning wood and metal engulf them, stinging their eyes and the backs of their throats. As they turn the corner into Hunters Road they see a crowd gathering up ahead. The crowd is watching nervously from the periphery as a brick is hurled into the large plate glass window of Woolworths. The window shatters into thousands of tiny crystals and a group of indistinct bodies disappear into the blackness of the store, emerging moments later with pockets full of cigarettes and arms full of fairy wings, socks, sweatshirts and nightdresses. One shadowy body lifts a trolley out of the window and passes it to a companion on the street, flinging out goods until it is piled high with clothes, toys, seven inch singles and six-pack cassettes wrapped in cellophane. Anxious voices from the gathering crowd shout out towards the group of boys at the broken shop front:

‘Chimmo, Rammi, Walter...you there boy?’

Police officers are everywhere; more than either Kuldip or Surjeet have ever seen in England before. The officers stand in shirt sleeves, a zebra line of black and white. They form a barricade across the top of the high street where Villa Road meets Lozells Road, all the way from the Acapulco Café across to Mr. Lovejohn’s cage-fronted optometrists on the corner of Barker Street.

‘Lozells is getting brok down’, a voice in the crowd sighs.

'It 'as halways been brok down', says another, and others in the crowd nod and suck teeth in agreement.

Lozells has long been a broken place. The Lozells Road runs through the heart of it and it is the most broken place of all. Cracks in shop windows are taped over with silver gaffer and creased brown packaging tape. Already, even before this night many shops are boarded over, daubed with the words 'Business as Usual' in jagged spray paint lettering. Uneven pavements along the Lozells Road bear witness to the nocturnal lives of the drunks and the homeless who sleep in burnt out cars or in the entrances and doorways which stink of urine and damp clothes, rotten with mildew. Empty bottles of cheap vodka lay discarded next to wrappers of burgers made with cheap meat, acquired by the takeaway owners from the back of a lorry on Rookery Road. At night rancid half-eaten burgers are recovered from filthy bins and devoured by tramps full of bitter expectation after hours of hanging around late night fried chicken joints and kebab houses. Any rare shoppers with money in their pockets walk hurriedly down the Lozells Road towards bus-stops to the livelier Soho Road and on towards the city centre. But there is another side to Lozells Road - the heart- thumping, roots reggae music that escapes from open windows and doorways all the way down it, bringing it to life. Music is the blood pumping through its arteries - deep chuga, chuga bass beats and low mournful voices keeping the heart beating:

My way is long, but the road is foggy,
 My way is long so long, but the road is foggy, foggy
 My head never swell, my heart never leap
 I never have no fear from within
 Even though the road is so foggy, foggy yeah

Velvety smooth words drift out and mingle with the high-pitched birdsong of Indian playback singers and the grating, tinny rattles of Radio 1 on transistor radios. Combined, the sounds waft discordantly around a soup of smells which permeate

the air: over ripe plantain from Jimbo's Caribbean Market, fragrant coriander, aromatic curry leaves, fresh, cool mint, stale cooking oil and the overwhelming stench of sickly, sweet goat carcasses hanging by their necks on giant butcher's hooks above the blood stained counter of Taj & Co. Next door to the butchers, Ashoka's Textile House is a vivid rainbow of Technicolor silks and cottons folded over wire hangers attached to a neon blue nylon washing line nailed to a sun-bleached canopy. The bright fabrics sway in the breeze, soaking up the surrounding odours. The Lozells Road spills over with colour and noise. Tonight the sounds and smells are different.

'They are destroying our neighbourhood', says Surjeet as the two men become part of the crowd.

They are jostled by the group as people push ahead to get a better view of the mayhem ensuing in front of them. Kuldip is nudged in the back by an anonymous elbow and stumbles, hands first into the road in front; it is blanketed in tiny shards of splintered glass. Within seconds miniscule droplets of crimson blood appear as polka dots speckling his palms. He wipes them away across his damp, sweat covered shirt but they reappear within milliseconds. Surjeet pulls him back up to standing position. The men are wedged together unable to move independently, swaying in unison with the crowd. A policeman turns towards them:

'Move along you lot or we will have to deal with you all too. Go home', he shouts roughly, pushing his shield up against them. 'It's not a bloody TV show. Move along'.

'What is 'appening, h'Officer?' A small black woman shouts back, 'my bwoy is h'out there... DELROY, can you 'ear your mutha? Can someone tell me what is 'appening?'

The policeman ignores her and stares instead at the growing group of young, mostly black men in front of the barricade. They begin to charge away from Villa Cross towards Church Street, arms full of the Woolworth's bounty. Objects hurtle back through the air towards the policemen and the crowd of onlookers who step

backwards instinctively. Tiny metal Matchstick cars and chunky Tonka Toys come raining down towards them alongside broken windscreen wipers, wing mirrors and petrol-filled milk bottles, set alight with cotton wool stoppers

At the Villa Road junction traffic is building up behind a stationary overcrowded number sixteen bus. The upper deck passengers press their faces to the steamy windows, mouthing muted comments with angry, jeering faces towards the crowd. Beyond the bus an ambulance is jammed, its siren wails out above the noise as it tries desperately to budge through the traffic, unable to push forwards or move backwards. Cars, buses and vans all begin to honk their horns. Around the traffic the golden glow of fire bombs illuminates the air into a spectacular incandescent sunset. Delroy's mother cups her hands over her ears.

'Let the h'ambulance through', she shouts, but the junction is gridlocked now. And then, all of a sudden, she screams and her voice is piercing.

'Oh my god, oh no, god have mercy', she cries

The small crowd of onlookers all turn away from the traffic chaos to see what has caused this startling noise and they see moving towards them a ball of flames, an orange silk lantern floating on the air.

'Bloody 'ell it's a person', a voice shouts and the crowd is suddenly silent.

The flame ball moves closer towards the police barricade but the police move forward to chase the rioters as they run down past Church Street towards Birchfield and the Villa ground. The policemen seem unaware of the human torch burning beside them. Delroy's mother begins screaming again, this time short, shrill screams that burst out of her in quick succession. Others in the crowd begin screaming too, joining in the terrible noise until it becomes a constant, ghostly wail. Kuldip covers his face with his hands; the four pints of stout from the pub press down on his bladder and he strains to hold on.

'Lord have mercy,' the woman shouts again, 'It is no more than a child... Someone help him. Please, help him for God's sake'.

The burning figure crumples to its knees, flames rising up from his waist towards his chest and face. He is close enough for his petrified eyes to meet those of first line of onlookers. Two teenage girls begin to cry, burying their faces as they hold on to each other.

The churning alcohol in Kuldip's empty stomach begins to rise up towards his mouth, burning his throat along the way. He takes a long, deep breath of the smoky air in through his nostrils; it halts the acidic bile. Sobriety slaps him in the face and he too becomes transfixed by the burning boy just a few metres ahead. Without thinking he begins undoing the transparent buttons on his shirt with clumsy fingers. Finally, the damp shirt is undone and he removes it fully before pushing his way through a small gap in the crowd. He strides towards the burning figure.

'Kuldip, what are you doing?' Surjeet Singh shouts after him. 'You will get burnt too, come away Bhai, the ambulance is coming through now!'

Kuldip carries on without looking back. As he approaches the boy stares straight into his face, Kuldip stares back, forcing a smile, trying to look calm. A tiny glint of hope flickers across the terror in the boy's eyes. Kuldip recognizes him as one of the older boys from the top end of Church Street. He has yelled at him often for hanging around, smoking weed and for whistling at Anila and her sisters. The heat around the boy is intense and as Kuldip gets within a few feet he reels backwards, stumbling on a discarded Cindy doll, still in its packaging. He forces himself on, inching forward, shaking out the sweaty shirt as he moves until he is close enough to smother the upper most flames around the boy's midriff with it. The ambulance edges towards them.

Chapter 2: 10 July Continued

Usha stares out of the living room window into the shadows that rise and stretch along Church Street towards the Lozells Road. The sky is a tangerine glow. Beyond the glow and into the blackness miniscule specks of starlight fade into infinity. Usha's eyes are wide, she avoids blinking. One by one her daughters slip into the room, bored of the attic and sensing the unease creeping through the house. They lounge across the rickety settee and sprawl across the floor. Then Kavi hurtles into the room;

'Nine o'clock, Fantasy Island!' he says, switching on the large black and white TV in the corner. 'A plane, a plane', he shouts in a comedy voice as the opening credits begin to roll. He points up to the ceiling just as the diminutive Tattoo does the same on the screen,

'Not this shit again,' says Nina, 'Isn't it past your bedtime, Kiddo?'

'It's not shit, its bostin', says Kavi, plonking himself on the floor next to Anila.

'Anyway, 'It isn't even dark yet, and Billy is still out on his bike', he continues, and then after a pause, 'I am older than him and I wouldn't be allowed out this late'. .

'He isn't allowed, you prat, that is the point. Can't you see Mom is worried?' says Nina.

Anila glances up at the television from the exercise book where she has completed her scrawl of the lyrics of "Wordy Rappinghood" in blue ink.

'Do we have to? ', she says.

Usha looks towards the four children. All except Kamela are now lying across the faded orange carpet. She hates that carpet. She has scrubbed it with Dettol at 6 'o'clock that morning, just as she does every week-day morning since reading about the incontinence of mice in the Reader's Digest two years earlier. The article triggered recurrent nightmares where dozens of scrawny rodents scurry around the house while the family sleep: the mice scramble through tiny gaps, leaving undiscovered sticky, black stools in her large transparent containers of rice and pulses. In one dream the

mice sneer at her with the personified faces of neighbours, Mrs. Conway and Elsie Meeson, as they dribble urine across the laminated kitchen worktops where the girls will butter bread for their packed lunches. So each morning Usha crawls out of bed and scrubs away the mouse piss before the rest of the household awake. At first the children complained about the damp squelch underfoot and the stench of disinfectant rising through the house stinging their nostrils as they tumbled downstairs for Ready Brek with jam before school. Usha has banned them from the living room on weekday mornings. On Saturdays she sets the alarm for five, giving the carpet an extra hour to dry before Tiswas.

‘You want some tea, Mom?’ says Anila.

Usha doesn’t speak; instead she stares into the night watching the last fragments of sunset disappear into the sky. An amber glow still flickers over one section of the Lozells Road just visible from the front room window. Kamela and Nina both look at Anila for a steer. She stares back at them with a shrug of her shoulders. Nina turns to her younger brother as the melodramatic theme music signals the end of Fantasy Island. It is ten o’clock.

‘Go to bed Kavi before Dad gets back. It is bad enough with Billy still out’, she says,

‘Sod off Nina’, you can’t boss me’, says Kavi.

‘Go to bed Kavi’, Kamela says, backing up her sister, ‘Can’t you see Mom is worried about Billy? It won’t help if Dad comes in all pissed up and you are still awake’.

‘What difference will it make?’, says Kavi, ‘he’ll find some excuse to kick off like he always does when he’s had a drink. He won’t be pleased about any of it... you lot still down here, Mom in a daze, Billy missing....’.

Anila glares at Kavi as he leaves the room. He thuds up the stairs towards the bedroom he shares with Billy. The bedroom door slams and a framed photo of Usha’s parents topples off the brick mantel, smashing onto the corner of the unlit gas fire, breaking into three triangle shards

The silence in the house is broken a moment later by a jangle of keys and a creak at the front door. The girls stare at each other, holding their breath as their father gently closes the door behind him. A wisp of smoky air seeps into the room as Kuldip moves past it towards the kitchen. Momentarily relieved, the girls let out the held breath in sharp exhalations and Nina says, in a hushed voice:

‘Deff this, I am going up..., I can’t be arsed with a scene’.

‘Don’t worry Mom, Billy will be fine, he’ll be at the McKenna’s house’, says Kamela, following her sister out of the room. Before she leaves Nina whispers into the room:

‘Don’t bother saying anything to Dad, let him think our Billy’s in bed – he’ll be back in the morning before Dad is even up’.

The two girls creep up the stairs on tiptoe. Anila stays fixed on the floor, scrawling in her tattered exercise book, occasionally glancing up at her mother’s slender back as Usha continues to stare into the night. Eventually the noises from Lozells Road begin to subside and the night outside appears to settle.

After he enters the house, Kuldip heads straight through the kitchen and into the tiny bathroom concealed behind it. He picks up a musty blue flannel from the side of the bath and rinses it under the cold tap of the sink and uses it to wipe away at the grey film of ash which coats his skin. The coolness of the cloth is fresh against his scorched face and he places it flat across the whole of his face for a second before the smell of singed hair rises up from his chest, evoking the stench of burnt flesh. He flings the cloth into the sink, leaves the bathroom and collapses onto a wooden chair next the dining table in the kitchen. He looks around as if seeing his family kitchen for the first time: it is a narrow oblong room of mismatched units, some nailed to the wall, others freestanding, a chipped teapot sits next to the kettle and next to that are jam jars, three in all, filled with sugar, teabags and loose change. Kuldip stares at the stack of unwashed crockery sitting beside the sink; the rest of the kitchen is spotless as always. School photos of the children stick to the window frame with drawing pins; a milk pan,

full to the brim with thick brown chicken curry sits on the gas cooker and beside it buttered chapattis are rolled up in tin foil like a Christmas cracker. Kuldip is lightheaded and he holds on to the side of the chair to steady himself. He closes his eyes; the image of the burning boy is imprinted on his eyelids. He blinks several times in succession, trying to dissipate the pixels that make up the image of terror in the boy's eyes but it is set firm in his mind, burning into him as if he is still standing amidst the red hot flames. His eyes well with tears and he sobs, rocking uncontrollably as tears stream down his face, stinging his scorched skin.

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At six o'clock in the morning there is a loud, unambiguous knock on the front door. Usha moves towards it slowly, dragging herself away from the ethereality of night towards the stark reality of dawn. A few seconds later Anila is jolted from a fitful sleep on the settee by the animal cry of her mother; a piercing howl that cuts through the morning quiet of the house and beyond into the street. Anila floats towards the front door, neither asleep nor awake. She reaches it just in time to catch her mother as she crumples towards the floor. Anila slumps paralysed on the cold linoleum of the hallway; her mother is an immovable heap on her lap, lead-heavy across her skinny legs. Nina, Kamela and Kavi sit rigid on the stairs behind as the scene unfolds. Kuldip stands above them; dishevelled in his pyjama bottoms. He looks down at his wife and daughter and then at the two young police officers standing in front of the open door. The crisp morning air permeates the house. Kuldip shivers. The sallow faced WPC looks up towards him. His eyes are dark, puffy and ringed by a purple hue and the WPC wonders if he has been in a fight. She mumbles words that make no sense ...accident...ambulance...riot...bike. Kuldip leans against the banister to steady himself; his knees begin to give way beneath him. The WPC says:

'I am sorry'

'Shit' whispers Nina to Kamela, 'Mom won't get through this'.

Anila is still not completely sure if she is awake or asleep.

Chapter 3: The Birth of Billy

'Billy was born in the lift'. Usha tells her friend Gillian Kelly, five days after Billy's death. Gillian dips malted milk biscuits into sweet, masala tea, catching the soggy biscuit with the tip of her tongue as it melts into her mouth.

The two women have been friends since meeting some years earlier on the periphery of The Bomb Pec; a square of waste ground behind Church Street where the children have dens in derelict houses amongst a playground of tyre-swings and climbing frames made out of stained mattresses, discarded factory pallets and disused oil cans. Like the other mothers from the area, Gillian and Usha had often stood beside one another shouting the kids in for tea as the sun began fading from the sky. One day Gillian broke the silence:

'We ought to have a cuppa sometime, Bab. Our kids look about the same age'.

Gillian was the first white friend Usha had made since leaving Lozells Girls School, almost eighteen years earlier.

Anila kneels silently behind the kitchen door, her ear pressed against it; listening to her mother talk in hushed tones to Gillian in a way that makes her wonder if she really is their mother, not some other mother from some other family. It is the first time she hears her mother talk about giving birth. Gillian manages to coax memories out of Usha in a way she and the rest of the family cannot.

'It was July 1969, almost exactly twelve years ago,' Usha tells Gillian. The lift in question was suspended between floors D and E of the red brick Victorian workhouse that had become Birmingham's Dudley Road Hospital in the 1890s. The building remained shabby and looming decades after its transformation to a general hospital and Usha crossed the road when walking past it, afraid it might conceal shadowy waifs,

malnourished and desperate, waiting in dark corners to grab her bags of potatoes and cheap white bread.

Billy was born twenty five minutes before midnight. A trickle of hot, bloody liquid seeped from Usha's womb, staining the bed sheets rose petal pink. Usha woke to an empty bed and looked anxiously around the room for the slumped, snoring body of her husband but Kuldip was still at the pub. Usha pushed off the soiled sheets and piled them in the corner of the room, felt under the bed for her hold-all packed with nightdresses and sanitary pads and scrawled a note to Kuldip: 'Gone to Dudley Road to have baby', she wrote. 'Don't come to the hospital until the children are sorted out. Take them to Bibi's house. Give them cereal first. Kavi likes only Weetabix but the girls only eat cornflakes. Clean sheets for the bed are on top shelf of wardrobe. I could not reach'.

Downstairs Usha whispered urgently into the phone:

'Come quickly as possible – the baby can't wait,', and then, before she put down the receiver: 'Please, don't use the siren, the children will wake up; the whole street will wake up'. She gently placed the receiver down and slipped out of the front door, leaned against the hard brick wall and pulled her Kashmiri shawl close around her swollen body, shivering in the chill of night air

Usha tells Gillian how she was lowered from the ambulance into a waiting wheelchair and left just beyond the hospital entrance,

'Hold on here, someone will be with you in a mo ', the young paramedic told her before disappearing back into the night.

It was a Friday night and the hospital reception was oozing with sickness; urgent faced orderlies pushed around trolleys of bandaged patients while stiff faced nurses yelled orders at each other across corridors. Men, young and old, sprawled

across waiting room benches reeking of vomit and alcohol, while nervous parents clung on to floppy babies, shifting awkwardly away from the beery breath of the drunks.

‘Hello, I’m Sister Olga’, announced a small, neat nurse as she grabbed the handles of Usha’s wheelchair,

‘You must be Mom-to-Be’.

She pushed Usha along a maze of lime coloured corridors towards the lifts.

‘Stupid having Labour on the top - all these poor ladies, fit to burst, expected to walk up stairs or wait for the stupid lifts. Labour Ward is on the fourth floor. Floor E1 - Why they don’t just say fourth floor I dunno? Be there in a tick though - not to worry. What’s your name, Lovey? ‘

‘Mrs. Agarwal.’

‘ Listen Lovey, it won’t be Mrs. Agarwal when that baby is pushing itself out of you but if that’s what you want I’ll just call you Lovey, okay dear?... You Injun ladies are so proper sometimes’

One of the two large lifts was vacant, its doors wide open. Olga pressed the green button marked Floor E as the doors clunked shut behind the two women. Inside, the low whirr of the mechanics was welcoming after the din of the entrance lobby and Usha breathed in a sigh of relief, knowing that her baby was only minutes from arriving. But the quiet hum of the lift was broken by a sudden jolt and a loud thud as it came crashing to a halt - jamming in its rickety shaft just moments after it had begun its ascent. The only movement now was the intermittent flicker of the fluorescent strip light.

‘Oh my god’, said Sister Olga, her voice raising a level in pitch, ‘I don’t like these lifts. Not a good time to get stuck now - not with you so close and all. Come on you stupid bloody thing’.

Usha felt dizzy. She wanted to close her eyes and disappear but the burning crush in her belly meant fading away was not an option. She clenched her cold, damp thighs and moaned long and low until the noise echoed off the metal walls. Five seconds passed by before the strip light stopped flickering, plunging the lift into complete darkness except for a tiny hint of illumination from a slither of green dotted light from the frozen display panel above the door. Sister Olga gasped. In between the twists and stabs in her belly, Usha shouted at her,

‘This baby isn’t going to wait for the firemen or whoever else fixes the lifts here. You are the nurse, help me!’

Sweat poured off Usha’s swollen body and the limited air around the two women quickly became sticky and humid. Olga removed her glasses and wiped the sweat from her nose with the hem of her apron before replacing them. Meanwhile, Usha gripped her buttocks together, trying to hold back the incredible urge to push out the baby and empty her bowels at the same time. The searing pains were urgent and uncontrollable. She managed to raise herself out of the chair and collapsed on to the floor on all-fours, her bare knees scratching against the harsh, gritted matting. In the dark she felt around for something stable to grab hold of and found Olga’s thick, nylon covered ankles; she squeezed them as tight as she could. Olga squealed just as the baby’s head began to force its way through Usha’s the cervical channel.

‘Mrs. Agarwal, you alright?’

Olga kicked an ankle free just as the strip lighting flickered back into life. She stepped forward, reaching into Usha’s hold-all and pulling out a brushed cotton nightie, the same pale yellow as a baby chick.

'Let me go', she said softly to Usha, 'Hold on to the wheelchair instead – I have to deliver this baby and I can't do it while you're holding me legs'.

Usha did as she was told while a breathless Olga clambered over her and, with only a second to spare, caught the waxy, pink baby in the folds of her apron as it slipped out of Usha's vagina towards the unforgiving lift floor. The women stared incredulously at the tiny creature; Olga spoke first:

'Mrs. Agarwal, you have a boy. Healthy, I think. Here ...' she said, handing the yellow bundle to its mother.

Usha stared into her baby's face. The eyelashes on the left eye were stuck under the eyelid beneath a crust of mustard coloured mucous. She licked the tip of her little finger and carefully wiped at the eyelid, flicking away the tiny crumbs and freeing the long, dark lashes before tracing a gentle finger down the new, wrinkled cheek. The baby opened his eyes for a split second, long enough to meet those of his mother before the stark light of the lift forced them straight back shut. Behind the wheelchair, Sister Olga gagged as the stale air became heavy with the sickly odour of birth and blood. She covered her mouth with her wrist and with the other arm guided Usha back up into the wheelchair.

On Floor E a small audience of midwives and nurses gathered outside the entrance to the lift, waiting anxiously for it to restart, aware that one of their own was stuck inside. The lift shuddered back into life a moment later and as the doors clunked open on Floor E the small congregation clapped and cheered with such enthusiasm that a junior doctor remarked it was as if Apollo 11 had landed for the second time that year. Sister Olga burst into tears as the doors slid open and two nurses rushed to console her, shunting the wheelchair out of the way as Usha sat cradling her new baby – a tiny, sparrow-like creature, still connected to her by the cord. The baby twitched in the noise; he was scrawny and no bigger, Usha thought, than the

bags of lemon bom-boms she bought for the children on the days the Family Allowance arrived.

#

'That is one helluva story, Usha' says Gillian, when her friend finishes speaking. Usha leans back in her chair, relieved. Outside the kitchen door Anila begins to snuffle into the back of her arm. Kamela, who has joined her at the door, gathers herself, sweeps her hands across her thighs and announces:

'I'm never doing that; it's disgusting all that blood and stuff - no babbies for me, no sireee'.

Chapter 4: Funeral

On the morning of Billy's funeral Usha gets out of bed at six. She removes the bottle of sleeping tablets from the bedside cabinet and places it under the pillow. Her head aches with a dull thud and as she silently pulls an old knitted cardigan over her long cotton nightdress she wonders if she has actually slept at all. The pink dawn creeps into the room when she lifts a corner of the curtain. The new day adds another space between the life and the death of Billy and Usha feels a familiar thick lump develop in her throat. She sits down on the edge of the bed and sighs. She tries to remember what Dr Selvon had said as he scribbled out the prescription for sleeping pills: denial, anger, guilt, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. He described the stages of grief to her as though he was passing on a recipe. Beside her Kuldeep stirs in his sleep; the stale smell of tobacco wafts from his sweaty body.

Usha moves downstairs to the kitchen where she sets about cleaning the oven while the rest of the house continues to sleep. Baked on black crusts cling to the oven walls and she pours Ajax over the oven interior until puddles of the gluey, white liquid drip down and collect in a dirty brown sludge. She kneels on the tired linoleum in front of the oven, smoothing down her faded floral apron to cover the lap of her brown kaftan. She begins to scrub at the sludge with a rose of steel wire, working up lather while scraping up and down, side to side repeatedly until the caustic chemicals make the skin on the tips of her fingers wrinkle into tiny bloodless white ridges. The crusts are difficult to budge and she reaches into the utensil drawer, grabs a dinner knife, wedges it under the most stubborn crust and hammers against it with the edge of a wooden spoon, pausing to wipe her forehead with the corner of her apron. As she bangs away at the oven Anila slips into the kitchen. She pops a slice of bread into the toaster and presses down the kettle switch.

'Nothing gets clean', Usha says, closing the oven door.

‘Oh Mom, it is spotless’, says Anila. ‘We ain’t livin’ in an ‘ospital, you know’

Usha turns to see Anila standing in the doorway with a slice of unbuttered toast in her hand. Usha’s eyes follow the minute trail of bread crumbs which float down from her daughter’s hand, dancing in the shafts of early sunlight before gathering at Anila’s feet. Anila glares back at her mother as Usha rests her ashen face against the oven door muttering:

‘I failed him. I didn’t protect him. A mother has to be able to protect her children’.

#

At eleven o’clock the hearse and funeral car slide up outside the Agarwals’ house on Church Street. Net curtains twitch as the low roar of engines moves down the street. Outside the house opposite, Derek Conway stops soaping his prized Ford Anglia, places the sponge back in the plastic washing up bowl beside his car and wipes his wet, frothy hands across his overalls. He stands in silence, head bowed as Usha, Kuldip, Kavi and the girls squeeze into the black limousine. .

‘I can’t look at it,’ Kavi whispers to Anila, nodding towards the hearse without raising his head. ‘I can’t stand that our kid is really in there, all broken up and that’.

‘I know’, says Anila. She bends her head towards her knees to halt the swell of nausea.

The two mile journey to Sandwell Crematorium is silent. On arrival the family are ushered out of the car. They follow the small coffin into the plain pastel blue rotunda ahead of them. Inside the simple brick building sun beams stream through stained glass windows flooding the hall in an unexpected bright light. The family all squint as they enter.

‘Blimey, it’s like Villa Park on a Wednesday game with all the floodlights on’, Kavi says. Anila nudges him with her elbow.

People pour in behind the family and all but the front two rows of utilitarian benches are soon filled with the white robes and saris of community elders; some already sobbing and snorting into large cotton hankies. Towards the front of the hall two old men mumble audibly as the family take their seats at the front of the hall. The old men stare unashamedly at the uncovered heads of the teenage Agarwal girls. Sat alongside the old men are a number of West Indians, mostly middle aged Jamaicans in their muted Sunday best; beads of sweat shine across glistening ebony faces. There are fewer white faces; Emily Meeson from across the road, some of the Conway family and one or two others from the shops along the Lozells Road. The white people are dressed in heavy black fabrics in spite of the warm weather; their garments accessorized by red flushed faces and damp armpits. The Agarwals are dressed in black too, all except Usha who punctuates the row like a white space between words in a sentence.

The ceremony is short, comprising a few perfunctory words from the presiding vicar followed by a few more in Sanskrit from Mr. Mishra, the Hindu priest from the nearby Heathford Road temple. He chants in a monotone, hypnotic drone and mumbles indecipherable verse which all seems to begin and end with the words ‘Om’ and ‘Shanti’. Usha and Kuldip stand side by side: Kuldip on the end of the row, Usha leaning onto Nina who, in turn, leans onto Anila. At the other end of the row Kavi is the bookend stopping them all from collapsing in a heap. Each one of them stares ahead, meeting the gaze of no one. There are no eulogies and the service is abrupt, ending suddenly as heavy maroon velvet curtains close around the coffin concealing its descent into the oven below. Usha gasps as the curtains close, leaning even harder into the sobbing girls to prevent her from collapsing down onto the hard, stony floor.

As the mourners leave the cool confines of the crematorium hall for the stifling heat of the graveyard, Mr. Brown, Billy's maths teacher, appears flustered at the doorway. He searches out Kuldip, (pushing his way through the mourners) and hands him a card from Billy's classmates, and Billy's end of year report.

'We thought you would like to have this', he says nervously.

Kuldip nods at him.

'Unbelievable,' mutters Anila.

'Too right', says Kavi.' What good is that now?'

Kavi snatches the report from his father's hands and tears it open.

'It doesn't sound anything like him', he says, 'I bet they didn't even know him. I bet they wrote it after he ...after the accident'.

The mourners begin to shuffle about as Kavi continues:

'Billy hated school. He didn't even want to do the 11-Plus. He wanted to come to the shit school with the rest of us. The grammar school is full of posh white kids from the other side of town, that's what he said'.

'Shut up, Kavi'. Nina yells across the mourners. 'It isn't the time'.

'I bet they have a special report for dead kids ', he continues.' How can we tell now if it's true, eh? And what the fuck does it matter anyway when all that's left is a broken up body? What is it all about then? Shit all, that's what.'

The mourners lower their heads. Only Usha and Kuldip stare directly at Kavi; their faces ash grey. Mr. Brown steps backwards, stumbling on a wreath beside a fresh grave. He looks around, checking the quickest route away from the mourners. He turns and begins to walk quickly away. Kavi shouts after him:

‘You didn’t even know Billy’, and then turning to the crowd of startled mourners, ‘None of you even knew him. Where are his bloody friends? Where are Jacko and Raj and that weird kid from the Pec?’. They didn’t even get told about today, I bet’.

Usha walks away in the opposite direction.

‘I am sorry Mom’, Kavi shouts after her. He begins to run away from the mourners who stare on helplessly. He runs past the head stones and the wilted flowers, pulling his t-shirt up over his nose and mouth to avoid the stench of rotting pears and damp decay that rises from the graves. He runs out of the gates and passes Mr. Brown scuttling towards the car park. ‘Wanker’, Kavi shouts and he keeps on running: down Sandwell Valley, towards Rookery Road, past the fragrant vegetable shops where he knocks over a tray of ginger roots and trips over them onto an Evening Mail A board stand outside the newsagents. Forty-five minutes later he is breathless and wet as he staggers into the open back gate of his house on Church Street. His slumps down on the kitchen floor and sobs.

Gillian is in the Agarwal kitchen preparing cheese cobs and plates of custard creams for after the funeral. She kneels down beside Kavi, strokes his damp hair and wipes his sweaty neck with a tea towel.

‘There, there, Bab, let it all out’, she says, ‘Go on, Bab, it’s good to have a proper cry’.

Kavi clutches on to Gillian’s purple smock top, crying and coughing into her lap until that too is damp. He stays fixed there, unable to pull away until the sound of cars at the front of the house disrupts Gillian’s gentle maternal purrs. Kavi jumps up and darts out of the back door into the bush at the end of the garden. Sweat and snot mingle with tears in streaks across his face and he pulls off his t-shirt to wipe it before flinging the garment to the ground. He feels about in his trouser pocket for the two inch-long nub end of a cigarette rescued from Kuldip’s bedside ashtray earlier that day;

he wipes away more snot with the back of his hand and lights it up, sighing out a sharp plume of bitter smoke.

Chapter 5: Clwyd

Billy's ashes sit in a brass urn, locked away in Usha's yellowing melamine cabinet next to her side of the bed.

'He might as well be sat on top of the telly', Anila says to Kavi as they all stand around to watch as the urn is placed there by Usha.

In the days that follow, a succession of older Indian women from the temple come to the house dressed in the white saris and the salwar kameez suits they wore to the funeral. They sit in the small living room glancing at the framed family photos and collection of cheap ornaments that line the mantelpiece. When Usha leaves the room to prepare masala tea the quiet is broken by whispers under the breath:

'Such a shame! Too many girls to worry about and all so modern'.

'My husband would be ashamed to let me live with such ragged old curtains where guests will sit'.

As she prepares cloves and cardamom for the tea Usha reminds herself to sweep beneath the settee and dust along the curtain rail before more visitors arrive the next day. When she returns to the front room the women say, 'Thank you, Beta' and put their arms around her shoulders. They wail loudly between gulps of hot, sweet chai and their uninhibited noises pierce through the house past Kavi's room where he lays with his head buried under the pillow and up to the small attic bedroom where Anila, Kamela and Nina drown them out with the jangly banter of Peter Powell on the radio; the volume turned up to full.

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On the sixth day after the funeral Usha says to Kuldip:

‘Gillian’s husband Eugene, Mr. Kelly, said we can use his van tomorrow’.

‘Gillian, Eugene...why do we have to ask favours from these people?’ Kuldip replies, slurping hot tea from a saucer.

‘We didn’t ask – Gillian is my friend, and she wants to help us. We help each other. Besides we have to take Billy to the sea ...she knows that the funeral isn’t finished until the ashes go into the sea’.

There is a pause.

‘She says Rhyl is the nearest place. It is in Wales and Eugene said we could borrow his van’.

‘What are these people, Irish?’ ‘

‘What does that matter?’

‘All bloody foreigners here, at least we have this in common’, says Kuldip.

#

The van is a rusty white transit. The space in the back is sucked up by the expanding bodies of the four teenagers as they jostle for leg and elbow room. Each of them is dressed in at least one article of white, as requested by their mother. Kavi shares a spare wheel as a seat with Anila.

‘Shit’, he says as black oil from the wheel soils the edge of his white PE shirt.

Nina and Kamela sit opposite, perched on a blue metal tool box, trying to avoid the oil stains from marking their cheesecloth tops, Usha sits stunned in the front passenger cab, clinging on to the black and gold urn while Kuldip drives nervously, unused to the van, his eyes firmly fixed on the grey parallel lines of the M6 ahead. Along the sides of the motorway, monotonous steely landscapes drag by, blending

into one long, horizontal line of spewing chimneys and bland industrial buildings separated by stretches of flat, drab Midland countryside, uninviting even in the vivid July sunshine.

Two hours seem like six in the van but eventually the family emerge past a sign to Mold and into Wales. The children sit up from hunched positions and scramble for a glimpse of this new country through the back windscreen. It is a transformed view; a gently undulating landscape of vibrant mint coloured hills and deep pea green trees set against warm shades of earthy reds and brown, punctuated by creamy sheep, like buttered popcorn, roaming high on the sloping banks above the dull hum of the dual carriageway. Kuldip continues driving, meandering through the splashes of colour until they reach Rhuddlan, a small town of indistinct beige bungalows topped by a castle ruin. Kuldip pulls the van to a stop into a neat little cul-de-sac as they enter the town, marked by a red X on the map by Eugene. The children shift about in the back, stretching out their legs and swapping places between tyre and tool box. Meanwhile, Usha stares blankly out of the front passenger window, unaware of the mostly old, white faces peering back at her from behind dull net curtains. After a minute or two of staring at the map Kuldip slips the van into reverse and screeches backwards out of the cul-de-sac. He continues to drive through the main high street, closely following the Eugene's route and before five minutes have past they are leaving the town through the other end.

The light is different on the north side of Rhuddlan. The sky is a clean, crisp blue and the sun seems brighter than the sun above the motorway. Usha relaxes her shoulders for the first time on the journey, sensing that the sea is now not too far. Anila breathes in a loud, exaggerated breath of the unfamiliar sharp, salty air. One by one each of her siblings does the same. After a few minutes they pull off the main road and head down a slip road. Kuldip pulls the van up on to a muddy lay-by next to a faded caravan park sign and one by one the children climb out of the back of the rusty

van, stretching their arms and legs back into life. They are next to a small meadow, deserted except for a cluster of butterflies flitting about wild, cerise coloured flowers; shockingly bold against the bleached summer grass. To the far side of the meadow is a clump of trees obscuring the view beyond:

‘ I think the sea is just past there’, whispers Nina, pointing at the trees to her sisters. They both nod enthusiastically.

The smell of the sea is strong now, like the fish counter at the Rag Market.

It takes longer than they anticipated crossing the meadow. They make their way down a narrow, slightly hidden footpath and eventually reach the trees. When they do it is not the sea which is hidden behind but a wide river mouth, joined on the far side by a thin tributary. Long branches cast unexpected shadows as they step on to the river bank and Usha shudders, pulling her white shawl tight around her slight body. The family move instinctively towards a clearing. The small area beneath an overhang of trees seems timeless, without regard for the day. It is cool in the dark shadows in spite of the strength of the midday sun now blocked out by the high branches. It is here the Agarwals stand, all six of them side by side in silence for a sombre half an hour on the deserted bank of the River Clwyd, throwing handfuls of vermillion rose petals after the trail of grey ash which snakes its way down the silvery river towards the faint sighing of the sea. When the last blood-red petal has finally drifted out of view Usha rummages in her shoulder-bag, pulling out packages of cheese sandwiches in tin foil and cans of Finefare Cherryade. The children eat, heads bowed; lumps of thick dry bread and cheese are difficult to swallow without swigs of metallic pop.

After an hour back on the road Anila breaks the silence:

‘Do you think we should go back to school? I mean it’s gonna be the last week of term next week and that by the time we go back. What do’y reckon?’

'I can't be arsed with that,' says Kavi, ' They'll all be pretending to be sorry for us like they really give a shit. I won't be able to stand it'.

'No-one will be going anywhere not until after the Kriya, It isn't thirteen days yet', Kuldip says abruptly. He has to shout to be heard above the hum of the traffic

'What the fuck's that?' Whispers Kamela to the others. Nina shrugs her shoulders.

'S'pect we will light another fire and eat more rice balls', Anila says.

Chapter 6: Anila

Anila stares through the front room window as great slanted sheets of rain slide down and drench the street outside. This day, which started leaden, has descended into a black gloom and by mid-morning it is more akin to a winter's evening than this high summer's day. It is the 6 August; not even a month has passed by since Billy's death and Anila wonders whether anything will ever be normal again. As the lightening begins to throw great shapes against the sky Anila steps back into the room, pauses a moment and then, not sure what to do with herself, begins to wander around the house.

Five rooms make up the whole of each of the terraced houses on Church Street: two up, two down plus the add-on bathrooms with flat corrugated tin roofs. Some, like this one, also have the attic, accessed by a slightly curved wooden staircase hidden behind a door on the narrow landing. It is towards the attic that Anila first heads.

In the room, Nina is reading the latest copy of *My Guy*.

'These blokes all look the bloody same, skinny and white. Why don't they ever have Indians or Jamaicans in these photo-loves?' she says.

'Cos the Moms won't let the Indian boys do that shit, 'what about respect, Beta?' Kamela says in an exaggerated Indian accent from the other side of the room.

'...And as for the Jamaicans, they are too cool to do that stuff – and imagine what those gora parents would say if they found Annabel or Tracey ogling some hunk of a black man? They'd close the crappy magazine down, that's what!' She pauses again, to catch her breath:

‘So what’ll it be, Nina ... ‘Pop Muzik’ or ‘D.I.S.C.O? Oooo I know , let’s have that Chip Shop Elvis one that Anila nicked from Villa Cross Woolies the other week, I quite like that one ‘

Kamela stands up and moves towards the red Dansette turntable; as she does so a small pile of 7” singles falls from her lap to the floor.

‘Be careful, won’t you?’ Snaps Nina, ‘It’s taken me and Anila ages to get all those records.’

Neither Nina nor Kamela notice Anila in the slit of the door before she turns and slips back down the narrow stairs.

Kavi’s and Billy’s bedroom is just big enough for two single beds and the tall boy wardrobe next to south facing window which overlooks the scraggy garden. Kavi lies on his bed, his face to the wall. John Lennon’s Woman plays faintly from a crackly transistor concealed somewhere in the room. Anila feels as if her stomach drops an inch towards the ground as a flash image of Lennon lying dead on the cold pavement outside the grandiose Dakota building flickers across her mind. Kavi doesn’t notice her either as she hovers momentarily by the doorway glaring at Billy’s made up bed before disappearing down the landing.

Usha and Kuldip have the biggest bedroom; a cheerful, sunflower yellow room at the front of the house with a large, bright street facing window. The houses on Church Street are close enough to one another to hear the guttural clearing of throats and the noisier parps of passed wind on a more typical summer’s day, when windows are flung wide open and the curtains fill with warm breeze and billow like the sails of a boat. Today the curtains are drawn and the room is almost in total darkness.

Anila continues to move around the house detached and silent, just as all the Agarwal children have all been since the funeral. Sometimes the siblings brush against

each other on the way up and down the stairs, other times they sit silently in rooms together, knees touching, eyes averted, shifting legs or arms as Usha cleans around them. Only Kuldip leaves the house on a regular basis, to drag himself to work or to buy coriander, dhals and rice from the Indian grocers on the corner of Anglesey Street or fish fingers from Fine Fare. The short hallway with its windowless landing is where the silence is most gloomy: once a symphony of chatter, laughter and bicker melding together in an almost tuneful clamour but this has now faded away and instead the hall and landing provide an empty chasm through the core of the house.

As Anila walks down the stair way to the bottom floor of the house she notices a tiny loose edge of wallpaper and flicks it with her fingers. The action loosens it more so she pulls at it until it tears a straight white strip all the way to the lower hallway ceiling. At the foot of the staircase a growing pile of *The Handsworth Times* remains unread by the front door. Usha sweeps around the newspapers each morning but she ignores the layer of powdery dust which gathers on the top of the pile. Anila glances at the headline on the uppermost paper – the words that continue to dominate are ‘UNREST’ and ‘TRAGIC’ but she refuses to linger on them too long. Some earlier editions of the paper include a photo of Billy supplied by the school. His unkempt, black hair is flattened down with saliva; rapidly applied spit rubbed into palms just seconds before the blinding camera flash. In grainy monotone Billy looks gawky as the flash startles him into a wide eyed glare. The photo fails to capture his essence; his sparky youth and the laughter in his eyes. A small globule of saliva is visible on the fringe above his left temple reflected in the sheen of the photographer’s lamp. The newspapers with the photo of Billy have now been placed face down buried in the pile.

After wandering through each other room Anila makes her way to the kitchen. Usha is on her hands and knees scrubbing at a turmeric stain on the lino near the sink. Anila stares at her before saying sharply:

‘What are you doing Mom?’

Usha looks up.

‘Cleaning this subji stain, it is where you father dropped his plate the other day after dinner’

They both know the plate was not dropped but flung down by Kuldip when the food failed to be spicy enough for his drowned out taste buds. The anger episodes were becoming more frequent since Billy had died. Anila stares at her mother as Usha pushes the scrubbing brush forwards and backwards:

‘Stop it’, Anila suddenly shouts. Her voice shakes.

Usha looks up startled.

‘Just stop it,’ Anila says. ‘Just stop bloody cleaning things that don’t matter. Cleaning won’t make Billy alive again. It just makes it feel like we are all dead too, like you are trying to clean it all away. It is all you do, you never talk. No-one talks in this bloody house. You just clean. Can’t you see the house is fucking spotless?’

‘Anila, that is a horrible thing to say’. Tears begin to well up and choke the back of Usha’s throat.

‘It is like we are all corpses in the same house, no talking, just existing. It is driving me bonkers’. Anila continues. She slumps down to the floor, and starts chewing at her stubby finger nails, pulling off a piece of loose skin with her teeth and then licking the tiny drop of blood that appears.

Usha wipes her hands on a tea towel tucked into the waistband of her trousers and stands up. She moves towards Anila and places one hand on her daughter’s head, looking down on Anila’s frizzy hair and her awkward, flourishing body. Anila continues to look downwards and to gnaw at her fingers. Her body is tense and the muscles in

her neck and shoulders tighten until they hurt. After a moment Usha turns back to the stain on the floor, kneels down and starts scrubbing away again. Anila looks up, cleans her dripping nose with the back of her wrist and glares at Usha, incredulous.

‘Bloody hell Mom, don’t you give a shit about any of the rest of us? Billy has gone, I am still here. We are all still here you know, stuck inside this miserable place’.

Usha pauses and without looking up she mumbles:

‘I have to clean Anila. I have to keep the house clean. It’s all I can do’.

The crashing of the rain momentarily amplifies as loud thunder echoes off the corrugated bathroom roof. Then the noise dies down to a steady, less distinct beat. Anila picks herself up and flings open the back door stepping out into the rain as the wind hits her in the face. She knows that if she stays in the kitchen she will say something awful to Usha. Her heart is racing. She thinks of her mother, just a few steps away on her hands and knees pushing like scrubbing brush back and forth like a robot. She wants to run back in, grab Usha by the throat and shake the private sufferings out of her. Instead she directs her own anger at the ominous grey sky and begins to shout:

‘No...No...Noooooooo,’ she screams towards the sky but her voice is barely audible above the heavy pelt of the rain which envelops her until her hair and clothes are drenched. Raindrops run down her cheeks and mingle with tears creating tiny rivulets across her face.

When she is completely wet Anila re-enters the house. She is shivering uncontrollably. Greyish brown water drips onto the kitchen floor and leaves a dirty trail behind her as she moves. She pushes past her mother and reaches for a kitchen towel which hangs on the handle of a nearby cupboard. She wipes her face and flings the towel to the floor. Rain-sodden clothes cling to her cold body. She leaves the

kitchen, taking the damp of the day through the living room and up the stairs. Usha picks up the discarded towel and soaks up the water trail on the kitchen floor before returning to scrub away at the stubborn turmeric stain.

Chapter 7: Kavi

Kavi can't work out how the scent of a dead person can still exist, hanging in the air weeks after they have been burnt like an old box on a bonfire. How can the smell cling to clothes and waft out unexpectedly as if that body might still be alive, existing in the threads of the fabrics, trapped, invisible and without a voice? He thinks of his brother Billy floating around, lost in space alone and scared like Major Tom in Bowie's Space Oddity. He slams the wardrobe shut. It is twelve weeks since Billy died.

Outside the bedroom the house stinks of Jeyes Fluid and bleach. In the kitchen Usha, is scrubbing the inside of a saucepan with a Brillo-Pad. Pink soap suds ooze from the wet steel wool scourer and lurid froth bubbles across her bright yellow Marigolds. Her hands look like they should be on the cover of *Never Mind the Bollocks* - garish, Day-Glo, and punk hands -Kavi thinks as he brushes past her. She doesn't look up. Beyond the cleaning products and the smell of sorrow that hangs about her like a shadow he detects a very faint hint of the coconut and cold cream he remembers from when he was young enough to bury his face in her bosom. He leaves by the back door, glancing at the back of the house which is wedged between other houses, stuck in the middle of a row of tiny red brick dwellings on Church Street. The houses have one long zigzag roof and the same washing filled back gardens - scrubby lawns and wild, unkempt bushes toppling over cracked brick border walls, marking out small stakes of territory.

Kavi makes his way through the narrow, arched alley way between the Argawal family house at 130 Church Street and the Sweeney's next door. He walks quickly towards the Lozells Road, avoiding piles of dog shit and strewn litter on the way. In the pit of his stomach there is a dull ache as the empty day stretches ahead. At the top of the road Kavi glances through the glass windows on the carved wooden doors of The Royal Oak pub. Inside he sees desperate faces of sullen, jobless men sitting in groups of two and three, drinking flat, cheap ale from chipped glasses. In the snug area of the

pub at the side of the room, older white women in shabby clothes huddle around glasses of port and lemon putting the world to rights. Kavi kicks a crumpled coke tin across the street. Behind him he hears a sharp sucking of teeth.

‘Hey Kavi man, what you doing hanging about here? You not going to school?’

It is Carlo, the older brother of a boy in his class.

‘Don’t ignore me, man’.

‘Fuck off, leave me alone’.

‘Listen man, we all know you been through some shit yeah, but you gonna get yourself into some serious trouble talking like that. I was just being friendly you know’.

‘Yeah....alright, sorry, right? I just wanna be on me own, okay?’

Carlo is suddenly side by side with Kavi. His short afro juts out from beneath his red and black tam hat and he smells strongly of patchouli oil.

‘So, how’s them pretty sisters of yours doing, man?’ Carlo says cheerily.

Kavi glares at him.

Carlo’s body has teetered over an edge between adolescence and manhood and Kavi is a much younger child next to this wiry, square shouldered boy.

‘Look man I’m going down the Acapulco. Clive’ll be there in a bit. Wanna come? I got a bit of weed in me pocket – can do some chillin’ – you look like you need to’.

Kavi shrugs his shoulders; he has nowhere else to go. He follows Carlo up Lozells Road towards Villa Cross, pulling his jacket collar up around his face as they pass Hardiman’s factory

Inside the Acapulco the air is heavy with smoke. Kavi breathes in the familiar, muddy scent of marijuana as they enter; some days the whole of Lozells smells like this. As the acrid smoke rides up his nostrils an undertone of chilli and juniper berry travels down his nasal passage, burning the back of his throat. He splutters, coughing out a dry and hoarse bark and he has to bend double to suppress the cough. At the bar-like counter a Rastafarian with shoulders draped in a cloak of thick, grey, waist length dreadlocks turns and stares. He fixes bloodshot eyes unflinchingly on Kavi in the doorway. Kavi feels his thin legs quiver beneath him and he hesitates, hovering on the threshold, allowing the cafe odours to dissipate into the street.

‘Shut dat bloody door’, someone shouts from the back of the room.

Carlo grabs Kavi by the elbow and ushers him to a Formica table at the far side of the cafe, away from the main window. The table is stained yellow with tea and coffee spills. The door swings closed behind them.

‘It’s alright man,’ Carlo looks directly towards the Rasta at the counter; ‘He is the one whose brother was killed in the riot’, he says.

The Rasta nods respectfully in their direction and turns back to the counter slowly; he stirs his black tea with the back of a dinner knife.

‘I shouldn’t be in here – you don’t want one of us in here’. Kavi says when they sit down.

‘Don’t listen to that shit man – this cafe is for all of us. There ain’t no colour bar you know!’

Carlo rolls a spliff. He tears a strip of cardboard from the edge of a Swan Vesta matchbox and curls it tight into a filter and shoves it into the narrow end of the joint. He lights the opposite end and draws on it, sucking in his face until it is gaunt and his cheekbones protrude as if two ping-pong balls are stuck up into the sides of his

mouth. He blows a huge plume of smoke behind him and passes the joint under the table to Kavi.

‘Listen Kavi, man, Clive said you haven’t been back to school this term. Does your mutha know? It’s been nearly a month now since they school start up again, man’.

‘It’s none of your business, Carlo’,

‘What do you do all day Kavi ...kick cans around, hang around the record shops? Ain’t gonna bring your brother back’.

‘Don’t talk about my brother.’ Kavi’s face turns crimson.

‘Look Kavi man I got a brother too, a baby one just like you had, and I know I’d be cut up if anything happened to him. Don’t tell I said that right? But you still alive man – you ain’t dead. Make the most of it, man’.

‘Make the most of it – make the most of what? What have we got here in Lozells? What have I got to look forward to, or you? Bloody teachers who stick us in remedial class because our dads have an accent? And then what, the dole? A dead-end job like my dad who is already miserable enough for the whole family? Fuck off, Carlo; there is nothing here for me.’

‘Exactly and that why your brother dead’. Carlo pauses to sip his stewed, lukewarm tea. ‘Get a grip Kavi man, your brother wouldn’t have died that night if there was no riot – and there wouldn’t have been a riot if they hadn’t forgot about us, leaving us to live and die in shitholes like this. Leaving old woman like my Nan to sit in the launderette all day ‘cos she can’t afford to have the gas fire on’.

Kavi hands back the spliff under the table. He feels giddy.

Carlo continues speaking:

‘He wasn’t just unlucky – THEY let that happen to him. If you want to get justice for your brother you better stop feeling sorry for yourself and set about trying to change things’.

‘What like throwing a brick through Woollies and nicking all the plates and useless shit?’

‘No, like standing up to be counted, man. Like joining the fight against those white baldhead bastards that are allowed to march past our houses and spit in our faces. Like not just hanging around getting stoned and moaning about it all.’

After a long pause, Kavi says;

‘Nah Carlo, it’s more complicated than that. It’s not just a black and white thing. Look at my dad, he can’t even bring himself to look at our next door neighbours because they come from some village less than 50 miles from where he was born, which just happens to be Pakistan. He is more racist than any of them. And whatever you say, you black guys don’t like us Asians. You think we have it cushy cos we work fifteen hours a day running crappy little shops that make no money. In a place like this everyone hates each other cos we all need someone to blame.’

Kavi gets up to leave. Carlo keeps talking.

‘When they say we black guys are pissed off with you Asians – that is just divide and rule man. It is the Babylon we is fighting with not you skinny Asian dudes. You get it? We are all in this shithole together, and some of us want to change that situation ‘.

Kavi tugs open the steel framed glass door.

‘Grow up, Carlo man’

Carlo’s voice rises in pitch:

'Look we are making a group, Handsworth Youth Movement, like in other places - Brixton, Liverpool, even some of your guys up in Bradford man. My dad works in the factory, so the Union have photocopied some leaflets for us. Come to the meeting here next week, Kavi. We are going to organise ourselves so we can make them listen to us'.

'Nah', says Kavi from the doorway. 'Not for me, I got my own battles to deal with'.

Outside the Acapulco a police car screams towards Wheeler Street Secondary school. The school bell is about to ring the end of the school day.

Chapter 8: Kuldip

Hardiman's Sheet Metals has had a presence on Lozells Road since the latter days of the Industrial Revolution. The main section of the building is red brick Victorian and is the only part of the original structure remaining. It houses the makeshift canteen, toilets and offices all leading off dirty sky blue walls. Originally the factory floor was also part of the brick structure, a smaller version of what exists today and primarily engaged in moulding metal into corrugated sheets for the new factories and other industrial buildings which were springing up all over England's rapidly developing second city. However, since 1905 almost all the contracts agreed by the company have involved the huge Longbridge car plant on the other side Birmingham. Hardiman's was renovated in the 1950s, almost a 100 years after its inception, as part of a huge post-war expansion to keep up with the demand from the booming car industry. Now the main factory floor comprises of windowless concrete blocks where over 400 men labour on assembly lines, welding stations and presses; each involved in his own section of work, never quite sure of how his bit of metal will connect to the bloke's next to him.

Kuldip began on the assembly line at Hardiman's the year he came to England. The job had been lined up for him by a contact of his father's brother before he had even arrived. He soon moved on to a more sophisticated machine where his job was to form small metal rectangles into coils and cones. For Kuldip, the action of guiding metal through the two elongated rollers of this new machine evoked a memory of his Dadhi Ma squeezing excess water from Baba Ji's shirts at the mangle in the small courtyard of their shared house in the village on the edge of Jalandhar City. For nine years he approached the forming machine with a reluctant anticipation brought about both by the monotony of the work and the random (and occasionally) upsetting nostalgia it provoked. For the subsequent ten years Kuldip's role was to operate one of the factory's huge smouldering irons, and since 1979, to oversee the new apprentices as

they got to grips with the heavy machinery. The time after Billy's death was the longest interruption to this routine he had had since beginning work at the factory in 1960.

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Autumn is cold, not the Indian summer that has been promised. The misty air in the morning weighs heavy and Kuldip has to drag himself away from the warm, musky smells of the bed long vacated by Usha. The bedroom is as cold as the morning outside.

'Bloody woman', Kuldip says, cursing Usha for not switching on the gas fire.

He rubs his brow with his thumb and forefinger and shivers down the stairs in his vest and pyjama bottoms; his body is still clammy from a restless sleep. He stumbles towards the bathroom at the back of the kitchen, propping his head up with the heel of his palm.

'Anyone seen my school bag?' Anila shouts through the house from the top of the stairs.

'Do you have to shout so loud all the time?' Kuldip shouts back up at her. 'No bloody peace and quiet in this house'.

In the bathroom, Kuldip stares at the stranger in the mirror. His once handsome face is now worn thin and his deep set eyes sag around dark rings of sleeplessness. Behind his reflection he notices eruptions of blistering paint in the doorway.

'Everything falling apart', he mutters, staring at his crinkled reflection.

He runs his dry fingers across the brittle scratchiness of the night's stubble, wondering how the path of his life had swerved in this direction. He remembers his optimism and the sense of adventure felt on the boat from Bombay to Liverpool almost 21 years earlier when a pretty, red haired waitress singled him out from the all the

young Indian men with the same Raj Kapoor hairdos and shouted, 'Hiya Elvis', each time he passed her by in the canteen. When she spoke in his direction the other passengers turned and stared, sniggering at his embarrassment as he shuffled away. Now in the cold bathroom in Church Street, the same waitress appears to him as a daydream and hovers by the flaky doorway, winking flirtatiously at him with the same cocky smile across her face as when he imagines her late at night as he pushes himself into the yielding body of his wife. Kuldip shakes away the vision and begins scraping at the black shadow around his chin with a used razor. He finishes his morning ablutions by clearing his nostrils, holding each one down in turn and blowing out great globules of blood-tinged snot into the sink with the other. In the kitchen, Usha mixes Ready Brek in a bowl; she gags at the sounds escaping from the flimsy door of the bathroom.

Kuldip arrives at the factory later than usual that day, with only a few minutes to spare before the bell rings. Small groups of men gather about the chained gates: fathers next to sons, uncles and brothers side by side. A drone of voices fills the air - more heightened than usual - like the buzz of an agitated bee trapped inside a closed window. Kuldip glances around at his colleagues, sensing the unease amongst the men, but he avoids eye contact and instead wills the day to be uncomplicated. Johnny Isaacs, a wide-eyed young handsome Jamaican, barely beyond adolescence, stands next to him. He is deep in conversation with Amrit, the short, stocky shop steward, well-liked for his geniality and fairness.

'They are taking the piss, man', Amrit says loudly. 'We have to get all the men to join us. You have to get the Jamaicans to join us, Johnny, they listen to you, they knew your dad, and they trust you. We all have to fight this together ...once they cut the tea break they'll be cutting dinner next. What they're really doing is cutting wages, innit? It's their way of doing it, thinking we won't notice, like'.

Johnny says:

‘Nah man, I don’t even drink tea, man. I ain’t bothered really... so long as there is time for a fag. Just want to hold on to the job, got a babbie on the way and that you know.’

‘Don’t be stupid, Johnny. We have to stand together or they just take the piss out of us.’

Amrit turns to Kuldip.

‘What about you, Kuldip, yaar, you going to join with us? Can you survive without ten minutes for a nice little drink in the afternoon?’

Kuldip turns and walks away, ignoring the sound of sucking of teeth behind him. He heads towards the alleyway at the side of the factory, fingering the small hip flask in his pocket.

‘He needs to pull himself together or he is going to be the first out of here,’ Amrit says to Johnny.

‘Must be hard, man, losing your bwoy like that - not so easy to pull yourself together’, says Johnny.

Amrit nods.

Amrit and Johnny are amongst a small group from the factory who had gone to Billy’s funeral. When Kuldip returned to work the day after the mourning period Johnny patted him on the back, mumbling condolences and kind words but Amrit and some of the other men avoided him, lowering their eyes when he passed, unsure of what to say. Kuldip prefers it this way. More recently some of the men joked about his clumsiness around the machinery.

'Kuldip, you smell like a pub at last orders time,' Amrit tells him one morning after pushing him inside the toilets out of earshot. 'You need a break from soldering. The men are worried you're gonna hurt yourself ...get burnt, or worse still you will hurt someone else'

Two days later Kuldip is called into Hardiman's office:

'Assembly line, Agarwal. There's been complaints from the men, you're gonna get hurt or hurt someone else. Can't take the risk like. Not with you teaching all them young 'uns. It'll just be temporary, mind, until you can refocus, you know what I mean?'

But Kuldip doesn't know what he means except from then on he spends each day placing small metal casings over the bolts on uniform metal sheets, over and over for hours and hours. He doesn't tell Usha about the demotion.

In the alleyway Kuldip unscrews the hip flask and takes a long swig of the fiery whiskey, licking away the few dribbles that linger on his lips before returning the flask to his pocket. On the other side of the wall the noise of the men rises like a wave as Hardiman's shiny black saloon pulls up to the factory gates. Ruddy faced and sweaty, Hardiman squeezes himself out of the front passenger seat into the swarm of waiting men. Colin Boyle, an older worker at the factory shouts out from the small crowd towards him:

'We can't work for nothing you know, Boss.'

A stern voice replies:

'Plenty fitter, younger men that'll be queuing at the dole office for good jobs like these, Boyle. I'd get to work if I were you, and nip this complaining in the bud'.

The reply is not from Hardiman but Stan Bedford, Hardiman's brother-in-law, second in command at the factory and driver of the car.

Hardiman and Bedford enter the building, slamming the corrugated door behind them. The men follow them and queue like a line of ants at the entrance.

'Bloody fools, all this nonsense just for tea-breaks', Kuldip mutters to himself before joining the clocking in line.

Chapter 9: Nina

When September is almost through Nina leaves home.

'It is university, Mom, just like you wanted '.

Usha stares at her blankly.

'I will be back most weekends, honest', Nina continues, and they both nod convincing neither themselves nor each other.

Usha reaches for her daughter's hand and squeezes it tight; she strokes the back of the plump soft fingers with her thumb

'Will you eat properly, Beta?' she says, 'promise me you will look after yourself.'

'Of course I will, don't be all daft, Mom'.

Nina disappears towards the stairs to pick up her hold-all and rucksack. Usha breathes in the lingering scent of her daughter as she passes by and then moves towards the living room to slip on her old fashioned dogtooth coat and grab her handbag from the settee.

'I can't take a day off work for this,' Kuldip had said earlier that morning, even though Eugene had offered them the use of his van again. 'Already, there has been too much time off this year. They are not happy about it'.

'Your son died, you didn't go on holiday', Nina says loudly as her father leaves the house. He doesn't say goodbye.

'Well fuck you too', Nina mutters under her breath as the front door closes behind him.

Outside Kuldeep leans against wall and takes in three long, slow breaths to steady himself before he moves on.

The number 16 bus journey to New Street Station is a slow one and a silent one. Usha grips Nina's hand tight; thumb and forefinger clasped around her wrist as if the young woman is a toddler. Mother and daughter stare at the colourless day out of the dirty bus window, watching the dreary streets of Birmingham whizz by under a blanket of relentless drizzle. At the station Usha pushes notes of money into Nina's hand. Some of the money had been left in an envelope marked Nina on the bedside table by Kuldeep, the rest has been saved up from the loose change of housekeeping in a jam jar. Nina untangles herself from her mother's embrace as Usha begins to weep.

'How can empty become emptier?' Usha mutters.

She kisses her daughter's damp hair and watches as Nina disappears through the ticket barriers towards a new life. Out of sight Nina wipes away the tears that have now begun to trickle down her own face. Anila's words ring in her ears:

'Escaping from the shithole – you are the lucky one. Not trapped in this nightmare. Make the bloody most of it, Nin',

On the train she settles into a forwards facing table seat near the buffet carriage. She blows her nose, wipes her face with the palms of her hands and sits back, sighing as the train begins to clunk out of the station.

'Too bloody right I will,' she whispers under her breath.

Chapter 10: Slap

After work Kuldeep staggers into Church Street at ten past five. The day has crawled by with the tensions that have been building over the weeks bubbling across the factory floor. Kuldeep's head throbs with the quagmire of jumbled up conversations about tea breaks and strikes which have accelerated over the past few days and have become the main topic of conversation amongst the men, even overtaking the football talk. As he turns into Church Street Kuldeep fixes himself on the bottle of whiskey that is concealed behind the teabags and tins of boiled chickpeas and baked beans in the small cupboard above the cooker. Further up the street, Kamela and Anila stand chatting in the doorway of the Conway's' house, directly across the street from their own. They see their father in the distance.

'Shit, he is pissed again, look Kam, he can't even walk'. Anila quickly passes over a half smoked cigarette to Debbie Conway.

'We better go in; he looks in a right mood again. He didn't see, did he?'

'Nah, he can't even walk straight, he isn't gonna see a fag from that far.'

The girls slip across the road and enter the house through the back door, disappearing up the stairs to their attic room.

In the bedroom, Anila fiddles with the record player placing the needle arm on the second groove on the first side of the LP. She turns the volume up to full and the dum, dum dumdah dah dah of "Brand New Cadillac" cranks into action, bouncing off the sloping walls and drowning out all other sounds. Anila starts dancing, hypnotised by the rhythm. She moves around the room, twisting up and down to the beat, mouthing the lyrics:

'My baby drove up in a brand new Cadillac

Yes she did!

My baby drove up in a brand new Cadillac

she said, "Hey, come here, Daddy!"

I ain't never comin' back! '

'You're mad...this is shit ', her sister shouts across the room as she flicks back the cover of a discarded *Jackie* magazine.

Anila carries on moving and singing along to the music:

'...She said, "Balls to you, Big Daddy"

....She ain't never coming back'

Suddenly, the door bursts open and slams against the frame of the bunk beds; a tiny crack appears in the white paint of the door.

'Can't you hear when your father is calling you?'

Anila pulls the needle from the record, screeching it across the vinyl and muttering 'shit' under her breath.

'Sorry, we couldn't hear you', Kamela says, still looking at the magazine.

'No one can hear anything with that bloody horrible music on', he says.

Kuldip shouts at the two girls without looking them. Instead he looks around the room at posters of Che Guevara, Siouxsie Sioux and Adam Ant which cover the walls; he feels as though he has stepped into a stranger's house. Then without warning he lunges towards Anila and grabs her by the ear, twisting it tight until the blood runs out of it. Her face turns a deep shade of scarlet.

'Fuck off, Dad', Anila screams, the pain sears through her body, 'What you doing?'

' I saw you, Anila, smoking like a dirty kuthi in the street '

Before she can struggle free he drags her skinny body down the flight of stairs into the bedroom where Usha stands over the bed pulling out sheets and towels from a pile of washing.

'What the hell are you doing, Kuldip? Have you gone mad?' Usha shouts, dropping the linen.

Kamela is right behind her sister, pulling at her sweatshirt and grabbing at her father's arm. Before she is able free her sister Kuldip has let go and is suddenly in front of Anila with a raised hand. He brings it down in a hard, sharp slap against her cheek and she lets out a tiny whimper. Then, without warning, a gush of hot urine flows through her knickers and collects in a steaming puddle on the brown carpet below her. Anila and Kamela stare at the pool of liquid on the floor; transfixed by their own reflections in this putrid mirror.

'You drunken fool', Usha screams at Kuldip. 'You have lost one child, Nina couldn't wait to get away and now you are pushing the others away too'. Usha puts her arms around Anila's shoulders and leads her out the room. Kamela follows.

'Everything falling apart', Kuldip whispers as they leave. He sits down on the edge of the bed and covers his face with his hands. When the footsteps on the stairs fade away, he feels for the hip flask in his pocket. He unscrews the lid and licks up the few drops of whiskey that shake into his mouth. The smell of urine begins to permeate the room and Kuldip sobs, squeezing the cold metal of the empty flask until his knuckles become white and bloodless.

Chapter 11: Usha & Kuldip

‘Kuldip is sinking’. Usha says to Gillian as they sit at the faded kitchen table drinking sweet, milky masala tea.

It is still morning but the kitchen is dark. There is a sharp, icy chill running past them, even though Usha has taped silver Gaffer around the edges of the sash window and has left a gas ring burning on the stove all morning. Outside the window the air is thick with winter. March is fast approaching but the sky is the same unfaltering lead grey it has been since before the arrival of the New Year some weeks earlier

‘What do you mean sinking?’ , Gillian says.

‘Drowning... I mean drowning. Like he is moving his arms and legs but cannot swim’.

‘In grief you mean? .In sadness? That’s understandable, Bab, people react to death in different ways.’

‘No Gillian, I am drowning in sadness. He is drowning in whiskey’.

A tiny stream of tea dribbles down the side of Gillian’s matt pink lips and collects in a droplet on the table top. She begins to laugh. Usha stares at her, fixing on her powdery amber skin and the bright pink streaks of blusher across her cheekbones. She touches her own face, the skin is bare except for a thin film of Ponds cream.

‘Sorry’, says Gillian, ‘It’s just I hadda picture of him at the Grove Lane baths with his stripy pyjamas on, splashing about in the water like a sinking kitten ‘.

Usha cups a hand over her own mouth as her shoulders begin to rhythmically rise and fall silently until a rasp splutters out of her pale mouth and becomes a soft

giggle, punctuated by high involuntary notes like a chirping bird. The sound spills out into air around them, warming it like an early breeze of a new spring after the dull, relentless winter. Eventually, Usha wipes her streaming eyes with the knuckles of her index fingers and sits back on the stiff, wooden dining chair. She catches her breath.

‘Not done that since school’, says Gillian, ‘The last time was in biology when the teacher told us about the facts of life and I thought he was having us on’

Usha composes herself. A wave of panic sweeps through her body. Her face contorts in the same way it does each morning as she opens her eyes after yet another night where Billy still exists full of life in fitful dreams and episodic bursts of sleep. After a short pause she says, in all earnest:

‘I still didn’t believe these things even after I got married. It took until the third baby before I realised the connection’.

The women laugh again together, this time Usha doesn’t try to suppress it.

‘You think I am joking?’ she says. ‘I was barely a teenager when I arrived in this country and was married to Kuldip by the time I was seventeen. I hardly had a chance to hear the stories that went about the playground’.

Silence dispels the lighter air.

‘Anyway’, says Gillian, ‘it is a rollercoaster - grief, no wonder he’s drinking a lot more. We all deal with it in our own ways. It was the same when my mother died.’

But Usha knows this isn’t true. Losing a child is a very different thing to losing a parent. Gillian knows it too. The two women sip their tea.

After a moment Usha starts speaking again. This time the words roll out as though she can’t stop them; a floodgate opened. Gillian listens, watching her friend’s face intently, gripped by the words:

'When we were first married he used to scream out in his sleep. I never knew what it was all about. They were loud screams - repetitive and distressing cries like a wounded animal crying out for comfort from its mother. He had been howling in his sleep like that every night from our wedding night. I thought I might go deaf from it'.

'Did you ask him about it?' Gillian asks.

'I had never slept in the same room as a man before, it is stupid but at first I thought maybe it is just what men do – they are so different from us. I only had sisters. Anyway, then I realised that was silly and thought instead that maybe he was remembering a past life; like the young boy who kept making his mother take him towards the shop he ran in his past life so he could confront his murderer who lived next door. This really happened; it was even on the BBC. It's what we believe'.

Gillian nods, bemused. She is only vaguely familiar with the concept of reincarnation and any talk of it brings to mind the image of a tin of sweet, condensed milk with a similar sounding name.

Usha continues:

'Then, when his friend from the village came to stay, he asked me if Kuldip still had the nightmares about his dead brother, as though I knew what he was talking about. I made him tell me what he meant. I never knew Kuldip even had a brother that had died. He never told me.'

'Dilip, that was the friend's name, told me that the three of them, Kuldip, Krishan (Kuldip's brother) and he were inseparable as boys. They spent every day together playing cricket after school and in the holidays they played it tirelessly, extending the same game (carrying over scores) for days on end. In the last summer together the sun beat down so hard it felt like all moisture had been wrung from the earth; the grass was scorched and shrivelled beneath their feet like a coir mat between

the wickets. The sky was a permanent shade of cobalt blue and the fields had turned from a luscious green to such an intense straw yellow that the young friends found it hard to look straight ahead without screwing up their eyes tight and blinking like they were seeing daylight for the first time. Their legs, blackened by the sun, ached and the soles of their feet, their knees and the flats of their palms were hardened by the endless climbing, running and kicking of those hot days. Dilip said one time Krishan taught the younger boys how to climb an old shisham tree like a monkey. He cupped his fingers into a step and then heaved the younger, slighter boys on to the most accessible lower branches. The trees mid height leafy branches had become their favourite den. From here they threw stones into the school yard behind the garden, hitting the brightly coloured, world maps murals on the exterior walls of the school. I think Krishan was just a year or two older than the other two but Kuldip looked up to his brother like he was a god.'

'It sounds wonderful;' says Gillian, 'just how childhood should be...What happened then, to Krishan?' she asks.

Usha continues, taken aback by the interruption;

'Once at a village wedding Kuldip bet Krishan he couldn't eat six adult portions of ras malai - you know the sweet you ate at Nina's birthday party? You said it was like eating sweet cheesy sponge, remember? Anyway, Krishan won the bet but later that evening his stomach bubbled until it erupted into pistachio coloured vomit. The stale smell of milky vomit lingered in their small bedroom room for so long that after a few days Kuldip's father dragged up the heavy wooden jute-weave beds onto the rooftop where Krishan and Kuldip slept in the open air from then on'.

'You'd freeze to bleedin' death if you slept on a roof out here', Gillian intercepts.

Usha ignores her and carries on speaking; the words become more urgent.

'That's when it happened. Kuldip was just nine years old so Krishan would have been eleven, like Billy. One night in his sleep, Krishan rose from his bed and walked like a ...how do you say it? ... a zombie across the roof top. Kuldip woke when he heard a noise but by the time he was awake enough to realize that the shadow moving across the rooftop was his brother there was nothing he could do. He yelled at Krishan to wake up and his screaming woke the rest of the house but it was too late - Krishan had somehow managed to climb on the low brick balcony wall and before Kuldip to get to him he had fallen'.

'Oh god', says Gillian, gripped by the story.

'Dilip lived on the other side of the small village but he said even he was awoken by the howl that pierced through the village that night. It wasn't just Kuldip's screaming but the horrific deep, dreadful moans of the boys' father and mother when they saw their first born son broken to pieces like that. Dilip says that Kuldip's mother couldn't get over it- she couldn't bear to see Kuldip's face; he reminded her of Krishan. I think maybe they blamed him for not saving his brother. After that, Kuldip was sent away to live with an aunt in Ludhiana, a big city over fifty kilometres away. He stayed there for ten years, until he managed to save enough money to come to England'.

'Bloody hell', Gillian says, 'so that is what the screaming at night is all about?'

'The screaming stopped the night Billy died', Usha says. Her eyes fill with tears.' I don't think even screaming can help him with this nightmare'.

Chapter 12: Kamela

'You were always the beautiful one', Anila says to Kamela.

The fraying, tartan photo album is open on Anila's lap as she flicks through faded images set behind protective transparent sheets. She sits in a dark corner of the attic bedroom, her movements measured like gestures in a film being shown in slow motion. Across the room Kamela darts around in preparation for the day ahead, one minute rummaging through a drawer of clothes, the next plucking at her thin eyebrows over the table lamp. The bright light that has glared into her eyes leaves purple floaters, thread-like fragments, dancing in the space in front of her, distracting, as she skips over to peer across her sister's shoulder. It takes a few seconds for her retina to readjust. Images of Usha and Kuldip stare back at the girls from plastic pages of the photo album - blurred, monochrome figures, only vaguely familiar, like distant relatives from a far off era. The soft-focus faces gaze innocently at the photographer: young, unmarked by the passing of time, untainted by the tragedy of loss.

'Look at this one', says Anila. It is a wedding photo, 'Look at all his wavy hair – how much Brylcream is in that? And that sharp suit. He looks like a Mod. Did they have Mods in India?'

'It's not in India, stupid. It's Broughton Road, Bibi's house; they got married in the front room, remember? Mom is stunning. Can you believe she was just past my age when she got married?'

The young Usha is beautiful. Huge, almond-shaped eyes stare shyly into the camera, the lids slightly lowered. Her head and shoulders are shrouded in a delicate embroidered chunni; she is resplendent even in black and white. Both bride and groom wear garlands, Usha a fresh flower necklace and Kuldip a golden heart hanging down across his suit and tie from a twinkly tinsel and beaded chain.

‘You look just like her’, says Anila, ‘I look like him’.

‘He was quite a good looking bloke back then, alright for someone fresh off the boat’.

‘Yeah, but I don’t wanna look like a bloke, do I? Even if he is my dad.’

‘Well you don’t help yourself do you, Anila? You could grow your hair a bit and let me do your eyebrows. You’ve got lovely thick hair – I could straighten it with the iron so it’s like mine. ...Maybe if you wore a skirt or a dress sometimes’.

‘I’m not talking about clothes, Kamela. I am talking about what is handed down to us that we have no choice about. You know? His big nose, bulbous eyes, shape of face and that’.

Kamela pulls out a colour image of her own sixth birthday party.

‘Hey look at this one’, she says.

In it she stands with Nina and Anila staring out eagerly towards the camera; birthday excitement sparkling in all their eyes. The Agarwal girls are beside a covered dining table; red and white gingham topped by a centrepiece luminous pink and peachy iced birthday cake. In the background Usha is in purple paisley against a wall of psychedelic green and orange swirls. Her hair is backcombed into a high bun on the top of her head and she holds a plump, moonfaced toddler dressed in red on her hip. The photo is vivid, streaming out colour from every centimetre as if the world has only just discovered colour, each shade a nugget of gold, panned from the bottom of a dull riverbed, glinting against the drab of greyscale tin.

‘It was the day Baba-ji died,’ Kamela says, turning away from the photo. ‘It is the first thing I can ever remember.’

‘I don’t remember,’ says Anila, disappointedly

'You weren't in the room, and anyway you weren't even five by then. He just did it without warning, dropped down dead on the cold kitchen floor - it was the worst thing ever...until Billy. It was just after this picture,' she says pointing to another image on the same page, 'Dad, made me line up with them McNamara twins in the kitchen door so it looked like we were outside.'

Two identical scrubbed, pink faced girls scowl out into the camera. Frilly pastel coloured party dresses fill the frame and the twins wear their hair in pig tails which sit in straw coloured Qs, jutting out like symmetrical jug handles from the sides of their heads. Kamela stands rigidly between them, her arms straight down her sides and her long, dark hair falling forward from a lowered head.

'They lived next door for a while. Mum was trying to be friendly but they didn't like me. They called me names, Paki and that, and their mum sprayed me with Glade once when I put a foot over their kitchen step. Those dresses got splattered in blood when he fell over. He cracked his head on the sink. It was a mess, blood everywhere, and them two screamed and screamed like we were torturing them'.

Kamela walks back to her own bed and draws burgundy lipstick across her mouth.

'I only wanted to be friends but they were spiteful. Jealous, Mum said'

'You were Baba's favourite, you were everyone's favourite. Everyone likes a pretty little girl'

'I always think of him on my birthday. I imagine him really; sort of make him up like things would have been different if he hadn't died that day. I was glad their nasty little dresses got ruined - serves them right, stuck up little bitches'

'I only remember as far back as Billy. Like everything started and ended that day. Before that everything seems all made up, imagined like you say about Baba, like

it exists in these photos but not in real life, if you know what I mean? I wonder if things would be different if Billy hadn't died'

'Like what?'

'Like not so bloody boring. Like Dad not being rat-arsed all the time and Mom not in a constant daze, cleaning like there's no tomorrow...and Nina maybe phoning occasionally or even coming home once in a while and Kavi,...well Kavi being a bit more, you know, interested .

'Get dressed, Anila, stop being all miserable and that, things carry on you know. You have to make it all better yourself – no one else is gonna. '

'What like you? Sneaking out to blues parties and loving it up with your old men boyfriends?'

'Sod off, Anila. Anyway, get a move on or you're gonna be late for school.'

Kamela leaves the room, her canvas satchel flung across her shoulder. She hurtles down the stairs, shouting into the hallway:

'Bye Mom, Bye Anila, see yous later'.

Outside it is unexpectedly warm for April. The sun startles Kamela, scolding the back of her neck as she slams the front door shut. Directly across the road Elsie Meeson stoops to gather up silver topped milk bottles from her doorstep. A burning cigarette end hangs from her crinkled lips.

'Morning', she shouts towards Kamela. Her voice is husky, weathered like her sloping body. She is the oldest resident on the street;

'Almost seventy-odd years I've lived on this street', she tells anyone who will listen. 'Ever since I was a babby. Not like this then, proper English then...clean like. Proud we were of this street even if we only had an outside bog'.

She wears a lilac candlewick dressing gown, shabby and faded like the curtains that hang in her front window.

‘Simon Bates on the radio says it is gonna be a bloody hot summer again, like ‘76. Right up your street, you lot, innit?’ She glares at Kamela, ‘Can pretend you’re back at home and that, can’t you?’

Her tone is deadpan and Kamela ignores her - it is an old cliché and Elsie Meeson says it every spring. Kamela heads up towards the bus stop at Villa Cross.

As she walks Kamela plans her day in her head. At lunchtime she will meet up with Debbie Conway and arrange to meet that night at the back of the infant school the on the corner of Wills Street, out of view of the houses. They will sneak out after their parents have gone to bed and go to the blues party on Anglesey Street with Carlton and Lindon and the other Jamaican boys they know from round about the area. They will dance for hours to the Cool Ruler, like they have done before, squashed up against the sweaty bodies of the revellers as the music pumps into the dark night; the low bass just about audible from the attic bedroom where, on past occasions Nina and Anila have laid awake in silence waiting for their sister to return (stinking of ganja and rum when she does), and willing for her not to be caught out, not to be revealed by the pillows stuffed under the covers that mimic her sleeping body. This time she has not told Anila her plans, worried that her sister might try to dissuade her. Anila has become so anxious since Billy’s death.

At the bus stop six girls are leaning against a cracked window pane on the bus shelter. They each have a lit cigarette and a plume of collective smoke rises over heads into a thin white cloud. Kamela reaches in her bag for her own cigarettes, lights up and nods at the girls recognising some of them from the canteen at Matthew Boulton, the college she has been attending since September. The girls do not nod back. The tallest of the group, a pretty mixed race girl with braided hair, sucks her teeth

in Kamela's direction. Kamela shrugs her shoulders, turns her back and peers up the road for the number 16 bus. Next to her an old man wrapped in a dirty mackintosh spits a globule of thick, green phlegm into the gutter. He misses her white canvas shoe by a couple of centimetres and she steps back in disgust. Behind her the girls snigger and when she glances around at them they have become a huddle, whispering under their breath into the circle. The bus arrives and the tall girl pushes past Kamela jutting a sharp elbow into her ribs.

'Hey', shouts Kamela, 'that hurt '.

'Good', the girl hisses. 'That'll teach ya to keep your filthy hands to yourself '.

Kamela is perplexed. 'It was you who hurt me; watch where you are going can't you?'

The girl pushes her face down into Kamela's until their noses almost touch.

'Cha! Keep away from my man, bitch. I've seen the way you stare at him in the canteen. Slack, cha'.

'I don't know what are bloody talking about, sod off would ya?'

'Watch ya mout, bloodclaat. You can't cuss me, bitch. You wait and see'.

The bus doors slide open and Kamela squeezes herself on in front of the group.

'Grow up you silly cow', she says, looking back at them, wishing one of her sisters was there for moral support. She grabs the only remaining seat downstairs as the girls disappear up to the top deck, each throwing her a cutting backwards glance as they ascend the winding steps. Kamela gets off the bus one stop earlier than usual.

‘I’m going up town– wanna come for a bit?’ Debbie Conway asks Kamela on the way out of the college building at the end of the day

‘Nah, better get back, play the good daughter before tonight’, Kamela replies with a wave.

Outside the Spring sunshine makes the air stifling. The main road is busy with cars and buses and the heat collects in visible waves, floating around the traffic. Kamela moves towards the myriad of graffiti-covered subways tangled beneath the Ringway which dominates the City Centre. She heads to the James Watt Underpass; it is chilly in the shadows after the bright sunshine. She descends into the subway and the hustle of above-ground comes to a sudden, gloomy halt. For a few seconds it is silent.

‘ Oi, Bitch’ , there is a sudden shout behind .

Kamela turns to see two of the girls from the morning incident walking up behind her. They are a few yards away. One is the braided girl.

‘You wanna go visit ya dead brotha, bitch?’

‘Leave me alone’, Kamela shouts back. A bead of sweat trickles from her hairline, balancing on the tip of her nose. She wipes it away with the back of her hand. ‘ I don’t know anything about you or your stinking boyfriends.’

The girls quicken their pace and Kamela begins to run. The underpass seems longer and darker than before. Suddenly the girls are right up with her and she is shoved against a cold, spray-painted wall. It smells of stale urine and damp chalk. Before she can speak she feels a knee thud into her stomach and she crumples downwards, unable to catch her breath. She tries to rise from the ground but as she does a sharp, piercing pain burns across her cheek. She lifts her hand to her face; vermillion drips onto her pale bloodless fingers. The clunk of a metal blade hits the

floor and the echo of the two girls fades down the subway. It is followed by the stench of old sweat which makes her choke and splutter out a succession of hoarse coughs. A curtain of darkness begins to close in around her and a crackle, like an unturned radio, fuzzes around her head. It turns into a high pitched siren, before the floating face of Baba (her granddad) and the disembodied head of Billy merge into one behind her eyelids. The image and the noise stop, then nothing.

#

The morning light stirs Kamela from a disjointed sleep. Ten days have passed since the attack in the subway and nights have become more and more restless; endless tosses and turns and sudden, abrupt awakenings. Sleep has become an intermittent stranger.

This morning the skylight in the attic roof is a rectangle of yellow cloaking the space beneath it in a translucent shower. Kamela thinks about her mother who she knows has not had a full night's sleep for almost ten months. The bedroom's honey coloured hue confuses her and she is unsure if she has been dreaming of her mother asleep or thinking of her consciously. A small bird darts across the golden oblong of the window, momentarily ripping a black slash across the sky. Kamela rises out of her single bed beneath the window, places a small wooden footstool on the bed and perches on it, precariously. She looks through the skylight across the ecru rooftops towards the Rotunda building in the City Centre. The orange dawn gives the impression of flames in the opaque windows of its upper levels. The outside world is like a mirage.

Kamela breathes in the sleeping house and it comforts her. She looks towards the top bunk in the corner where Anila is softly snoring. The top bunk used to be her bed before Nina left Birmingham. Now on Nina's rare visits she has to make do with the dark shadows of the bottom bed. Kamela climbs back into her crumpled

sheets, pulling them tight around herself, sucking in the lingering smell of her mother's Pond's Cold Cream on the sheets where Usha has knelt to kiss her forehead. A copy of 19 Magazine lies next to the bed, acquired for her by Anila. She looks through the glossy pages of flawless, white faces towards the Dear Jenny section at the back. The made-up misery of others distracts her for a moment or two but she tires quickly and her eyes are hard to keep open, soon she is unable to focus. It is nearly six am. She closes the magazine and fingers the bumpy scar across her cheek; the pain dulls the side of her face and she buries herself into the peacock print pillow case, pulling the bed covers taut over her head and body, shielding herself against the new day.

Chapter 13: The Movement

A layer of thin dust lines the bottle green window sill of the classroom. Anila runs her index finger along it until the tip is coated in charcoal grey. An image of her scarred sister lying in her bed at home flickers across her mind. . She has an urge to lick her finger. She resists. Outside the window, beyond the school gates, a small group of young men gather. From a distance, they are indistinct in shades of khaki and taupe. Anila stares towards them, fixing her eyes on a pigeon in the middle distance; it is manky and limp but manages to struggle towards the border of trees which provide the only hint of green in the concrete playground.

‘Anila, Anila, Miss Agarwal! ‘.

The echo rising in volume in her head is Mrs Tatton, the English teacher, pulling her in back to earth.

‘Where are you Anila? You’re certainly not with Piggy and Simon with the rest of us, are you? Page 151, read it out, now’.

Anila thumbs through the pages of the tatty paperback in front of her. It takes a few slow seconds to find the page.

‘Simon’s head was tilted slightly up.

His eyes could not break away from the Lord of the Flies hung in the space before him’.

Behind Anila there is shuffling and giggling - just as there is every class.

‘Don’t know why I bother’, Mrs Tatton mumbles under her breath

Anila reads louder in monotone, her boredom enveloping each word:

‘ What are you doing out here all alone? Aren’t you afraid of me?’

The shrill school bell cuts the reading short and the noise level in the class rises to a din as the children begin clambering over chairs, jostling for bags and coats. Mrs Tatton turns to the wall, her back to the class, and fumbles in her bag for the half-empty pack of Embassy No.1's. Anila closes the book with a sigh and straggles behind the other pupils.

The group of young men outside have set up a trestle table by the wrought iron railings. Laid over it is a red sheet daubed in black letters, the words read SELF DEFENCE IS NO OFFENCE jumping out of the cloth in bold, crude letters; a splash of colour against a steely, impenetrable landscape. The shock of the words make Anila shiver, it is a thrill she does not recognise. She is drawn towards the men, pulled in like a paperclip to a magnet. As the pupils pile out of the iron gates the men begin to chant in one loud, united voice:

Here to stay, here to fight.

Handsworth Youth with all their might

Anila and some of the others move beyond the confines of the school, across the pavement, closer to where the men stand. The chanting dies down and the men quickly shove leaflets into any receptive hands. There is little difference between the ages of the men and the school children, the only variance is in the uniform and as the two groups move towards each other they blend into one amorphous crowd. The majority of the men are Asian, a couple are black and Anila recognises one of them as Carlo, the older brother of Kavi's friend Clive. He nods in her direction and makes his way over to where she hovers on the edge of the small group forming around the trestle table.

'Alright,' he says grinning, 'How your brother doing?'

'So, so', replies Anila, without meeting his eye.

'I see him not so long back, kicking can, hanging out on corners with a bad crowd, like. Ya mama know he is skiving all the time?'

Carlo speaks in a sing song voice, part patois, and part broad Brummie like most of the younger West Indians around Handsworth.

'None of your business really, is it?' Anila shrugs.

'You is a feisty one, ain't you?'

Carlo smiles gently as Anila looks up, meeting her eyes for just a fraction of a second before she quickly averts her gaze.

'What's it all about then?' Anila asks, snatching a leaflet from Carlo's hand and staring down at it.

Carlo continues to look at the top of Anila's head, directing his reply into her frizzy mass of black hair.

'We is organising ourselves. Had enough of Babylon stopping every one of our yout every five minutes, you know – like the riot when your Billy.....' He stops short of his full sentence.

Anila stares at him coldly and flips over the leaflet. On the back is a rough pen and ink drawing of twelve black fists punching into the air. Anila likes the image. The ink of the photocopier is still damp and a black residue seeps into the crevices of her fingertips.

'Come to the meeting, we need some girls... maybe you can bring your mates, gobby ones like you? Bring Kavi – I tried to get him before but him nah interested man'.

An old man limps by. He walks past the school each day just as the school gates open and the children spill out around him. He grunts at the small crowd; his words spraying out a shower of saliva:

‘You lot should join the bloody army instead of hanging around here... you’re a bloody waste of space, the lot of yous’.

‘Cha’, Carlo mutters and winks at Anila.

She shuffles away, head down, avoiding the lump of phlegm spat out by the old man onto the pavement just ahead of her.

Chapter 14: Hardiman's

Kuldip falls out of bed as he stretches his arm into the darkness reaching to stem the loud ring of the alarm clock on the bedside cabinet. As his body thuds to the floor he knocks the side of his head against the edge of the cabinet and a half drunk glass of water topples, clinking as it hits the surface. Cold liquid dribbles onto Kuldip's bare arms:

'Bloody bugger', he mumbles under his breath and begins to feel about in the pitch blackness under the bed. As his finger tips touch the stiff leather of his hip flask he breathes a sigh of relief and clutches the flask tight, moving it towards him.

Usha, wide awake, turns over in the bed and squeezes her eyes tightly shut, wishing the day to be over before it has even started.

Kuldip pulls on his work clothes without trying to be quiet. The room is still in the shadows and the sun has failed to break through the grey clouds of dawn. When dressed, he slips the hip flask into his trouser pocket and heads to the bathroom, taking a swig from the flask on the way. He pauses to top up the contents from the bottle of whiskey behind the condiments in the cupboard next to cooker. After a few moments Kuldip closes the front door behind him and heads for the factory, leaving the rest of the household seemingly asleep as usual. The whiskey burns the back of his throat and his empty stomach rumbles deep and hollow. He tries to remember when he first found he needed the whiskey so early in the morning but he cannot. He craves another swig before he comes to the end of Church Street and he looks around before bringing it out of his pocket; many of his work colleagues live on Church Street.

Hardiman's is a short walk from the house but this morning, after a night of vivid dreams and fitful sleep, Kuldip is slower than usual. He stops to rest a moment against the brick wall of the infant school on the corner of Wills Street, and then again

just before he reaches the Lozells Road junction. As he walks images of the previous night's dreams invade his mind, appearing and disappearing like flickers on the telly. The dreams are all of his children: Billy's face is that of the burning boy, flames melting his flesh like candle wax; Nina is running down a busy road, dodging traffic, without so much as a backwards glance; Kamela lays in a pool of her own crimson blood, her face in shreds like torn fabric whilst Anila swims in a bath of urine and excrement, the shit sticking in clumps to her skin and hair. The images of Kavi are the ones he most consciously tries to block out; in them Kavi's face merges with his own as his son staggers about, ragged and drunken like the tramps that sleep in the doorways of the Lozells Road

By the time Kuldip approaches the factory gates it is past eight thirty a.m. and the hip flask is almost empty. As he moves towards the entrance, it takes him a few minutes to notice the line of men beyond the first set of gates blocking the doorway to the main part of the factory. Amrit sees him first:

'Hello Yaar,' Amrit shouts jovially, 'Good you can join us . I was thinking you would just stay at home this morning'

The seventy-plus crowd begin a slow hand clap as Kuldip nears them and he turns around to see who they are clapping for. As he turns he notices one of two other men arriving with placards and to the left of him some of the faces he knows from the shop floor carrying piles of unfamiliar red top newspapers.

'What is going on, Amrit, why is no one working?' The words slur out on a wave of whiskey breath. Amrit's face drops.

'You don't remember? We have been talking all month about this one day strike. Don't tell me you have just come to work as usual, Kuldip?'

Another voice from the crowd says:

'Too pissed to take any notice that's what's going on there'

'Really, Kuldip?', Amrit continues:

' Did you not remember? Even from Friday? It is only three days ago and we have been talking of this for months. There have been ballots, letters from the union, posters - all sorts of things. It is all the men talk about'.

'I don't talk about tea-breaks', Kuldip mumbles, his head is fuzzy and he is beginning to feel nauseous.

' Well fuck off home then you useless shit', someone shouts from the back of the crowd

'No', says Kuldip stubbornly. 'I will lose money if I don't work. I need to feed my family'.

'You can't go in', Amrit says horrified. 'You would be crossing the picket line, Kuldip. Do you know what this means?'

'It doesn't mean anything, Amrit. You carry on with your children's games, I need to earn money. This is an English thing, strikes...tea-breaks...pickets... not for us Punjabi men – we work to feed our families.'

The crowd begins to boo and Kuldip looks around at them staring defiantly into the first set of eyes he meets. He takes out his hip flask and blatantly pours the last of the liquid into his mouth as he begins to nudge his way through the jeering crowd. As he reaches the entrance the jeers accelerate, accompanied by a chant of 'Scab, Scab. Scab'.

Kuldip stumbles into the reception area of the factory floor. He looks in towards the machine room and notices three or four men towards the back of the each with

their head bowed, silently operating his machine . He raises the flask to his mouth once more, panic rising up through his body as he realises the flask is now empty.

‘Agarwal, What are you doing?’

The voice comes from behind and Kuldip jumps at the sound of someone unnoticed so close.

‘Mr. Bedford, Sssir. I am here at work, not like those lazy buggers outside’. The words stammer out.

‘Is that booze, Agarwal?’. He snatches the flask and raises it to his nose. ‘Whiskey, you bloody fool. Are you drunk, Man? You are in no fit state to be in this factory, Agarwal.’

The other men from the floor look up towards Kuldip and Bedford. Kuldip is standing with one arm outstretched against the wall for support but he still sways backwards and forwards like a jittery child.

‘You can’t come to work drunk, Agarwal, you bloody idiot. We have cut you the slack the last few weeks but this is not acceptable. You are completely pissed man. You can’t operate machinery in that state’.

‘Cut the slack’, Kuldip repeats, he has never heard the term before and he repeats it a second and third time under his breath.

‘Go home’, Bedford says, his pink face turning bright red. ‘I am suspending you. This is a disciplinary now. Do you understand?’

Kuldip doesn’t understand and he stays fixed with his arm against the wall as though he is having a casual chat with Bedford at the Barton Arms or The Grove Inn.

‘Get on to your union rep. We will be in touch. Go home, Agarwal and don’t come unless we tell you too’.

The men on the factory floor turn their heads back downwards as Bedford slams through the internal doors towards the management offices. Kuldip, still perplexed, trips as he leaves by the doors he has entered by just a few minutes earlier. The impact of Bedford's words have not yet sunk in.

Outside the men don't notice as he staggers around the side of them and heads for the gate into the back alley. Just as he is about to slip through the gate a hand lightly touches him on the shoulder. It is Johnny.

'What's going on, brother?' , Johnny says

Kuldip pauses before blurting out the words:

'Sssuspended, sssuspended and sent home like a naughty schoolboy.' He is shaking as he speaks.

'Shit man', says Johnny visibly shocked . 'Let me buy you a cup o tea or something. Sober you up before you go and tell that nice wife of yours the news, eh?

Within a few minutes the two men are sat in the otherwise empty Acapulco Cafe, sipping on steaming cups of over-brewed tea. Kuldip is grateful for the fried egg sandwich Johnny has ordered for him but it does nothing to alleviate the nausea which churns in his stomach.

'What you gonna do, man?', Johnny asks.

'I don't know, everything is falling apart, Johnny.' Kuldip says.

'Oh shit, this man is going to shed some tears', Johnny mutters to himself. 'Got to go man, the others will notice I am gone', he says more audibly before standing up to leave. Before parting he says: 'Go on home , Man. You is no good for nuthink today'.

After Johnny leaves, Kuldip dozes in the stiff chair. The middle-aged waitress behind the counter shouts across to ask if he wants another cup of tea, Kuldip jolts

and looks up at the wall clock above the woman's head. He realises that almost 90 minutes has passed by. He shakes his head at the woman, she 'tuts' and turns back the Handsworth Times on the counter.

Kuldip leaves the Acapulco and makes his way up the Lozells Road towards Church Street. As he approaches his turning he notices the landlord of The Royal Oak pub sticking a poster in the window and he realises it is opening time already. He turns into the pub without hesitation, as though this was his destination all the time.

'Kuldip, what are you doing home so early?' Usha asks as Kuldip stumbles through the house soon after three o'clock. She is chopping cauliflower at the kitchen table in preparation for the evening meal.

'Go to hell', Kuldip slurs back. Usha is alarmed, he has never been in this state so early in the day before.

'Kuldip, what is wrong? Why are you home? Have you been drinking?'

'Go to hell I said...and I will follow you. That is where we are all heading to.'

He moves closer to where Usha is standing and she takes a step backwards. The stench of alcohol is overbearing. He stumbles towards her, knocking over a stack of washed dishes next to the sink; two plates crash to the floor and smash into pieces. Then, without warning he picks up the colander of freshly cut cauliflower from the table and tips it on the shards of smashed crockery.

'Kuldip, what are you doing? That is our dinner. We don't have money to waste throwing food away. '

'I make the money, I can waste the money...working every day, morning till night and even then they don't appreciate it. They all slowly, slowly go away ...and we are left with empty stomachs. '

'Be quiet Kuldip, you are not making any sense - the children will hear you. They will be upset.'

'Upset', Kuldip slurs, ' I am upset – no one cares that I am upset. I am bloody upset. All this time in this stupid country, working in that stupid factory, abandoned by my children, suspended by the factory and you, with your Jeyes Fluid and Squeezy and bloody English friends. What about me? Who cares about me in all of this?'

'Suspended! Kuldip, you are drunk? Go to bed, sleep it off so you can go back to work tomorrow'.

Usha kneels down to clear up the broken crockery with a dust pan and brush. She picks out most of the cauliflower florets and puts them back in the colander to wash

'Can't you bloody hear me Usha? Suspended! No work until they tell me to come back.'

Kuldip kicks the remainder of the crockery and florets across the lino before staggering upstairs towards the bedroom. On the way out of the kitchen he grabs the half empty bottle of whiskey from the cabinet.

Upstairs Kuldip sits on the edge of the bed and lights a cigarette. He throws the flickering match into the washing basket by the door without thinking and within moments a lilac cotton sari blouse begins to smoulder as the match flame ignites the fabric. Oblivious to the small fire growing in the corner, Kuldip lays his head against the pillow and immediately his eyes close, the burning face appears. He slips into a drunken sleep - once again the face is transformed to the visage of Billy; his boy melting away into intangible molten liquid - a face without eyes.

Anila is lying on her bed listening to the Top 20 Countdown as the musty smell of burning cloth travels up the staircase towards her attic room. She edges open the

door with her foot to investigate the smell, it opens just enough for her to see a smoky haze seeping towards her from the landing below. She jumps up and heads down the stairs. As she reaches the room, flames are beginning to flicker above the rim of the basket towards the wardrobe and the curtains just beyond. She grabs a damp towel from the back of the door and stems the fire before it manages to spread beyond the buckling plastic criss-cross of the washing basket. Meanwhile, Kuldip sleeps on, tossing and turning and moaning as the smoke gathers around him in a cloud. Anila waves the towel above him, dispersing the smoke until all that remains of the fire is the acrid odour of burnt plastic mingling with the stench of beer and whiskey emanating from Kuldip's sleeping body.

'Bloody idiot', Anila thinks as she watches her father lying on the bed in a restless slumber.

She grabs the bottle of whiskey from the bedside table and opens the window wide before leaving the room. Once back in the attic she leans against the closed door, takes a large swig of the whiskey and savours the strong, burning sensation in her throat before shoving the bottle deep under the bottom bunk.

Chapter 15: The Meeting

Most dry days Anila walks the longest way home she can after school. Today as she walks she thinks about her conversation with Nina on the phone two days earlier. It is the first time since the Christmas holidays that her sister has phoned, and this time it is to tell Usha that her Easter grant instalment hasn't arrived and could she send her something? Anila answers the phone:

'How you doing, Nils? ' Nina sounds so far away Anila thinks.

'O you know- same old, same old. Kavi doesn't go to school still and Kamela is too scared to go out since you know what and Dad is just hanging around like a bad smell now he's been suspended. I think Mum is going mad just cleaning around them all the time.'

'Blimey, is she still doing that? I don't know how you put up with it and all, Nils..... Come and visit me. I could send you some money for the train fare when my grant comes in. There are some great parties up here'.

There is a pause before she says:

' I've been meaning to tell you about someone I met at one'.

A conversation about men is a first for the sisters.

'Nina – have you got a fella?'

'Well sort of, well, I was a bit drunk like and ...there's no one else in the room is there?'

'No, go on spill the beans...is he Indian?'

'You can't tell anyone, Anila, okay?'

‘Just tell me, go on what’s he like? What’s his name?’

‘Imran’

‘Imran!’ Anila bleats.

‘Yes’.

‘But that’s Paki name isn’t it?’

‘Paki is a racist term, Anila, I thought you knew better.’

‘Nina, are you going out with a Pakistani bloke? Oh my god, Dad’ll kill you...and Mom. He’s not from round here is he?’

‘No, Leeds. Oh Anila he is bloody lovely though and really clever. He’s in the year above, ...and it has kind of got serious if you know what I mean.’

‘Oh my god, Nina, you haven’t, have you?’

‘Haven’t what?’

‘You know – done it with him - with a Paki bloke from Leeds?’

‘Shut up Anila. Grow up and stop talking like some idiot from Lozells. There is a whole world out here and its one where it doesn’t matter which side of the bloody partition your ancestors came from. For goodness sake, at least he isn’t Jamaican like those blokes Kamela got stabbed over.’

‘That’s not fair Nina, she didn’t deserve that. Anyway, you know what they think around here about Pakis. Go on, what was it like, you know – did it hurt?’

‘Anila just get Mom to phone us will you? I’ve got to go. Don’t tell anyone, promise?’

‘Yeah, yeah’.

#

A few weeks have passed since the young men with trestle tables were outside school and now Anila finds the leaflet with the black fists screwed up in her pocket. She reads it over and over again and examines the illustration of the fists closely. She thinks about Carlo calling her feisty, it isn't a label she has had before but something about it makes her feel good.

Anila thinks about Nina living a new life in a different world, away from the Agarwal family in some far off northern town. She imagines the boyfriend Imran as if he is some hero from a Bollywood film, twirling Nina around by the hand on a tropical beach. Anila is embarrassed by the naughtiness of the image she has conjured up. Then, unexpectedly her imaginings move into daydream and Imran transmogrifies into Carlo, and she into the girl. Carlo is pressing his lips to her wet mouth, his body is pushed up against hers and they are naked. Her hands feel the spikiness of his short afro; his hands explore parts of her body which are unexplored even by herself. They are no longer on the Bollywood beach but down the back alley off Villa Cross where Anila stops to have a sneaky cigarette on the way home sometimes. She shakes her head to get rid of the daydream. A dull menstrual ache in the pit of her stomach is followed by moisture between her legs, 'Shit', she mutters, wondering if she has time to slip home and use the bathroom before the meeting on the leaflet starts; it is at four-thirty that day.

Anila tries to enter the meeting hall at the back of St Silas Church quietly but she stumbles over a discarded bucket by the entrance as she rushes to escape the rain that has just begun to fall. Almost thirty young men are already crammed inside the small, dank, windowless room. Most of the men are Asian and some turn to look at her. She stares back, surprised to see these young men gathered together; the only place she has seen young Asian men gather in such big groups before is at sprawling

weddings that pullulate the temples, gurdwaras and school halls of Handsworth at weekends and where the men congregate in clusters along corridors eyeing up the girls. It is a different kind of eyeing up she senses now.

Anila has arrived just as the first speech is building to a climax. The crowd jostles for space at the front of the room, patting one another on the back, nudging each other like school boys before a football match. The speaker is standing on a plastic chair at the front of the room. The chair wobbles as he shifts about on it. He is a small, scrawny young man with blue-black hair cut short in a crop close to his head. His eyes are eager, shining out against fine facial features - he is like a raven, Anila thinks. Kas Ali, she hears someone whisper as the speaker begins to talk. His voice booms out strong.

‘It is my belief,’ he says, ‘that when people are attacked, they have the right to act in self-defence. The nature of that defence depends on the nature of the attack. I believe the defence of black (of all working class people in fact) who are menaced by the threat of fascism makes the organization of defensive groups like this one an absolute necessity.’

Anila is instantly transfixed by the man. She has never seen or heard anyone like him. He is not a bit like the images of the white, spiky rock stars that cover her school books and adorn her wall. Kas Ali is barely in his twenties, he is small and the same shade of brown as she is yet he is articulate and confident, like a much older teacher, a bigger presence. The crowd in the room begins to holler and cheer as the speech draws to an end: There is a camaraderie enveloping the room.

‘We cannot allow the police to continue to hound us like dogs for no reason whatsoever while they allow fascism to continue to breed like a disease around us. Remember brothers, we are here to stay, here to fight, Handsworth Youth with all our might’.

The closing words resonate like a mantra.

Anila breathes in sharply repelling the urge to weep. She steps closer to get a better view of the man on the chair. More of the small congregation become aware of her and there is mumbling and shuffling. Kas Ali pauses, sensing a shift in the atmosphere; he scans the room for the point of commotion and rests his eyes on Anila, she is the only girl in the room.

'Hello', he says. 'Good to see you here. Welcome to the Handsworth Youth Movement, may you be the first of many sisters to join the struggle'.

Anila feels a hot blush rise into her face as he addresses her directly. Now all the men turn and stare at her. She moves backwards into a corner and leans against a pillar, partly obscuring her view of the room and it of her. All but a couple of the men turn their faces back to the chair stage. .

'Hey', Carlo sidles up. 'You made it. Well done, Sister'.

He is dressed all in khaki, army surplus mostly, punctuated at either end by black hockey boots and jet back hair. Anila blushes again. She is relieved to see Carlo's familiar face. He stands beside her for the rest of the meeting and she can feel warmth radiating from his body. He smells like incense sticks. But the speech is distracting and Anila finds herself joining with the crowd in waves of cheers and shouts of bitter protestation as stories of police brutality and experiences of racist encounters are shared by and amongst the crowd. Anila watches on bemused, still aware of the warmth of Carlo beside her. In front of her, two Indian men glare in unashamed disapproval. She knows it is because she is standing next to a black man.

Three further speakers take to the chair and each repeats the same message with a separate vociferous passion. Towards the end of the fourth speech the metal legs of the chair have begun to buckle. Anila absorbs little about the second, third and

fourth speakers but Kas Ali sticks in her head and she wants to replay his speech over and over..

As the meeting closes a bulky, dreadlocked Rasta presses play on an oversized ghetto blaster, decorated with spray paint and stickers. A familiar reggae rhythm cranks up; it is a tune by local boys, Steel Pulse, Handsworth Revolution, often heard booming out from open car windows and shop fronts around the area like an anthem. Mostly heard as a soundscape to the faded Victorian Handsworth Park which sits like a green heart at the centre of the area, its wide tree-lined arteries clogged with the residue of the ragged life blood pulsating to this same beat.

The men at the meeting nod their heads in time to the music, mouthing the lyrics as they pile out of the meeting room. Anila finds herself doing the same and the song, although familiar, sounds crisp and new as though she is hearing it for the first time:

Handsworth shall stand, firm - like Jah rock - fighting back

We once beggars are now choosers

No intention to be losers

Striving forward with ambition

And if it takes ammunition

We rebel in Handsworth revolution

#

Usha is washing greasy plates with a worn yellow sponge when Anila slips in through the back kitchen door after the meeting. It is just past seven thirty in the evening.

‘Hi Mom,’ she says, flopping into a kitchen chair, ‘I’m knackered’.

‘That’s nice, roti is in the oven’. Usha tilts her head backwards towards the oven while her eyes remain fixed on a rainbow of grease skimming across the froth of soap suds in the sink,

‘Not hungry’, says Anila, arching her eyebrows in the direction of Usha. She springs up from the chair and heads out of the kitchen.

Upstairs Kavi is lying on his bed strumming the old guitar he bought for 50 pence at a jumble sale two years earlier. It is still out of tune. Anila barges in and perches herself on the side of the bed. Kavi plucks at the guitar strings without looking up.

‘Did you go to school today, Kavi?’

‘Nah’

‘What’d you do all day?You need to go to school you know, more chance of a job and that’.

‘No Anila, no jobs, no point, no school.’

Kavi turns his face to the wall. Anila ignores his disinterest and speaks hurriedly. She tells him about the meeting, about Kas Ali and Carlo, and about the urgency to organize and be part of this group.

‘You’ve got to come to the next meeting, Kavi. It’s all young blokes like you. Probably some of your mates and that’.

When she stops for breath Kavi turns his head slightly towards her.

‘Not for me, Anila, no point. No point in very much really cos, you know, we just drop dead in the end.’

‘Shit Kavi, that’s so miserable’

‘True though, ain’t it?’

‘Billy wouldn’t want you talking like that’.

Kavi sniggers.

‘And that’s so stupid, like. Billy ain’t here and we don’t know what he would have said or not said because he ain’t here. Point made! You go to your meetings and stuff but it won’t make a difference to me. I ain’t going to school because it’s shit.’ He pauses, ‘Okay? ’

‘You are nearly sixteen, Kavi – who knows what will happen in the next few years? You have your whole life ahead of you.’

‘Stop trying to be so wise, Anila, life is gonna happen, yeah, and right now I don’t see how it can be anything other than shit.’

‘ Yeah, but Kavi, the thing is I think there is a way to change it ‘

‘Not interested, Anila. No bloody meetings are going to make things any better for me - the best I’ve got to look forward to is the same as Dad, working in bloody Hardiman’s, having babbies and being stuck in Lozells for the rest of my life. ‘

Anila stares at her brother. His face has the same bitter twist in it as the old man who walks past the school scowling at the kids as they hang over the fence swinging their legs. She leaves him to mope on his bed and climbs the wooden stairs to the attic where Kamela is gently smearing pale green face mask on to her hands. The room smells of cucumber and sour milk. Anila stares at her.

'It was free in the magazine', Kamela says, by way of an explanation, 'Didn't want to waste it, like.'

Anila lies on her back on the bottom bunk, her arms folded behind her head. She closes her eyes and goes over the meeting in her head. She lingers on Kas Ali; his animated face is a vivid picture and his strong, stirring words ring in her ears as she drifts off into a daydream:

'We will refuse to be discriminated against.

We will rise up and show them we are not weak.

Together we will succeed'.

.

Chapter 16: Usha

Kavi lays across the long settee in the living room. The television mumbles out the banalities of Antipodean life as the summer sun streams through the spotless window, illuminating the screen to a practically unwatchable state. The living room door is open on to the kitchen at the back of the house. The back door leading from the kitchen to the garden is also open and a faint waft of singed fish fingers permeates the room. Kavi's stomach rumbles.

'Mom', he shouts at the top of his voice, 'Is there anything to eat?'

Kuldip sits in the armchair next to the window in the same room as Kavi. He raises his eyes over the top of the copy of the Handsworth Times he has been reading for over an hour.

'You are a lazy bugger, Kavi. Why don't you make your own food instead of watching this rubbish television all day?'

'You can talk', Kavi mutters back but the rustle of Kuldip's paper prevents him from hearing his son's backchat.

In the kitchen Usha stands in the open back doorway. She listens to the familiar rhythm of the The Clapping Song as it trickles towards her from gardens further down the street. The singing is accompanied by the fresh, sprightly sound of girly giggling. On the street in front of the houses Jimmy McKenna and another boy race their Chopper bikes from St Silas Square to the bottom end junction with Nursery Road. Usha watched them for a moment earlier as she put a bag of rubbish out for the dustbin men to collect. The boys were wearing capped sleeve tee shirts and they gripped the handlebars tight, backs against the uprights, legs akimbo, freewheeling down the hill, whooping just like they had many times before with Billy in tow:

‘Furr.....king nora, whahayeee...’

They are still whooping now.

Usha leans against the back door frame to steady her sleep deprived body as she listens to the sounds around her. The day is startlingly light after the long grey days that have preceded it. The sky is a crisp and stark blue as though it has been freshly painted onto the world. Kamela enters the kitchen and stares into the blank space, not noticing her mother at the back door. She has hardly been out of the house since the stabbing a few months earlier. Her scar has faded and now resembles a small knotted rope, across the edge of her cheek bone quite close to her ear. To conceal the scar she keeps a tress of hair pulled forward, twirling it habitually with her thumb and forefinger. She opens the biscuit drawer but finds only crumbs and a broken edge of a digestive at the bottom of an airtight Tupperware box.

Back in the living room Kamela shoves Kavi's legs off the settee by his ankles, making room so she can sit down.

‘Get off, I woz here first’, Kavi snaps at her.

‘Get off yourself you lazy sod; all you do is sit on the settee all day’.

‘And what about you? All you do is look in the mirror, picking at your scabs and feeling sorry for yourself’.

‘Fuck off, Kavi, you are so cruel these days. Anila is right – you are just cruel and bitter and instead of doing something to change your life, you just sit around having a go at everyone else.’

‘Kamela, do not use this kind of language in my house’. Kuldip shakes out the paper and lifts it from his lap, where it has lain as he snoozes. Kamela give him a dirty look. Both children ignore him.

‘You fuck off, Kam. At least I can go out if I want too. At least I’m not scared of stepping out the front door.’

Usha stands in the back door listening to the bickering which has now drowned out the sounds of a summer’s day. She returns to the kitchen, pulls on her rubber gloves and begins to rub at the steel pots and pans she has pulled out from the back of a cabinet to re-wash.

In the living room the bickering continues. Kavi has increased the volume on the television and the theme tune to Neighbours blares out.

‘You wouldn’t understand Kavi. It’s not my choice’, Kamela shouts above the din.

‘Yeah but you are just letting them win by staying in the house all the time’.

‘Yeah, well I’m gonna go out in my own time. Anyway, take some of your own medicine’, she says as she clips Kavi across the side of his head with the heel of her hand.

‘Ow, you cow! Fuck off out my space’. He clips the top of her head back, careful to avoid her scar.

‘Your space?’ Says Kuldip, edging the newspaper down a few inches. ‘Actually, this is my house and you are disturbing me. Can’t you see I am trying to read the newspaper?’ He raises the newspaper back up to obscure his face and the view of his children.

The siblings begin to shove each other. Kamela prods Kavi with her elbow. He flicks her bare arm with his thumb and middle finger.

In the kitchen Usha stares at her own grey reflection in the dishes she has been washing and then without thinking she pulls off the rubber gloves and flings them to the floor before marching into the living room:

‘Shut up all of you. Shut up, shut up, shut up. I can’t hear myself think, I can’t hear anything except your voices swirling around in my head.’

Kavi, Kuldip and Kamela all stare at Usha as she continues her outburst. ‘Actually, you are in my space all of you. Kavi you should be at school, Kamela you at college and as for you...’

She turns and stares as Kuldip cowers behind the newspaper; she pulls the newspaper out of his hands, screws it up and throws it to the floor.

‘You...’ she continues, ‘...you are no use whatsoever. All you do is drink and shout and sit around. Why aren’t you crawling back to that factory to ask for your job back? Have you no shame? What kind of example are you to these children?’

Kavi and Kamela are both speechless. They stare at their father. Usha hasn’t finished:

‘I can’t stand it anymore. I can’t stand you all lounging around, doing nothing waiting for me to cook you food and clean up afterwards. And with what? There is no money. I have to scrabble around for cheap things at the shops and wait until it is almost closing so the vegetables are cheaper. I have even spoken to Gillian about getting some work in the sewing machine factory. Have you no shame?’ She repeats the question directly to Kuldip. ‘All you do is spend money on whiskey and cigarettes when I can barely feed the children. It is embarrassing’.

Usha pauses for breath before carrying on:

'I can't stand it. And none of you even think to help with the housework. It is like something has died in each of you... and in me too'.

Usha sits on the arm of the settee. Her voice becomes softer:

'I miss him so much', she says.

Kamela holds on to her mother's arm as Usha carries on speaking:

'This is stupid – I cannot allow this to carry on.'

Usha stands back up and shakes her arm free. She turns to Kamela:

'Kamela - you are going back to college on Monday otherwise term will end and you will never go back. You have already missed too much. Kavi, you are going to school even if I have to walk you there myself.' She then turns to Kuldip. ' And you, well you know what you have to do.'

'I ain't going', Kavi says and he walks out of the room slamming the door behind him.

'I will', says Kamela meekly.

'Thank you Beta,' her mother replies

Kuldip says nothing. Usha leaves the living room, picks up the gloves from the kitchen floor and throws them into the sink.

Chapter 17: Skinheads

On the first anniversary of Billy's death Usha cleans out the wardrobe in the bedroom where Billy's clothes still hang as if he might walk in one day and reach in to grab a tee-shirt or a pullover from the back hangers. Kavi sits hunched with his back against the wall, hugging his knees close to his chest; he watches as his mother gently removes the clothes, folds each item and delicately places it in a neat pile on Billy's now coverless bed. The faint smell of an ephemeral life seeps out, evading the room as the clothes are disturbed. Usha lingers on Billy's favourite garments, running her long, slim fingers across the fabric and allowing fleeting memories of Billy to waft through her mind as if he only ever existed as part of her own being.

Kavi stares blankly as Usha weeps, burying her nose into the musty wool of a misshapen Dennis the Menace jumper which she had knitted in stolen moments in dead of night after Billy nagged for the year leading up to his eleventh birthday. It has hardly been worn. Kavi pushes open the sash window, letting a damp breeze flush out the final sensorial elements of Billy from the house. Usha folds the last faded tee-shirt and places it on top of the small pile on the bed. And then, task completed, she cups her hand over her quivering mouth. Her startled face is like that of a small abandoned bird. Kavi looks on helplessly.

#

Anila walks out of the school gates for the last time. All around her high spirits resound off the hysterical and sentimental goodbyes:

'See you at the baths in the 'olidays'

'I'll phone you when we get back from me Nan's caravan.

'Or rioght – lets meet up to on the ramp this Saturday?'

‘You going down the Springfield Disco this Friday? See yous there if you are’

Flour and eggs are tossed in the air. They combine with the summer drizzle and descend, clinging temporarily onto blazers and hair, before plopping to the pavement in clumps of sticky glue.

Anila strides past the shirt signers and ignores the conversations about keeping in touch and meeting up. She marches ahead without as much as a backwards glance. She walks up towards Soho Road, beyond Lozells and into the heart of Handsworth to a big old warehouse on the corner of Grove Lane. It is ten weeks since her first encounter with Kas Ali and the other men from the Handsworth Youth Movement. She has been to every meeting with the group since then and it is to them that she now heads.

Over the last two months the meetings have become more regular, particularly in the weeks leading up to the end of school. They now take place at least once, if not twice, a week. Slowly new people begin to attend too: some because of the leaflets they hand out on the corner of Soho Road or outside the Central Library; others because they have heard about Kas Ali on the grapevine. Some of the new recruits are girls: girlfriends and sisters of the men but also others who, like Anila, have come out of a compulsion to do something proactive rather than wait for someone else to do it for them. After just a month the meetings get too big for the room at the back of St Silas and the warehouse, known as The Shoe, has become the headquarters for the Handsworth Youth Movement.

To reach The Shoe, Anila walks past the synagogue, Guru Nanak Gurdwara and gaudy Hindu temple which cluster around the grammar school on Rose Hill Road. Beyond the places of worship the shops fall out colourfully onto the main high street that is Soho Road. As she passes the first set of shops Anila sucks in the smell of the garam masalas and ripe breadfruit that fill the air. Soho Road is full of life: down at

heel men fester around pubs, suppressing the desperation of worklessness with cheap whiskey and stale crisps while older white haired Pakistani men reek of the sharp smelling Beedies they puff at in small groups around the benches in front of the library; behind them a group of young black teenagers sit on the library steps drinking Vimto. Older girls drag younger ones in and out of shops while their mothers prod and sniff plump vegetables, looking one another up and down as they pretend to be checking out the produce. Soho Road is ablaze with colour: bright cotton dresses, shimmering salwar kameez and saris, African print dashiki and head wraps. The sounds of a hundred languages mingle with jangly bhangra and bassy reggae, filling the air with a surprisingly congruous music. Once on Grove Lane the red brick, Edwardian houses look as if they still belong to a more affluent bygone era but behind the unspoilt facades the affluence has dropped away as the former middle class, white residents have retreated into the suburbs and smarter areas, afraid of the unknowns poised by these new immigrants with their optimistic, anticipatory smiles, their pungent smells, strange sounds and exotic clothing.

‘You know ...’ Carlo says as he meets Anila on the way up Grove Lane (the chance encounters have now become weekly arranged assignations), ‘...my mum told me that the year she came to Handsworth the white people marched down Soho Road with banners and shit ‘cos Grove Lane school was getting too many coloured kids. They thought all their little white babbies were gonna turn black overnight or sometin’.

Each time she approaches The Shoe Anila imagines it busy with the labour of the immigrant mothers and fathers and other relatives of many of the young people who now attend the meetings alongside her. Now most of the former warehouse workers are on the Dole, except for a few lucky ones who have found factory work beyond Handsworth around Hockley and Perry Barr. These days The Shoe is an empty shell, except for the pop-up Pentecostal church which occupies it at weekends,

and The Handsworth Youth Movement's (now abbreviated to HYM) increasingly regular meetings. Inside, the building has a wide dim hallway, cheered up with a coat of white-wash by the weekend worshippers. On one side of the large, corrugated doorway is a small table where Anila sits at the beginnings of meetings and collects 10 pence pieces, names and telephone numbers from all those that attend. She marks down the information in a foolscap notebook and answers questions about the meeting dates and the speakers from the new recruits.

Mid-way into the long, grey summer the atmosphere at one Wednesday meeting suddenly shifts from determined, convivial camaraderie to something more urgent. There is a buzz in the room and when Anila enters Kas Ali catches her eye and smiles a half smile in her direction. Anila lowers her head and grins coyly. Olive Benjamin, one of the few, new female recruits touches her elbow. Anila looks up; Olive is almost dancing with excitement.

'They are letting that NF baldhead scum march around here through Town and down Constitution Hill next week. It's too close to here. It's almost to the crossroads by Soho Hill.'

Anila feels a tug in the pit of her stomach. She has an urge to go to the loo.

From the pulpit Kas Ali says,

'Now is our chance, we'll show them we won't put up with this on our doorstep'.

The day before the march of the skinheads, Anila slips the hairdressing scissors out of Kamela's make up bag and into the back pocket of her jeans, pulling the bottom of her baggy sweatshirt down to conceal them. She makes her way downstairs to the bathroom, locks the door and stares at herself in the mirror. She begins to snip at the long ringlets which fall around her face. The hair falls into the sink in black swirls, cascading down the chipped, white ceramic bowl towards the plughole. For a moment,

as Anila snips at her hair, she has a memory of herself standing behind three year old Billy, catching his fine, curly first hair in a white tea towel as it is systematically shaved off by a fat, jovial priest in his Mundan ceremony. She remembers Kuldeep whispering to her sister Nina that this meant Billy could start a new life, free of previous incarnations, liberating him from the past lives which can remain with us like a burden.

Anila chops away more and more of her hair until all that is left is a patchy crown of short cropped hair, a coarse black blanket on the top of her head. She removes the clumps of tresses from the sink and throws them in the toilet before turning on the tap and directing any stray strands towards the plughole. Then she stares at herself in the mirror. Her eyes are wide and her nose is bigger than she'd thought. She sits on the closed toilet lid for a few seconds before opening the bathroom door and peering around the corner towards the kitchen.

'Oh my god,' Usha screams, when she sees the cropped head poking out from the corner. She drops the saucepan lid she holds; it bounces on the lino, spinning like a top before coming to standstill.

'What have you done, Anila? You have made my beautiful daughter ugly'.

'Don't be silly Mom; it is how we have it these days. You've seen Top of the Pops and that. Anyway, it's a political statement'.

Usha calms slightly and recovers the lid from the floor.

'What do you know of these things? Going to meetings doesn't make you a politician, Anila. You are just a follower, like the Hare Krishna's, shaving your hair and following what other people tell you.'

'No, I'm doing something I think is right for once. Anyway, it makes me feel strong, not all weak, like I am not expected to do anything for myself. Like some housewife '

Usha moves towards the sink.

' I have failed to protect you', she says, 'and now you are all slowly drifting away one by one'.

'I'm not drifting away Mom. I am trying to change things around here. You gotta agree it's no good as it is. And now the skinheads are back.... We need to make it better or it's all going to get a lot worse'.

Usha turns her back on her daughter and rinses the pan lid under running water.

'You too have become a skinhead, Anila', she says.

Ends

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