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NATIONAL BESTSELLER

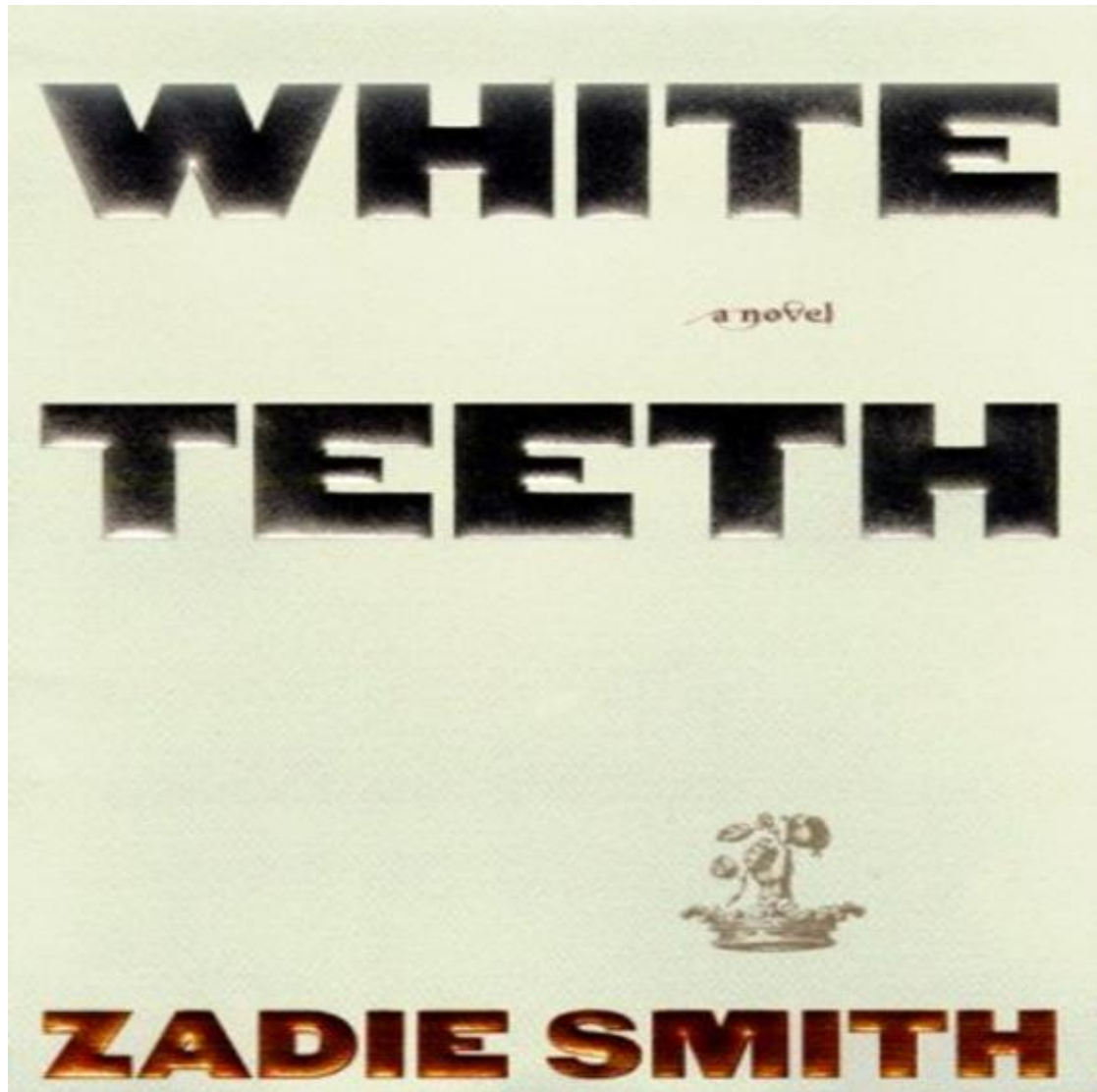
TEETH

A NOVEL

ZADIE

"A preternaturally gifted new writer [with] a voice that's street-smart and learned, sassy and philosophical all at the same time." —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

SMITH



# **White Teeth**

**By**

**Zadie Smith**

“A rich, ambitious and often hilarious delight’

Independent on Sunday

“A rollicking, thundering, good-natured, ironic blast of a debut;  
a

story that bowls along on an energy so raucous, smart-mouthed  
and fast

that the force of it almost steamrollers the many plots and characters

that make up its multi cultured 20th-century British family saga... so

readable and good-hearted ... a book full of admirable energy and

salvaged joie de vivre, a truly epic, shining piece of life'  
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precocious debuts, Smith announces herself as a writer of remarkable

powers' The New York Times

“An extraordinarily accomplished first novel, a new voice that will

give its readers hope for a multicultural society' Financial Times

“Exceptional talent... Smith writes like an old hand, and, sometimes,

like a dream' New Yorker

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zadie Smith was born in north-west London in 1975, and continues to

live in the area.

White Teeth

ZADIE SMITH

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To my mother and my father Andforjimmi Rahman

“What's past is prologue' The Tempest, Act II, scene i

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nothing escapes.

Archie 1974,1945

“Every little trifle, for some reason, does seem incalculably important

today, and when you say of a thing that “nothing hangs on it” it sounds

like blasphemy. There's never any knowing how am I to put it?  
which

of our actions, which of our idlenesses won't have things  
hanging on it

for ever." Where Angels Fear to Tread, E. M. Forster

The Peculiar Second Marriage of Archie Jones

Early in the morning, late in the century, Cricklewood  
Broadway. At

06.27 hours on i January 1975, Alfred Archibald Jones was  
dressed in

corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate face  
down

on the steering wheel, hoping the judgement would not be too  
heavy upon

him. He lay forward in a prostrate cross, jaw slack, arms splayed  
either side like some fallen angel; scrunched up in each fist he  
held

his army service medals (left) and his marriage licence (right),  
for he

had decided to take his mistakes with him. A little green light  
flashed in his eye, signalling a right turn he had resolved never  
to

make. He was resigned to it. He was prepared for it. He had  
flipped

a coin and stood staunchly by its conclusions. This was a  
decided-upon

suicide. In fact it was a New Year's resolution.

But even as his breathing became spasmodic and his lights  
dimmed,

Archie was aware that Cricklewood Broadway would seem a  
strange

choice.



Strange to the first person to notice his slumped figure through the  
windscreen, strange to the policemen who would file the report,  
to the  
local journalist called upon to write fifty words, to the next of  
kin  
who would read them. Squeezed between an almighty concrete  
cinema  
complex at one end and a giant intersection at the other,  
Cricklewood  
was no kind of place. It was not a place a man came to die. It  
was a  
place a man came in order to go other places via the a 41. But  
Archie  
Jones didn't want to die in some pleasant, distant woodland, or  
on a  
cliff edge fringed with delicate heather. The way Archie saw it,  
country people should die in the country and city people should  
die in  
the city. Only proper. In death as he was in life and all that. It  
made sense that Archibald should die on this nasty  
urban street where he had ended up, living alone at the age of  
forty-seven, in a one-bedroom flat above a deserted chip shop.  
He  
wasn't the type to make elaborate plans suicide notes and  
funeral  
instructions he wasn't the type for anything fancy. All he asked  
for  
was a bit of silence, a bit of shush so he could concentrate. He  
wanted it to be perfectly quiet and still, like the inside of an  
empty  
confessional box or the moment in the brain between thought  
and speech.

He wanted to do it before the shops opened.

Overhead, a gang of the local flying vermin took off from some unseen

perch, swooped, and seemed to be zeroing in on Archie's car roof only

to perform, at the last moment, an impressive U-turn, moving as one

with the elegance of a curve ball and landing on the Hussein-Ishmael, a

celebrated hal al butchers. Archie was too far gone to make a big

noise about it, but he watched them with a warm internal smile as they

deposited their load, streaking white walls purple. He watched them

stretch their peering bird heads over the Hussein-Ishmael gutter; he

watched them watch the slow and steady draining of blood from the dead

things chickens, cows, sheep hanging on their hooks like coats around

the shop. The Unlucky. These pigeons had an instinct for the Unlucky,

and so they passed Archie by. For, though he did not know it, and

despite the Hoover tube that lay on the passenger seat pumping from the

exhaust pipe into his lungs, luck was with him that morning. The

thinnest covering of luck was on him like fresh dew. Whilst he slipped

in and out of consciousness, the position of the planets, the music of

the spheres, the flap of a tiger-moth's diaphanous wings in  
Central

Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit  
Happen had

decided it was second-chance time for Archie. Somewhere,  
somehow, by

somebody, it had been decided that he would live.

The Peculiar Second Marriage of Archie Jones

The Hussein-Ishmael was owned by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, a  
great bull of a

man with hair that rose and fell in a quiff, then a duck tail Mo

believed that with pigeons you have to get to the root of the  
problem:

not the excretions but the pigeon itself. The shit is not the shit  
(this was Mo's mantra), the pigeon is the shit. So the morning of

Archie's almost-death began as every morning in the Hussein-  
Ishmael,

with Mo resting his huge belly on the windowsill, leaning out  
and

swinging a meat cleaver in an attempt to halt the flow of  
dribbling

purple.

"Get out of it! Get away, you shit-making bastards! Yes! SIX!"

It was cricket, basically the Englishman's game adapted by the  
immigrant, and six was the most pigeons you could get at one  
swipe.

"Varin!" said Mo, calling down to the street, holding the  
bloodied

cleaver up in triumph. "You're in to bat, my boy. Ready?"

Below him on the pavement stood Varin - a massively  
overweight Hindu

boy on misjudged work experience from the school round the corner,  
looking up like a big dejected blob underneath Mo's question mark. It  
was Varin's job to struggle up a ladder and gather spliced bits of pigeon into a small Kwik Save carrier bag, tie the bag up, and dispose  
of it in the bins at the other end of the street.  
"Come on, Mr. Fatty-man," yelled one of Mo's kitchen staff, poking  
Varin up the arse with a broom as punctuation for each word.  
"Get-yourfatGaneshHindubacksideupthere-  
ElephantBoyandbringsomeofthatmas  
edpigeonstuffwith-you." Mo wiped the sweat off his forehead, snorted,  
and looked out over Cricklewood, surveying the discarded armchairs and  
strips of carpet, outdoor lounges for local drunks; the slot machine  
emporiums, the greasy spoons and the mini cabs all covered in shit.  
One day, so Mo believed, Cricklewood and its residents would have cause  
to thank him for his daily massacre; one day no man, woman or child in  
the Broadway would ever again have to mix one part detergent to four  
parts vinegar to  
clean up the crap that falls on the world. The shit is not the shit,  
he repeated solemnly, the pigeon is the shit. Mo was the only man in  
the community who truly understood. He was feeling really very Zen

about this very goodwill-to-all-men until he spotted Archie's car.

"Arshad!"

A shifty-looking skinny guy with a handlebar moustache, dressed in four

different shades of brown, came out of the shop, with blood on his

palms.

"Arshad!" Mo barely restrained himself, stabbed his finger in the

direction of the car. "My boy, I'm going to ask you just once."

"Yes, Abba?" said Arshad, shifting from foot to foot.

"What the hell is this? What is this doing here? I got delivery at 6.30. I got fifteen dead bovines turning up here at 6.30. I got to get

it in the back. That's my job. You see? There's meat coming. So, I

am perplexed .. ." Mo affected a look of innocent confusion.

"Because

I thought this was clearly marked "Delivery Area"." He pointed to an

ageing wooden crate which bore the legend no parkings of any vehicle on

any days. "Well?"

"I don't know, Abba."

"You're my son, Arshad. I don't employ you not to know. I employ him

not to know' he reached out of the window and slapped Varin, who was

negotiating the perilous gutter like a tightrope-walker, giving him a

thorough cosh to the back of his head and almost knocking the boy off

his perch “I employ you to know things. To compute information. To

bring into the light the great darkness of the creator’s unexplainable universe.”

“Abba?”

“Find out what it’s doing there and get rid of it.”

Mo disappeared from the window. A minute later Arshad returned with

the explanation. “Abba.”

Mo’s head sprang back through the window like a malicious cuckoo from a

Swiss clock.

“He’s gassing himself, Abba.”

“What?”

Arshad shrugged. “I shouted through the car window and told the guy to

move on and he says, “I am gassing myself, leave me alone.”

Like

that.”

“No one gasses himself on my property,” Mo snapped as he marched

downstairs. “We are not licensed.”

Once in the street, Mo advanced upon Archie’s car, pulled out the

towels that were sealing the gap in the driver’s window, and pushed it

down five inches with brute, bullish force.

“Do you hear that, mister? We’re not licensed for suicides around

here. This place hal al Kosher, understand? If you’re going to die

round here, my friend, I'm afraid you've got to be thoroughly  
bled

first.”

Archie dragged his head off the steering wheel. And in the  
moment

between focusing on the sweaty bulk of a brown-skinned Elvis  
and

realizing that life was still his, he had a kind of epiphany. It

occurred to him that, for the first time since his birth, Life had  
said

Yes to Archie Jones. Not simply an “OK” or

“You-might-as-well-carry-on-since-you’ve-started”, but a  
resounding

affirmative. Life wanted Archie. She had jealously grabbed him  
from

the jaws of death, back to her bosom. Although he was not one  
of her

better specimens, Life wanted Archie and Archie, much to his  
own

surprise, wanted Life.

Frantically, he wound down both his windows and gasped for  
oxygen from

the very depths of his lungs. In between gulps he thanked Mo  
profusely, tears streaming down his cheeks, his hands clinging  
on to

Mo's apron.

“All right, all right,” said the butcher, freeing himself from  
Archie's

fingers and brushing himself clean, ‘move along now. I've got  
meat

coming. I'm in the business of bleeding. Not

counselling. You want Lonely Street. This Cricklewood Lane.”

Archie, still choking on thank-yous, reversed, pulled out from the curb,

and turned right.

Archie Jones attempted suicide because his wife Ophelia, a violet-eyed

Italian with a faint moustache, had recently divorced him. But he had

not spent New Year's morning gagging on the tube of a vacuum cleaner

because he loved her. It was rather because he had lived with her for

so long and had not loved her. Archie's marriage felt like buying a

pair of shoes, taking them home and finding they don't fit. For the

sake of appearances, he put up with them. And then, all of a sudden

and after thirty years, the shoes picked themselves up and walked out

of the house. She left. Thirty years.

As far as he remembered, just like everybody else they began well. The

first spring of 1946, he had stumbled out of the darkness of war and

into a Florentine coffee house, where he was served by a waitress truly

like the sun: Ophelia Diagiolo, dressed all in yellow, spreading warmth

and the promise of sex as she passed him a frothy cappuccino. They

walked into it blinkered as horses. She was not to know that women



never stayed as daylight in Archie's life; that somewhere in him  
he

didn't like them, he didn't trust them, and he was able to love  
them

only if they wore haloes. No one told Archie that lurking in the  
Diagilo family tree were two hysteric aunts, an uncle who talked  
to

aubergines and a cousin who wore his clothes back to front. So  
they

got married and returned to England, where she realized very  
quickly

her mistake, he drove her very quickly mad, and the halo was  
packed off

to the attic to collect dust with the rest of the bric-a-brac and  
broken kitchen appliances that Archie promised one day to  
repair.

Amongst that bric-a-brac was a Hoover.

On Boxing Day morning, six days before he parked outside  
Mo's hal al

butchers, Archie had returned to their semidetached in Hendon  
in search

of that Hoover. It was his fourth trip to the attic in so many days,  
ferrying out the odds and ends of a marriage to his new flat, and  
the

Hoover was amongst the very last items he reclaimed one of the  
most

broken things, most ugly things, the things you demand out of  
sheer

bloody-mindedness because you have lost the house. This is  
what

divorce is: taking things you no longer want from people you no  
longer

love.

“So you again,” said the Spanish home-help at the door, Santa Maria or Maria-Santa or something. “Meester Jones, what now? Kitchen sink, si?”

“Hoover,” said Archie, grimly. “Vacuum.”

She cut her eyes at him and spat on the doormat inches from his shoes.

“Welcome, senior.”

The place had become a haven for people who hated him. Apart from the home-help, he had to contend with Ophelia’s extended Italian family, her mental-health nurse, the woman from the council, and of course Ophelia herself, who was to be found in the kernel of this nuthouse, curled up in a foetal ball on the sofa, making lowing sounds into a bottle of Bailey’s. It took him an hour and a quarter just to get through enemy lines and for what? A perverse Hoover, discarded months earlier because it was determined to perform the opposite of every vacuum’s objective: spewing out dust instead of sucking it in.

“Meester Jones, why do you come here when it make you so unhappy? Be reasonable. What can you want with it?” The home-help was following him up the attic stairs, armed with some kind of cleaning fluid: “It’s broken. You don’t need this. See? See?” She plugged it into a

socket and demonstrated the dead switch. Archie took the plug out and

silently wound the cord round the Hoover. If it was broken, it was

coming with him. All broken things were coming with him. He was going

to fix every

damn broken thing in this house, if only to show that he was good for

something.

“You good for nothing!” Santa whoever chased him back down the stairs.

“Your wife is ill in her head, and this is all you can do!”

Archie hugged the Hoover to his chest and took it into the crowded

living room, where, under several pairs of reproachful eyes, he got out

his toolbox and started work on it.

“Look at him,” said one of the Italian grandmothers, the more glamorous

one with the big scarves and fewer moles, ‘he take everything, capisce?

He take-a her mind, he take-a the blender, he take-a the old stereo he

take-a everything except the floorboards. It make-a you sick .. .”

The woman from the council, who even on dry days resembled a

long-haired cat soaked to the skin, shook her skinny head in agreement.

“It’s disgusting, you don’t have to tell me, it’s disgusting . and naturally, we’re the ones left to sort out the mess; it’s mug gins here

who has to ‘

Which was overlapped by the nurse: “She can’t stay here alone,  
can she

.. . now he’s bugged off, poor woman .. . she needs a proper  
home,

she needs

I’m here, Archie felt like saying, I’m right here you know, I’m  
bloody

right here. And it was my blender.

But he wasn’t one for confrontation, Archie. He listened to them  
all

for another fifteen minutes, mute as he tested the Hoover’s  
suction

against pieces of newspaper, until he was overcome by the  
sensation

that Life was an enormous rucksack so impossibly heavy that,  
even

though it meant losing everything, it was infinitely easier to  
leave

all baggage here on the roadside and walk on into the blackness.  
You

don’t need the blender, Archie boy, you don’t need the Hoover.  
This

stuff’s all dead weight. Just lay down the rucksack, Arch, and  
join

the happy campers in the sky. Was that wrong? To Archie ex-  
wife and

ex-wife’s relatives in one ear, spluttering vacuum in the other it  
just

seemed that The End was unavoidably nigh. Nothing personal to  
God or

whatever.

It just felt like the end of the world. And he was going to need  
more

than poor whisky, novelty crackers and a paltry box of Quality Street

all the strawberry ones already scoffed to justify entering another

annum.

Patiently he fixed the Hoover, and vacuumed the living room with a

strange methodical finality, shoving the nozzle into the most difficult

corners. Solemnly he flipped a coin (heads, life, tails, death) and felt nothing in particular when he found himself staring at the dancing

lion. Quietly he detached the Hoover tube, put it in a suitcase, and

left the house for the last time.

But dying's no easy trick. And suicide can't be put on a list of Things to Do in between cleaning the grill pan and levelling the sofa

leg with a brick. It is the decision not to do, to un-do; a kiss blown

at oblivion. No matter what anyone says, suicide takes guts. It's for

heroes and martyrs, truly vainglorious men. Archie was none of these.

He was a man whose significance in the Greater Scheme of Things could

be figured along familiar ratios:

Pebble: Beach.

Raindrop: Ocean.

Needle: Haystack.

So for a few days he ignored the decision of the coin and just drove

around with the Hoover tube. At nights he looked out through the  
windscreen into the monstropolous sky and had the old realization of  
his universal proportions, feeling what it was to be tiny and rootless.  
He thought about the dent he might make on the world if he disappeared,  
and it seemed negligible, too small to calculate. He squandered spare  
minutes wondering whether ‘Hoover’ had become a generic term for  
vacuum  
cleaners or whether it was, as others have argued, just a brand name.  
And all the time the Hoover tube lay like a great flaccid cock on his  
back seat, mocking his quiet fear, laughing at his pigeon-steps as he  
approached the executioner, sneering at his impotent indecision.  
ii  
Then, on the 29th of December, he went to see his old friend Samad Miah  
Iqbal. An unlikely compadre possibly, but still the oldest friend he  
had a Bengali Muslim he had fought alongside back when the fighting had  
to be done, who reminded him of that war; that war that reminded some  
people of fatty bacon and painted-on-socks but recalled in Archie  
gunshots and card games and the taste of a sharp, foreign alcohol.

“Archie, my dear friend,” Samad had said, in his warm, hearty tones.

“You must forget all this wife-trouble. Try a new life. That is what

you need. Now, enough of all this: I will match your five bob and

raise you five.”

They were sitting in their new haunt, O’Connell’s Pool House, playing

poker with only three hands, two of Archie’s and one of Samad’s -

Samad’s right hand being a broken thing, grey-skinned and unmoving,

dead in every way bar the blood that ran through it. The place they

sat in, where they met each evening for dinner, was half cafe, half

gambling den, owned by an Iraqi family, the many members of which

shared a bad skin condition.

“Look at me. Marrying Alsana has given me this new lease on living,

you understand? She opens up for me the new possibilities. She’s so

young, so vital like a breath of fresh air. You come to me for advice?

Here it is. Don’t live this old life it’s a sick life, Archibald. It does you no good. No good whatsoever

Samad had looked at him with a great sympathy, for he felt very tenderly for Archie. Their wartime friendship had been severed by

thirty years of separation across continents, but in the spring of 1973

Samad had come to England, a middle-aged man seeking a new life with

his twenty-year-old new bride, the diminutive, moon-faced Alsana Begum

with her shrewd eyes. In a fit of nostalgia, and because he was the

only man Samad knew on this little island, Samad had sought Archie out,

moved into the same London borough. And slowly but surely a kind of

friendship was being rekindled between the two men.

“You play like a faggot,” said Samad, laying down the winning queens back to back. He flicked them with the thumb of his left hand

in one elegant move, making them fall to the table in a fan shape.

“I’m old,” said Archie, throwing his cards in, “I’m old. Who’d have me

now? It was hard enough convincing anybody the first time.”

“That is nonsense, Archibald. You have not even met the right one yet.

This Ophelia, Archie, she is not the right one. From what you leave me

to understand she is not even for this time ‘

He referred to Ophelia’s madness, which led her to believe, half of the

time, that she was the maid of the celebrated fifteenth century art

lover Cosimo de’ Medici.

“She is born, she lives, simply in the wrong time! This is just not

her day! Maybe not her millennium. Modern life has caught that woman



completely unawares and up the arse. Her mind is gone.  
Buggered. And

you? You have picked up the wrong life in the cloakroom and  
you must

return it. Besides, she has not blessed you with children . . . and  
life without children, Archie, what is it for? But there are second  
chances; oh yes, there are second chances in life. Believe me, I  
know.

You,” he continued, raking in the lop’s with the side of his bad  
hand,

‘should never have married her.’”

Bloody hindsight, thought Archie. It’s always 20/20.

Finally, two days after this discussion, early on New Year’s  
morning,

the pain had reached such a piercing level that Archie was no  
longer

able to cling to Samad’s advice. He had decided instead to  
mortify his

own flesh, to take his own life, to free himself from a life path  
that

had taken him down numerous wrong turnings, led him deep  
into the

wilderness and finally petered out completely, its bread crumb  
course

gobbled up by the birds.

Once the car started to fill with gas, he had experienced the  
obligatory flashback of his life to date. It turned out to be a  
short,

unedifying viewing experience, low on entertainment value, the  
metaphysical equivalent of the Queen’s Speech. A dull  
childhood, a bad

marriage, a dead-end job that classic triumvirate they all flicked  
by

quickly, silently, with little dialogue, feeling pretty much the  
same

as they did the first time round. He was no great believer in  
destiny,

Archie, but on reflection it did seem that a special effort of  
predestination had ensured his life had been picked out for him  
like a

company Christmas present early, and the same as everyone  
else's.

There was the war, of course; he had been in the war, only for  
the last

year of it, aged just seventeen, but it hardly counted. Not front  
line

nothing like that. He and Samad, old Sam, Sammy boy, they had  
a few

tales to tell, mind, Archie even had a bit of shrapnel in the leg  
for

anyone who cared to see it but nobody did. No one wanted to  
talk about

that any more. It was like a club-foot, or a disfiguring mole. It  
was

like nose hair. People looked away. If someone said to Archie,  
What

have you done in life, then, or What's your biggest memory,  
well, God

help him if he mentioned the war; eyes glazed over, fingers  
tapped,

everybody offered to buy the next round. No one really wanted  
to

know.

Summer of 1955 Archie went to Fleet Street with his best  
winkle-pickers

on, looking for work as a war correspondent. Poncey-looking  
bloke with

a thin moustache and a thin voice had said, Any experience, Mr.  
Jones?

And Archie had explained. All about Samad. All about their  
Churchill

tank. Then this poncey one had leant over the desk, all smug, all  
suited, and said, We would require something other than merely  
having

fought in a war, Mr. Jones. War experience isn't really relevant.

And that was it, wasn't it. There was no relevance in the war not  
in

'55, even less now in '74. Nothing he did then mattered now.  
The

skills you learnt were, in the modern parlance, not relevant, not  
transferable.

Was there anything else, Mr. Jones?

But of course there bloody wasn't anything else, the British  
education system having tripped him up with a snigger many  
years

previously. Still, he had a good eye for the look of a thing, for  
the

shape of a thing, and that's how he had ended up in the job at  
Morgan

Hero twenty years and counting in a printing firm in the Euston  
Road,

designing the way all kinds of things should be folded  
envelopes,

direct mail, brochures, leaflets not much of an achievement,  
maybe, but

you'll find things need folds, they need to overlap, otherwise life

would be like a broadsheet: flapping in the wind and down the street so

you lose the important sections. Not that Archie had much time for the

broad sheets If they couldn't be bothered to fold them properly, why

should he bother to read them (that's what he wanted to know)?

What else? Well, Archie hadn't always folded paper. Once upon a time

he had been a track cyclist. What Archie liked about track cycling was

the way you went round and round. Round and round. Giving you chance

after chance to get a bit better at it, to make a faster lap, to do it right. Except the thing about Archie was he never did get any better.

62.8 seconds. Which is a pretty good time, world-class standard, even.

But for three years he got precisely 62.8 seconds on every single lap.

The other cyclists used to take breaks to watch him do it. Lean their

bikes against the incline and time him with the second hand of their

wrist watches. 62.8 every time. That kind of inability to improve is

really very rare. That kind of consistency is miraculous, in a way.

Archie liked track cycling, he was consistently good at it and it provided him with the only truly great memory he had. In 1948, Archie

Jones had participated in the Olympics in London, sharing thirteenth place (62.8 seconds) with a Swedish gynaecologist called Horst Ibelgaufts. Unfortunately this fact had been omitted from the Olympic records by a sloppy secretary who returned one morning after a coffee break with something else on her mind and missed his name as she transcribed one list to another piece of paper. Madam Posterity stuck Archie down the arm of the sofa and forgot about him. His only proof that the event had taken place at all were the periodic letters and notes he had received over the years from Ibelgaufts himself. Notes like:

17 May 1957 Dear Archibald,

I enclose a picture of my good wife and I in our garden in front of a rather unpleasant construction site. Though it may not look like Arcadia, it is here that I am building a crude velodrome nothing like the one you and I raced in, but sufficient for my needs. It will be on a far smaller scale, but you see, it is for the children we are yet to have. I see them pedalling around it in my dreams and wake up with a glorious smile upon my face! Once it is completed, we insist that you visit us. Who more worthy to christen the track of your earnest competitor,

Horst Ibelgaufts?

And the postcard that lay on the dashboard this very day, the day  
of

his Almost Death:

28 December 1974 Dear Archibald,

I am taking up the harp. A New Year's resolution, if you like.

Late

in the day, I realize, but you're never too old to teach the old  
dog in

you new tricks, don't you feel? I tell you, it's a heavy instrument  
to

lay against your shoulder, but the sound of it is quite angelic and  
my

wife thinks me quite sensitive because of it. Which is more than  
she

could say for my old cycling obsession! But then, cycling was  
only

ever understood by old boys like you, Archie, and of course the  
author

of this little note, your old contender,

Horst Ibelgaufts

He had not met Horst since the race, but he remembered him  
affectionately as an enormous man with strawberry-blond hair,  
orange

freckles and misaligned nostrils, who dressed like an  
international

playboy and seemed too large for his bike. After the race Horst  
had

got Archie horribly drunk and procured two Soho whores who  
seemed to

know Horst well ("I make many business trips to your fair  
capital,

Archibald," Horst had explained). The last Archie had ever seen  
of

Horst was an unwanted glimpse of his humongous pink arse bobbing up

and

down in the adjoining room of an Olympic chalet. The next morning,

waiting at the front desk, was the first letter of his large correspondence:

Dear Archibald,

In an oasis of work and competition, women are truly sweet and easy

refreshment, don't you agree? I'm afraid I had to leave early to catch

the necessary plane, but I compel you, Archie: Don't be a stranger! I

think of us now as two men as close as our finish! I tell you, whoever

said thirteenth was unlucky was a bigger fool than your friend, Horst Ibelgaufts

P.S. Please make sure that Dana and Melanie get home fine and well

Daria was his one. Terribly skinny, ribs like lobster cages and no chest to speak of, but she was a lovely sort: kind; soft with her kisses and with double-jointed wrists she liked to show off in a pair

of long silk gloves set you back four clothing coupons at least. "I

like you," Archie remembered saying helplessly, as she replaced the

gloves and put on her stockings. She turned, smiled. And though she

was a professional, he got the feeling she liked him too. Maybe he

should have left with her right then, run to the hills. But at the time it seemed impossible, too involved, what with a young wife with

one in the oven (an hysterical, fictional

pregnancy, as it turned out, a big bump full of hot air), what with his

dodgy leg, what with the lack of hills.

Strangely, Daria was the final pulse of thought that passed through

Archie just before he blacked out. It was the thought of a whore he

met once twenty years ago, it was Daria and her smile which made him

cover Mo's apron with tears of joy as the butcher saved his life. He

had seen her in his mind: a beautiful woman in a doorway with a come

hither look; and realized he regretted not coming hither. If there was

any chance of ever seeing a look like that again, then he wanted the

second chance, he wanted the extra time. Not just this second, but the

next and the next all the time in the world.

Later that morning, Archie did an ecstatic eight circuits of Swiss Cottage roundabout in his car, his head stuck out the window while a

stream of air hit the teeth at the back of his mouth like a wind sock.

He thought: Blimey. So this is what it feels like when some bugger

saves your life. Like you've just been handed a great big wad of Time.



He drove straight past his flat, straight past the street signs  
(Hendon  
3%), laughing like a loon. At the traffic lights he flipped ten  
pence  
and smiled when the result seemed to agree that Fate was  
pulling him  
towards another life. Like a dog on a lead round a corner.  
Generally,  
women can't do this, but men retain the ancient ability to leave a  
family and a past. They just unhook themselves, like removing a  
fake  
beard, and skulk discreetly back into society, changed men.  
Unrecognizable. In this manner, a new Archie is about to  
emerge. We  
have caught him on the hop. For he is in a past-tense, future-  
perfect  
kind of mood. He is in a maybe this, maybe that kind of mood.  
Approaching a forked road, he slows down, checks his  
undistinguished  
face in the wing-mirror, and quite indiscriminately chooses a  
route  
he's never taken before, a residential street leading to a place  
called  
Queens Park. Go straight past Go!" Archie-boy, he  
tells himself; collect two hundred and don't for gawd's sake  
look  
back.  
Tim Westleigh (more commonly known as Merlin) finally  
registered the  
persistent ringing of a doorbell. He picked himself off the  
kitchen  
floor, waded through an ocean of supine bodies, and opened the  
door to

arrive face-to-face with a middle-aged man dressed head-to-toe in grey

corduroy, holding a ten pence coin in his open palm. As Merlin was

later to reflect when describing the incident, at any time of the day

corduroy is a highly stressful fabric. Rent men wear it. Tax men too.

History teachers add leather elbow patches. To be confronted with a

mass of it, at nine in the a.m.” on the first day of a New Year, is an

apparition lethal in its sheer quantity of negative vibes.

“What’s the deal, man?” Merlin blinked in the doorway at the man in

corduroy who stood on his doorstep illuminated by winter sunshine.

“Encyclopedias or God?”

Archie noted the kid had an unnerving way of emphasizing certain words

by moving his head in a wide circular movement from the right shoulder

to the left. Then, when the circle was completed, he would nod several

times.

“Cos if it’s encyclopedias we’ve got enough, like, information . and

if it’s God, you’ve got the wrong house. We’re in a mellow place,

here. Know what I mean?” Merlin concluded, doing the nodding thing

and moving to shut the door.

Archie shook his head, smiled and remained where he was.

“Em . . . are you all right?” asked Merlin, hand on the doorknob.

“Is

there something I can do for you? Are you high on something?”

“I saw your sign,” said Archie.

Merlin pulled on a joint and looked amused. “That sign?” He bent his

head to follow Archie’s gaze. The white bedsheet hanging down from an upper window. Across it, in large rainbow coloured

lettering, was painted: welcome to the ‘end of the world’ party, 1975.

Merlin shrugged. “Yeah, sorry, man, looks like it wasn’t. Bit of a

disappointment, that. Or a blessing,” he added amiably, ‘depending on

your point of view.”

“Blessing,” said Archie, with passion. “Hundred per cent, bona fide

blessing.”

“Did you, er, dig the sign, then?” asked Merlin, taking a step back

behind the doorstep in case the man was violent as well as schiz.

“You

into that kind of scene? It was kind of a joke, you see, more than anything.”

“Caught my eye, you might say,” said Archie, still beaming like a mad

man. “I was just driving along looking for somewhere, you know,

somewhere to have another drink, New Year’s Day, hair of the dog and

all that and I’ve had a bit of a rough morning all in all and it just

sort of struck me. I flipped a coin and thought: why not?"

Merlin looked perplexed at the turn the conversation was taking.  
"Er

... party's pretty much over, man. Besides, I think you're a little advanced in years ... if you know what I mean ... ." Here Merlin turned gauche; underneath the dakshiki he was at heart a good middle-class boy, instilled with respect for his elders. "I mean," he

said after a difficult pause, 'it's a bit of a younger crowd than you

might be used to. Kind of a commune scene."

"But I was so much older then," sang Archie mischievously, quoting a

ten-year-old Dylan track, arching his head round the door, "I'm younger

than that now."

Merlin took a cigarette from behind his ear, lit it, and frowned.

"Look, man ... I can't just let anyone in off the street, you know? I

mean, you could be the police, you could be a freak, you could '

But something about Archie's face huge, innocent, sweetly expectant

reminded Tim what his estranged father, the Vicar

of Snarebrook, had to say about Christian charity every Sunday from his

pulpit. "Oh, what the hell. It's New Year's Day, for fucks sake You

best come in."

Archie sidestepped Merlin, and moved into a long hallway with four

open-doored rooms branching off from it, a staircase leading to another

storey, and a garden at the end of it all. Detritus of every variety animal, mineral, vegetable lined the floor; a great mass of bedding, under which people lay sleeping, stretched from one end of the hallway to the other, a red sea which grudgingly separated each time Archie took a step forward. Inside the rooms, in certain corners, could be witnessed the passing of bodily fluids: kissing, breast-feeding, fucking, throwing up all the things Archie's Sunday Supplement had informed him could be found in a commune. He toyed for a moment with the idea of entering the fray, losing himself between the bodies (he had all this new time on his hands, masses and masses of it, dribbling through his fingers), but decided a stiff drink was preferable. He tackled the hallway until he reached the other end of the house and stepped out into the chilly garden, where some, having given up on finding a space in the warm house, had opted for the cold lawn. With a whisky tonic in mind, he headed for the picnic table, where something the shape and colour of Jack Daniels had sprung up like a mirage in a desert of empty wine bottles.

“Mind if I...?”

Two black guys, a topless Chinese girl, and a white woman wearing a

toga were sitting around on wooden kitchen chairs, playing rummy. Just

as Archie reached for the Jack Daniels, the white woman shook her head

and made the signal of a stubbed out cigarette.

“Tobacco sea, I’m afraid, darling. Some evil bastard put his fag out

in some perfectly acceptable whisky. There’s Babycham and some other

inexorable shit over here

Archie smiled in gratitude for the warning and the kind offer.

He took a seat and poured himself a big glass of Liebfraumilch instead.

Many drinks later, and Archie could not remember a time in his life

when he had not known Clive and Leo, Wan-Si and Petronia, intimately.

With his back turned and a piece of charcoal, he could have rendered

every puckered goose pimple around Wan-Si’s nipples, every stray hair

that fell in Petronia’s face as she spoke. By ii a.m.” he loved them

all dearly, they were the children he had never had. In return, they

told him he was in possession of a unique soul for a man of his age.

Everybody agreed some intensely positive karmic energy was circulating

in and around Archie, the kind of thing strong enough to prompt a

butcher to pull down a car window at the critical moment. And it

turned out Archie was the first man over forty ever invited to join the  
commune; it turned out there had been talk for some time of the need  
for an older sexual presence to satisfy some of the more adventurous  
women. “Great,” said Archie. “Fantastic. That’ll be me, then.” He  
felt so close to them that he was confused when around midday their  
relationship suddenly soured, and he found himself stabbed by a  
hangover and knee deep in an argument about the Second World War, of  
all things.  
“I don’t even know how we got into this,” groaned Wan-Si, who had  
covered up finally just when they decided to move indoors, Archie’s  
corduroy slung round her petite shoulders. “Let’s not get into  
this.  
I’d rather go to bed than get into this.”  
“We are into it, we are into it,” Clive was ranting. “This is the  
whole problem with his generation, they think they can hold up  
the war  
as some kind of-“  
Archie was grateful when Leo interrupted Clive and dragged the  
argument  
into some further subset of the original one, which Archie had  
started  
(some unwise remark three quarters of an hour ago about  
military  
service building up a young man’s character) and then  
immediately

regretted when it required him  
to defend himself at regular interludes. Freed finally of this  
obligation, he sat on the stairs, letting the row continue above  
while  
he placed his head in his hands.  
Shame. He would have liked to have been part of a commune. If  
he'd  
played his cards right instead of starting a ding-dong, he might  
have  
had free love and bare breasts all over the gaff; maybe even a  
portion  
of allotment for growing fresh food. For a while (around 2,  
a.m." when  
he was telling Wan-Si about his childhood) it had looked like his  
new  
life was going to be fabulous, and from now on he was always  
going to  
say the right thing at the right time, and everywhere he went  
people  
would love him. Nobody's fault, thought Archie, mulling over  
the  
balls-up, nobody's fault but my own, but he wondered whether  
there  
wasn't some higher pattern to it. Maybe there will always be  
men who  
say the right thing at the right time, who step forward like  
Thespis at  
just the right moment of history, and then there will be men like  
Archie Jones who are just there to make up the numbers. Or,  
worse  
still, who are given their big break only to come in on cue and  
die a  
death right there, centre stage, for all to see.



A dark line would now be drawn underneath the whole incident, underneath the whole sorry day, had not something happened that led to the transformation of Archie Jones in every particular that a man can be transformed; and not due to any particular effort on his part, but by means of the entirely random, adventitious collision of one person with another. Something happened by accident. That accident was Clara Bowden.

But first a description: Clara Bowden was beautiful in all senses except maybe, by virtue of being black, the classical. Clara Bowden was magnificently tall, black as ebony and crushed sable, with hair plaited in a horseshoe which pointed up when she felt lucky, down when she didn't. At this moment it was up. It is hard to know whether that was significant.

She needed no bra she was independent, even of gravity she wore a red halter neck which stopped below her bust, underneath which she wore her belly button (beautifully) and underneath that some very tight yellow jeans. At the end of it all were some strappy heels of a light brown suede, and she came striding down the stairs on them like some kind of

vision or, as it seemed to Archie as he turned to observe her, like a

reared-up thoroughbred.

Now, as Archie understood it, in movies and the like it is common for

someone to be so striking that when they walk down the stairs the crowd

goes silent. In life he had never seen it. But it happened with Clara

Bowden. She walked down the stairs in slow motion, surrounded by

afterglow and fuzzy lighting. And not only was she the most beautiful

thing he had ever seen, she was also the most comforting woman he had

ever met. Her beauty was not a sharp, cold commodity. She smelt

musty, womanly, like a bundle of your favourite clothes. Though she

was disorganized physically legs and arms speaking a slightly different

dialect from her central nervous system even her gangly demeanour

seemed to Archie exceptionally elegant. She wore her sexuality with an

older woman's ease, and not (as with most of the girls Archie had run

with in the past) like an awkward purse, never knowing how to hold it,

where to hang it or when to just put it down.

“Cheer up, bwoy,” she said in a lilting Caribbean accent that reminded

Archie of That Jamaican Cricketer, ‘it might never happen.’”

“I think it already has.”

Archie, who had just dropped a fag from his mouth which had been

burning itself to death anyway, saw Clara quickly tread it underfoot.

She gave him a wide grin that revealed possibly her one imperfection. A

complete lack of teeth in the top of her mouth.

“Man . . . dey get knock out,” she lisped, seeing his surprise.

“But I tink to myself: come de end of de world, d’Lord won’t mind if I

have no toofs.” She laughed softly.

“Archie Jones/ said Archie, offering her a Marlboro.

“Clara.” She whistled inadvertently as she smiled and breathed in the

smoke. “Archie Jones, you look just about exackly how I feel. Have

Clive and dem people been talking foolishness at you? Clive, you bin

playing wid dis poor man?”

Clive grunted the memory of Archie had all but disappeared with the

effects of the wine and continued where he left off, accusing Leo of

misunderstanding the difference between political and physical sacrifice.

“Oh, no . . . nothing serious,” Archie burred, useless in the face of

her exquisite face. “Bit of a disagreement, that’s all. Clive and I have different views about a few things. Generation gap, I suppose.”

Clara slapped him on the hand. “Hush yo mout! You’re That dat of”. I

seen older.”

“I’m old enough,” said Archie, and then, just because he felt like

telling her, “You won’t believe me, but I almost died today.”

Clara raised an eyebrow. “You don’t say. Well, come and join de club.

Dere are a lot of us about dis marnin’. What a strange party dis is.

You know,” she said brushing a long hand across his bald spot, ‘you

look pretty djam good for someone come so close to St. Peter’s Gate.

You wan’ some advice?”

Archie nodded vigorously. He always wanted advice, he was a huge fan

of second opinions. That’s why he never went anywhere without a ten

pence coin.

“Go home, get some rest. Marnin’ de the world new, every time. Man

... dis life no easy!”

What home? thought Archie. He had unhooked the old life, he was

walking into unknown territory.

“Man .. .” Clara repeated, patting him on the back, ‘dis life no easy!”

She let off another long whistle and a rueful laugh, and, unless

he was really going nuts, Archie saw that come hither look; identical

to Daria's; tinged with a kind of sadness, disappointment; like she

didn't have a great deal of other options. Clara was nineteen.

Archibald was forty-seven. Six weeks later they were married.

## 2 Teething Trouble

But Archie did not pluck Clara Bowden from a vacuum. And it's about

time people told the truth about beautiful women. They do not shimmer

down staircases. They do not descend, as was once supposed, from on

high, attached to nothing other than wings. Clara was<sup>^</sup> from somewhere.

She had roots. More specifically, she was from Lambeth via Jamaica and

she was connected, through tacit adolescent agreement, to one Ryan

Topps. Because before Clara was beautiful she was ugly. And before

there was Clara and Archie there was Clara and Ryan. And there is no

getting away from Ryan Topps. Just as a good historian need recognize

Hitler's Napoleonic ambitions in the east in order to comprehend his

reluctance to invade the British in the west, so Ryan Topps is essential to any understanding of why Clara did what she did. Ryan is

indispensable. There was Clara and Ryan for eight months before Clara

and Archie were drawn together from opposite ends of a staircase. And

Clara might never have run into the arms of Archie Jones if she hadn't

been running, quite as fast as she could, away from Ryan Topps.

Poor Ryan Topps. He was a mass of unfortunate physical characteristics. He was very thin and very tall, red-headed, flatfooted and freckled to such an extent that his skin was rarer than

his freckles. Ryan fancied himself as a bit of a Mod. He wore ill-fitting grey suits with black polo-necks. He wore Chelsea boots

after everyone else had stopped wearing them. While the rest of the

world discovered the joys of the electronic synthesizer, Ryan swore

allegiance to the little men with big guitars: to the Kinks, the Small

Faces, the Who. Ryan Topps rode a green Vespa GS

scooter which he polished twice a day with a baby's nappy and kept

encased in a custom-built corrugated-iron shield. To Ryan's way of

thinking, a Vespa was not merely a mode of transport but an ideology,

family, friend and lover all rolled into one paragon of late forties engineering.

Ryan Topps, as one might expect, had few friends.

Clara Bowden was gangly, buck-toothed, a Jehovah's Witness, and saw in

Ryan a kindred spirit. A typical teenage female panoptic on she knew

everything there was to know about Ryan Topps long before they ever

spoke. She knew the basics: same school (St. Jude's Community School,

Lambeth), same height (six foot one); she knew he was, like her, neither Irish nor Roman Catholic, which made them two islands floating

surrounded by the popish ocean of St. Jude's, enrolled in the school

by the accident of their post codes reviled by teachers and pupils alike. She knew the name of his bike, she read the tops of his records

as they popped up over the brim of his bag. She even knew things about

him he didn't know: for example, she knew he was the Last Man on Earth.

Every school has one, and in St. Jude's, as in other seats of learning, it was the girls who chose this moniker and dished it out.

There were, of course, variations:

Mr. Not for a Million Pounds.

Mr. Not to Save My Mother's Life.

Mr. Not for World Peace.

But, generally, the schoolgirls of St. Jude's kept to the tried and tested formula. Though Ryan would never be privy to the conversations

of the school's female changing rooms, Clara knew. She knew how the

object of her affections was discussed, she kept an ear out, she knew

what he amounted to when you got down to it, down amongst the sweat

and

the training bras and the sharp flick of a wet towel.

“Ah, Jaysus, you’re not listening. I’m saying, if he was the last man

on earth!”

“I still wouldn’t.”

Teething Troubk

“Ah, bollocks you would!”

“But listen: the whole bleedin’ world has been hit by the bomb, like in

Japan, roight? An’ all the good-lookin’ men, all the rides like your

man Nicky Laird, they’re all dead. They’ve all been burnt to a crisp.

An’ all that’s left is Ryan Topps and a bunch of cockroaches.”

“On me life, I’d rather sleep with the cockroaches.”

Ryan’s unpopularity at St. Jude’s was equalled only by Clara’s. On

her first day at the school her mother had explained to her she was

about to enter the devil’s lair, filled her satchel with two hundred copies of the Watchtower and instructed her to go and do the Lord’s

work. Week after week she shuffled through the school, head hung to the

ground, handing out magazines, murmuring, Only Jehovah saves’; in a

school where an overexcitable pustule could send you to Coventry, a

six-foot black missionary in knee socks attempting to convert six

hundred Catholics to the church of the Jehovah’s Witnesses equalled

social leprosy.



So Ryan was red as a beetroot. And Clara was black as yer boot.  
Ryan's

freckles were a join-the-dots enthusiast's wet dream. Clara  
could

circumnavigate an apple with her front teeth before her tongue  
got

anywhere near it. Not even the Catholics would forgive them for  
it

(and Catholics give out forgiveness at about the same rate  
politicians

give out promises and whores give out); not even St. Jude, who  
got

saddled way back in theist century with the patronage of  
hopeless

causes (due to the tonal similarity between Jude and Judas), was  
prepared to get involved.

At five o'clock each day, as Clara sat in her house attending to  
the

message of the gospels or composing a leaflet condemning the  
heathen

practice of blood transfusion, Ryan Topps would scoot by her  
open

window on his way home. The Bowden living room sat just  
below street

level, and had bars on its window, so all views were partial.

Generally, she would see feet, wheels, car exhausts, swinging  
umbrellas. Such slight glimpses were often

2.9

telling; a lively imagination could squeeze much pathos out of a  
frayed

lace, a darned sock, a low swinging bag that had seen better  
days. But

nothing affected her more deeply than gazing after the  
disappearing  
tailpipe of Ryan's scooter. Lacking any name for the furtive  
rumblings  
that appeared in her lower abdomen on these occasions, Clara  
called it  
the spirit of the Lord. She felt that somehow she was going to  
save  
the heathen Ryan Topps. Clara meant to gather this boy close to  
her  
breast, keep him safe from the temptation that besets us all  
around,  
prepare him for the day of his redemption. (And wasn't there  
somewhere, lower than her abdomen somewhere down in the  
nether region  
of the unmentionables was there not the half-conceived hope  
that Ryan  
Topps might save her?)  
If Hortense Bowden caught her daughter sitting wistfully by the  
barred  
window, listening to the retreating splutter of an engine while  
the  
pages of the New Bible flicked over in the breeze, she koofed  
her  
up-side her head and thanked her to remember that only 144,000  
of the  
Witnesses of Jehovah would sit in the court of the Lord on  
Judgement  
Day. Amongst which number of the Anointed there was no  
space for  
nasty-looking so-and-sos on motorcycles.  
"But what if we saved "

“Some people,” Hortense asserted with a snort, ‘have done such a hoi’

heap of sinning, it late for dem to be making eyes at Jehovah. It take

effort to be close to Jehovah. It take devotion and dedication.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they alone shall see God.

Matthew

5:8. Isn’t dat right, Darcus?”

Darcus Bowden, Clara’s father, was an odoriferous, moribund, salivating

old man entombed in a bug-infested armchair from which he had never

been seen to remove himself, not even, thanks to a catheter, to visit

the outdoor toilet. Darcus had come over to England fourteen years

earlier and spent the whole of that period in the far corner of the living room, watching tele30

vision. The original intention had been that he should come to England

and earn enough money to enable Clara and Hortense to come over, join

him and settle down. However, on arrival, a mysterious illness had

debilitated Darcus Bowden. An illness that no doctor could find any

physical symptoms of, but which manifested itself in the most incredible lethargy, creating in Darcus admittedly, never the most

vibrant of men a lifelong affection for the dole, the armchair and British television. In 1972, enraged by a fourteen-year wait, Hortense

decided finally to make the journey on her own steam. Steam was something Hortense had in abundance. She arrived on the doorstep with the seventeen-year-old Clara, broke down the door in a fury and so the legend went back in St. Elizabeth gave Darcus Bowden the tongue-whipping of his life. Some say this onslaught lasted four hours, some say she quoted every book of the bible by memory and it took a whole day and a whole night. What is certain is, at the end of it all, Darcus slumped deeper into the recesses of his chair, looked mournfully at the television with whom he had had such an understanding, compassionate relationship so uncomplicated, so much innocent affection and a tear squeezed its way out of its duct and settled in a crag underneath his eye. Then he said just one word: Hmph.

Hmph was all Darcus said or ever was to say after. Ask Darcus anything; query him on any subject at any hour of the day and night; interrogate him; chat with him; implore him; declare your love for him; accuse him or vindicate him and he will give you only one answer.

“I say, isn’t dat right, Darcus?”

“Hmph.”

“An’ it not,” exclaimed Hortense, returning to Clara, having received

Darcus's grunt of approval, 'dat young man's soul you boddrin' yourself

wid! How many times must I tell you you got no time for bwoys!"

For Time was running out in the Bowden household. This

3i

was 1974, and Hortense was preparing for the End of the World, which,

in the house diary, she had marked carefully in blue biro: i  
January

1975. This was not a solitary psychosis of the Bowdens. There were

eight million Jehovah's Witnesses waiting with her. Hortense was in

large, albeit eccentric, company. A personal letter had come to

Hortense (as secretary of the Lambeth branch of the Kingdom Halls),

with a photocopied signature from William J. Rangeforth of the largest

Kingdom Hall in the USA, Brooklyn, confirming the date. The end of the

world had been officially confirmed with a gold-plated letterhead, and

Hortense had risen to the occasion by setting it in an attractive mahogany frame. She had given it pride of place on a doily on top of

the television between a glass figurine of Cinderella on her way to the

Ball and a tea-cosy embroidered with the Ten Commandments. She had

asked Darcus whether he thought it looked nice. He had hmphed his

assent.

The end of the world was nigh. And this was not the Lambeth branch of the church of the Jehovah's Witnesses was to be assured like the mistakes of 1914 and 1925. They had been promised the entrails of sinners wrapped around the trunks of trees, and this time the entrails of sinners wrapped around the trunks of trees would appear. They had waited so long for the rivers of blood to overflow the gutters in the high street, and now their thirst would be satiated. The time had come. This was the right date, this was the only date, all other dates that might have been proffered in the past were the result of some bad calculations: someone forgot to add, someone forgot to minus, someone forgot to carry the one. But now was the time. The real thing, i January 1975.

Hortense, for one, was glad to hear it. The first morning of 1925 she had wept like a baby when she awoke to find instead of hail and brimstone and universal destruction the continuance of daily life, the regular running of the buses and trains. It had been for nothing, then, all that tossing and turning the previous night; waiting for those neighbours, those who failed to listen to your warnings, to sink under a hot and terrible fire that shall separate their skin from their bones, shall melt the eyes in their sockets, and burn the babies that

suckle at their mothers' breasts ... so many of your neighbours shall

die that day that their bodies, if lined up side by side, will stretch

three hundred times round the earth and on their charred remains shall

the true Witnesses of the Lord walk to his side. The Clarion Bell,

issue 245

How bitterly she had been disappointed! But the wounds of 1925 had

healed, and Hortense was once again ready to be convinced that apocalypse, just as the right holy Mr. Rangeforth had explained, was

round the corner. The promise of the 1914 generation still stood: This

generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled (Matthew

24:34). Those who were alive in 1914 would live to see the Armageddon.

It had been promised. Born in 1907, Hortense was getting old now, she

was getting tired and her peers were dying off like flies. 1975 looked

like the last chance.

Had not two hundred of the church's best intellectuals spent twenty

years examining the bible, and hadn't this date been their unanimous

conclusion? Had they not read between the lines in Daniel, scanned for

the hidden meaning in Revelation, correctly identified the Asian wars

(Korea and Vietnam) as the period spoken of by the angel, ‘a time, and times, and half a time’? Hortense was convinced these were the sign of signs. These were the final days. There were eight months to the end of the world. Hardly enough time! There were banners to be made, articles to be written (“Will the Lord Forgive the Onanist?”), doorsteps to be trod, bells to be rung. There was Darcus to think about who could not walk to the fridge without assistance how was he to make it to the kingdom of the Lord? And in all Clara must lend a hand; there was no time for boys, for Ryan Topps, for skulking around, for adolescent angst. For Clara was not like other teenagers. She was the Lord’s child, Hortense’s miracle baby. Hortense was all of forty-eight when she heard the Lord’s voice while gutting a fish one morning, Montego Bay, 1955. Straight away she threw down the marlin, caught the trolley car home and submitted to her least favourite activity in order to conceive the child He had asked for. Why had the Lord waited so long? Because the Lord wanted to show Hortense a miracle. For Hortense had been a miracle child herself, born in the middle of the legendary Kingston earthquake, 1907, when everybody else



was busy dying miracles ran in the family. Hortense saw it this way:

if she could come into this world in the middle of a ground shaker, as

parts of Montego Bay slipped into the sea, and fires came down from the

mountains, then nobody had no excuses about nothing no how. She liked

to say: "Being' barn is de hardest part! Once ya done dat no problems." So now that Clara was here, old enough to help her with

door stepping administration, writing speeches and all the varied business of the church of the Jehovah's Witnesses, she'd better get on

with it. No time for boys. This child's work was just beginning.

Hortense born while Jamaica crumbled did not accept apocalypse before

one's nineteenth birthday as any excuse for tardiness.

Yet strangely, and possibly because of Jehovah's well documented

penchant for moving in a mysterious manner, it was in performing the

business of the Lord that Clara eventually met Ryan Topps face to face.

The youth group of the Lambeth Kingdom Hall had been sent door

stepping

on a Sunday morning, Separating the sheep from the goats (Matthew

25:31-46), and Clara, detesting the young Witness men with their bad

ties and softly spoken voices, had set off alone with her own suitcase

to ring bells along Creighton Road. The first few doors she received  
the usual pained faces: nice women shooing her away as politely as  
possible, making sure they didn't get too close, scared they might  
catch religion like an infection. As she got into the poorer end of  
the street, the reaction became more aggressive; shouts came from  
windows or behind closed doors.

"If that's the bloody Jehovah's Witnesses, tell 'em to piss off!"  
Or, more imaginatively, "Sorry, love, don't you know what day it is?"

It's Sunday, in nit I'm knackered. I've spent all week creating the  
land and oceans. It's me day of rest."

At No. 75 she spent an hour with a fourteen-year-old physics whizz  
called Colin who wanted to intellectually disprove the existence of God  
while looking up her skirt. Then she rang No. 87. And Ryan Topps  
answered.

"Yeah?"

He stood there in all his red-headed, black polo-necked glory, his lip  
curled in a snarl.

"I...!..."

She tried desperately to forget what she was wearing: a white shirt  
complete with throat-ruffle, plaid knee-length skirt and sash that  
proudly stated nearer my god to thee.

“You want som mink said Ryan, taking a fierce drag of a dying cigarette. “Or som mink

Clara tried her widest, buck-toothed smile and went on to auto-pilot.

“Marnin’ to you, sir. I am from de Lambet Kingdom Hall, where we, de

Witnesses of Jehovah, are waitin’ for de Lord to come and grace us wid

his holy presence once more; as he did briefly hot sadly, invisibly in

de year of our farder, 1914. We believe dat when he makes himself

known he will be bringing wid ‘im de tree-fold fires of hell in

Armageddon, dat day when precious few will be saved. Are you int’

rested in’

“Wot?”

Clara, close to tears at the shame of it, tried again. “Are you int’ rested in de tea chins of Jehovah?”

“You wot?”

“In Jehovah in de tea chins of d’Lord. You see, it like a staircase.”

Clara’s last resort was always her mother’s metaphor of the holy steps.

“I see dat you walkin’ down and der’s a missin’ step comin’. I’m just

tellin’ you: watch your step! Me jus wan’

share heaven wid you. Me nah wan’ fe see you bruk-up your legs.”

Ryan Topps leant against the door frame and looked at her for a long

time through his red fringe. Clara felt she was closing in on herself,

like a telescope. It was only moments, surely, before she disappeared

entirely.

“I ‘ave some materials of readin’ for your perusal’ She fumbled with

the lock of the suitcase, flipped the catch with her thumb but neglected to hold the other side of the case. Fifty copies of the Watchtower spilled over the doorstep.

“Bwoy, me ky ant do nuttin’ right today ‘

She fell to the ground in a rush to pick them up and scraped the skin

off her left knee. “Owl”

“Your name’s Clara,” said Ryan slowly. “You’re from my school, ain’t

ya?”

“Yes, man,” said Clara, so jubilant he remembered her name that she

forgot the pain. “St. Jude’s.”

“I know wot it’s called.”

Clara went as red as black people get and looked at the floor.

“Hopeless causes. Saint of,” said Ryan, picking something surreptitiously from his nose and nicking it into a flowerpot.

“IRA.

The lot of’em.”

Ryan surveyed the long figure of Clara once more, spending an inordinate amount of time on two sizeable breasts, the outline of their

raised nipples just discernible through white polyester.

“You best come in,” he said finally, lowering his gaze to inspect the

bleeding knee. “Put somefin’ on that.”

That very afternoon there were furtive rumblings on Ryan’s couch (which

went a good deal further than one might expect of a Christian girl) and

the devil won another easy hand in God’s poker game. Things were

tweaked, and pushed and pulled; and by the time the bell rang for end

of school Monday Ryan Topps and Clara Bowden (much to their school’s

collective disgust) were more or less an item; as the St. Jude’s phraseology went,

they were ‘dealing’ with each other. Was it everything that Clara, in

all her sweaty adolescent invention, had imagined?

Well, ‘dealing’ with Ryan turned out to consist of three major pastimes

(in order of importance): admiring Ryan’s scooter, admiring Ryan’s

records, admiring Ryan. But though other girls might have balked at

dates that took place in Ryan’s garage and consisted entirely of watching him pore over the engine of a scooter, eulogizing its intricacies and complexities, to Clara there was nothing more thrilling. She learnt quickly that Ryan was a man of painfully few

words and that the rare conversations they had would only ever concern

Ryan: his hopes, his fears (all scooter-related) and his peculiar

belief that he and his scooter would not live long. For some reason,

Ryan was convinced of the ageing fifties motto “Live fast, die young”,

and, though his scooter didn’t do more than 22 mph. downhill, he liked

to warn Clara in grim tones not to get ‘too involved’, for he wouldn’t

be here long; he was ‘going out’ early and with a ‘bang’. She imagined

herself holding the bleeding Ryan in her arms, hearing him finally

declare his undying love; she saw herself as Mod Widow, wearing black

polo-necks for a year and demanding “Waterloo Sunset’ be played at his

funeral. Clara’s inexplicable dedication to Ryan Topps knew no bounds.

It transcended his bad looks, tedious personality and unsightly personal habits. Essentially, it transcended Ryan, for whatever Hortense claimed, Clara was a teenage girl like any other; the object

of her passion was only an accessory to the passion itself, a passion

that through its long suppression was now asserting itself with volcanic necessity. Over the ensuing months Clara’s mind changed,

Clara’s clothes changed, Clara’s walk changed, Clara’s soul changed.

All over the world girls were calling this change Donny Osmond or

Michael Jackson or the Bay City Rollers. Clara chose to call it Ryan

Topps.

There were no dates, in the normal sense. No flowers or restaurants,

movies or parties. Occasionally, when more weed

was required, Ryan would take her to visit a large squat in North

London where an eighth came cheap and people too stoned to make out

the

features on your face acted like your best friends. Here, Ryan would

ensconce himself in a hammock, and, after a few joints, progress from

his usual monosyllabic to the entirely catatonic. Clara, who didn't

smoke, sat at his feet, admired him, and tried to keep up with the

general conversation around her. She had no tales to tell like the

others, not like Merlin, like Clive, like Leo, Petronia, Wan-Si and the

others. No anecdotes of LSD trips, of police brutality or marching on

Trafalgar Square. But Clara made friends. A resourceful girl, she

used what she had to amuse and terrify an assorted company of Hippies,

Flakes, Freaks and Funky Folk: a different kind of extremity; tales of

hellfire and damnation, of the devil's love of faeces, his passion for

stripping skin, for red-hot-poke ring eyeballs and the flaying of genitals all the elaborate plans of Lucifer, that most exquisite of

fallen angels, that were set for i January 1975.

Naturally, the thing called Ryan Topps began to push the End of the

World further and further into the back-rooms of Clara's consciousness.

So many other things were presenting themselves to her, so much new in

life! If it were possible, she felt like one of the Anointed right now, right here in Lambeth. The more blessed she felt on earth, the

more rarely she turned her thoughts towards heaven. In the end, it was

the epic feat of long division that Clara simply couldn't figure. So

many unsaved. Out of eight million Jehovah's Witnesses, only 144,000

men could join Christ in heaven. The good women and good-enough men

would gain paradise on earth not a bad booby prize all things considered but that still left a few million who failed to make the

grade. Add that to the heathens; to the Jews, Catholics, Muslims; to

the poor jungle men in the Amazon whom Clara had wept for as a child;

so many unsaved. The Witnesses prided themselves on the absence of

hell in their theology the punishment was torture, unimaginable torture

on the final day, and then the grave was the grave. But to Clara, this

seemed worse the thought of the Great Crowd, enjoying themselves in



earthly paradise, while the tortured, mutilated skeletons of the lost lay just under the topsoil.

On the one side stood all the mammoth quantities of people on the globe, unacquainted with the teachings of the Watchtower (some with no access to a postbox), unable to contact the Lambeth Kingdom Hall and receive helpful reading material about the road to redemption.

On the other side, Hortense, her hair all wrapped up in iron rollers, tossing and turning in her sheets, gleefully awaiting the rains of sulphur to pour down upon the sinners, particularly the woman at No. 53.

Hortense tried to explain: “Dem dat died wid out de knowing de Lord, will be resurrected and dem will have an udder chance.” But to Clara, it was still an inequitable equation. Unbalanceable books. Faith is hard to achieve, easy to lose. She became more and more reluctant to leave the impress of her knees in the red cushions in the Kingdom Hall.

She would not wear sashes, carry banners or give out leaflets. She would not tell anyone about missing steps. She discovered dope, forgot the staircase and began taking the lift.

i October 1974. A detention. Held back forty-five minutes after

school (for claiming, in a music lesson, that Roger Daltrey was a greater musician than Johann Sebastian Bach) and as a result, Clara missed her four o'clock meeting with Ryan on the corner of Leenan Street. It was freezing cold and getting dark by the time she got out; she ran through piles of putrefying autumn leaves, searched the length and breadth of Leenan, but there was no sign. It was with dread that she approached her own front door, offering up to God a multitude of silent contracts (I'll never have sex, I'll never smoke another joint, I'll never wear another skin above the knee) if only he could assure her that Ryan Topps had not rung her mother's doorbell looking for shelter from the wind.

"Clara! Come out of de cold."

It was the voice Hortense put on when she had company an over-compensation of all the consonants the voice she used for pastors and white women.

Clara closed the front door behind her, and walked in a kind of terror through the living room, past the framed hologram of Jesus who wept (and then didn't), and into the kitchen.

"Dear Lord, she look like so meting de cat dragged in, hmm?"

“Mmm,” said Ryan, who was happily shovelling a plate of ackee and salt fish into his mouth on the other side of the tiny kitchen table. Clara stuttered, her buck teeth cutting shapes into her bottom lip.

“What are you doing here?”

“Ha!” cried Hortense, almost triumphant. “You tink you can hide your

friends from me for ever? De bwoy was cold, I letim in, we been havin’

a nice chat, haven’t we young man?”

“Mmm, yes, Mrs. Bowden.”

“Well, don’ look so shock. You’d tink I was gwan eatim up or so meting

eh Ryan?” said Hortense, glowing in a manner Clara had never seen

before.

“Yeah, right,” smirked Ryan. And together, Ryan Topps and Clara’s

mother began to laugh.

Is there anything more likely to take the shine off an affair than when

the lover strikes up a convivial relationship with the lo vee mother?

As the nights got darker and shorter and it became harder to pick Ryan

out of the crowd who milled outside the school gates each day at three

thirty, a dejected Clara would make the long walk home only to find her

lover once more in the kitchen, chatting happily with Hortense,

devouring the Bowden household’s cornucopia of goodies: ackee and salt

fish beef jerky, chicken-rice-and-peas, ginger cake and coconut ices.

These conversations, lively as they sounded when Clara turned the key

in the door, always fell silent as she approached the kitchen.

Like

children caught out, they would become sullen, then awkward, then Ryan

would make his excuses and leave. There was also a look, she noticed,

that they had begun to give her, a look of sympathy, of condescension;

and not only that they began to comment on her clothing, which had

become steadily more youthful, more colourful; and Ryan what was

happening to Ryan? shed his polo-neck, avoided her in school, bought a

tie.

Of course, like the mother of a drug addict or the neighbour of a serial killer, Clara was the last to know. She had once known everything about Ryan before Ryan himself knew it she had been a Ryan

expert. Now she was reduced to overhearing the Irish girls assert that

Clara Bowden and Ryan Topps were not dealing with each other definitively, definitely not dealing with each other oh no, not any

more.

If Clara realized what was happening, she wouldn't allow herself to

believe it. On the occasion she spotted Ryan at the kitchen table,

surrounded by leaflets and Hortense hurriedly gathering them up  
and

shoving them into her apron pocket Clara willed herself to  
forget it.

Later that month, when Clara persuaded a doleful Ryan to go  
through the

motions with her in the disabled toilet, she squinted so she  
couldn't

see what she didn't want to see. But it was there, underneath his  
jumper, there as he leant back on the sink was the glint of silver,  
its

gleam hardly visible in the dismal light it couldn't be, but it was  
the

silver glint of a tiny silver cross.

It couldn't be, but it was. That is how people describe a miracle.

Somehow the opposites of Hortense and Ryan had met at their  
logical

extremes, their mutual predilection for the pain and death of  
others

meeting like perspective points on some morbid horizon.

Suddenly the

saved and the unsaved had come a miraculous full circle.

Hortense and

Ryan were now trying to save her.

“Get on the bike.”

Clara had just stepped out of school into the dusk and it was  
Ryan, his

scooter coming to a sharp halt at her feet.

4i

“Claz, get on the bike.”

“Go ask my mudder if she wan' get on de bike!”

“Please,” said Ryan, proffering the spare scooter helmet.

“Simportant.

Need to talk to you. Ain’t much time left.”

“Why?” snapped Clara, rocking petulantly on her platform heels. “You

goin’ someplace?”

“You and me both,” murmured Ryan. The right place, ope fully

“No.”

“Please, Claz.”

“No.”

“Please. “Simportant. Life or death.”

“Man.. all right. But me nah wearin’ dat ting’ she passed back the

helmet and got astride the scooter ‘not mussin’ up me hair.”

Ryan drove her across London and up to Hampstead Heath, the very top of

Parliament Hill, where, looking down from that peak on to the sickly

orange fluorescence of the city, carefully, tortuously, and in language

that was not his own, he put forward his case. The bottom line of

which was this: there was only a month until the end of the world.

“And the ring is, herself and myself, we’re just ‘

“We!”

“Your mum your mum and myself mumbled Ryan, ‘we’re worried. “Bout

you.

There ain’t that many wot will survive the last days. You been wiv a

bad crowd, Claz ‘

“Man,” said Clara, shaking her head and sucking her teeth, “I don’

believe dis biznezz. Dem were your friends.”

“No, no, they ain’t. Not no more. The weed the weed is evil. And all

that lot Wan-Si, Petronia.”

“Dey my friends!”

“They ain’t nice girls, Clara. They should be with their families, not

dressing like they do and doing things with them men in that house. You

yourself shouldn’t be doin’ that, neither. And dressing like, like, like ‘

“Like what?”

“Like a whore!” said Ryan, the word exploding from him like it was a

relief to be rid of it. “Like a loose woman!”

“Oh bwoy, I heard every ting now . . . take me home, man.”

“They’re going to get theirs,” said Ryan, nodding to himself, his arm

stretched and gesturing over London from Chiswick to Archway. “There’s

still time for you. Who do you want to be with, Claz? Who d’ya want

to be with? With the 144,000, in heaven, ruling with Christ? Or do

you want to be one of the Great Crowd, living in earthly paradise,

which is all right but.. . Or are you going to be one of them who get

it in the neck, torture and death. Eh? I’m just separating the sheep

from the goats, Claz, the sheep from the goats. That's Matthew.  
And I

think you yourself are a sheep, in nit

"Lemme tell you so meting said Clara, walking back over to the  
scooter

and taking the back seat, "I'm a goat. I like being' a goat. I  
wanna

be a goat. An' I'd rather be sizzling in de rains of sulphur wid  
my

friends than sittin' in heaven, bored to tears, wid Darcus, my  
mudder

and you!"

"Shouldn'ta said that, Claz," said Ryan solemnly, putting his  
helmet

on. "I really wish you 'adn't said that. For your sake. He can  
hear

us."

"An' I'm tired of hearin' you. Take me home."

"It's the truth! He can hear us!" he shouted, turning backwards,  
yelling above the exhaust-pipe noise as they revved up and  
scooted

downhill. "He can see it all! He watches over us!"

"Watch over where you goin'," Clara yelled back, as they sent a  
cluster

of Hasidic Jews running in all directions. "Watch de path!"

"Only the few that's wot it says only the few. They'll all get it  
that's what it says in Dyoot-er-ronomee they'll all get what's  
comin'

and only the few '

Somewhere in the middle of Ryan Topps's enlightening biblical  
exegesis,

his former false idol, the Vespa G S, cracked right into



a 400-year-old oak tree. Nature triumphed over the presumptions of engineering. The tree survived; the bike died; Ryan was hurled one way; Clara the other.

The principles of Christianity and Sod's Law (also known as Murphy's Law) are the same: Everything happens to me, for me. So if a man drops a piece of toast and it lands butter-side down, this unlucky event is interpreted as being proof of an essential truth about bad luck: that the toast fell as it did just to prove to you, Mr. Unlucky, that there is a defining force in the universe and it is bad luck. It's not random. It could never have fallen on the right side, so the argument goes, because that's Sod's Law. In short, Sod's Law happens to you to prove to you that there is Sod's Law. Yet, unlike gravity, it is a law that does not exist whatever happens: when the toast lands on the right side, Sod's Law mysteriously disappears. Likewise, when Clara fell, knocking the teeth out of the top of her mouth, while Ryan stood up without a scratch, Ryan knew it was because God had chosen Ryan as one of the saved and Clara as one of the unsaved. Not because one was

wearing a helmet and the other wasn't. And had it happened the other

way round, had gravity reclaimed Ryan's teeth and sent them rolling

down Primrose Hill like tiny enamel snowballs, well . . . you can bet

your life that God, in Ryan's mind, would have done a vanishing act.

As it was, this was the final sign Ryan needed. When New Year's Eve

rolled around, he was there in the living room, sitting in the middle

of a circle of candles with Hortense, ardently praying for Clara's soul

while Darcus pissed into his tube and watched the Generation Game on

BBC One. Clara, meanwhile, had put on a pair of yellow flares and a

red halter neck top and gone to a party. She suggested its theme, helped to paint the banner and hang it from the window; she danced and

smoked with the rest of them and felt herself, without undue modesty,

to be quite the belle of the squat. But as midnight inevitably came

and went without the horsemen of the apocalypse making an appearance, Clara surprised herself by falling into a melancholy.

For ridding oneself of faith is like boiling sea-water to retrieve the

salt something is gained but something is lost. Though her friends

Merlin, Wan-Si, et al. clapped her on the back and congratulated her

for exorcizing those fervid dreams of perdition and redemption, Clara

quietly mourned the warmer touch she had waited for these nineteen

years, the all-enveloping bear hug of the Saviour, the One who was

Alpha and Omega, both the beginning and the end; the man who was

meant

to take her away from all this, from the listless reality of life in a ground-floor flat in Lambeth. What now for Clara? Ryan would find

another fad; Darcus need only turn to the other channel; for Hortense

another date would of course materialize, along with more leaflets,

ever more faith. But Clara was not like Hortense. Yet a residue, left

over from the evaporation of Clara's faith, remained. She still wished

for a saviour. She still wished for a man to whisk her away, to choose

her above others so that she might Walk in white with Him: for [she]

was worthy. Revelation 3:4.

Perhaps it is not so inexplicable then, that when Clara Bowden met

Archie Jones at the bottom of some stairs the next morning she saw more

in him than simply a rather short, rather chubby middle-aged white man

in a badly tailored suit. Clara saw Archie through the grey-green eyes

of loss; her world had just disappeared, the faith she lived by had

receded like a low tide, and Archie, quite by accident, had become the

bloke in the joke: the last man on earth.

### 3 Two Families

It is better to marry than to burn, says Corinthians I, chapter seven,

verse nine.

Good advice. Of course, Corinthians also informs us that we should not

muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain so, go figure.

By February 1975, Clara had deserted the church and all its biblical

literalism for Archibald Jones, but she was not yet the kind of carefree atheist who could laugh near altars or entirely dismiss the

teachings of St. Paul. The second dictum wasn't a problem having no

ox, she was excluded by proxy. But the first was giving her sleepless

nights. Was it better to marry? Even if the man was a heathen? There

was no way of knowing: she was living without props now, sans safety

net. More worrying than God was her mother. Hortense was fiercely

opposed to the affair, on grounds of colour rather than of age, and on

hearing of it had promptly ostracized her daughter one morning on the

doorstep.

Clara still felt that deep down her mother would prefer her to marry an

unsuitable man rather than live with him in sin, so she did it on impulse and begged Archie to take her as far away from Lambeth as a man

of his means could manage Morocco, Belgium, Italy. Archie had clasped

her hand and nodded and whispered sweet nothings in the full knowledge

that the furthest a man of his means was going was a newly acquired,

heavily mortgaged, two-storey house in Willesden Green. But no need to

mention that now, he felt, not right now in the heat of the moment. Let

her down gently, like.

Three months later Clara had been gently let down and here they were,

moving in. Archie scabbling up the stairs, as usual

cursing and blinding, wilting under the weight of boxes which Clara

could carry two, three at a time without effort; Clara taking a break,

squinting in the warm May sunshine, trying to get her bearings. She

peeled down to a little purple vest and leant against her front gate.

What kind of a place was this? That was the thing, you see, you couldn't be sure. Travelling in the front passenger seat of the removal van, she'd seen the high road and it had been ugly and poor and

familiar (though there were no Kingdom Halls or Episcopalian churches),

but then at the turn of a corner suddenly roads had exploded in greenery, beautiful oaks, the houses got taller, wider and more detached, she could see parks, she could see libraries. And then abruptly the trees would be gone, reverting back into bus-stops as if

by the strike of some midnight bell; a signal which the houses too

obeyed, transforming themselves into smaller, st airless dwellings that

sat splay opposite derelict shopping arcades, those peculiar lines of

establishments that include, without exception,

one defunct sandwich bar still advertising breakfast one locksmith

uninterested in marketing frills (keys cut here)

and one permanently shut unisex hair salon, the proud bearer of some

unspeakable pun (Upper Cuts or Fringe Benefits or Hair Today, Gone

Tomorrow).

It was a lottery driving along like that, looking out, not knowing whether one was about to settle down for life amongst the trees or

amidst the shit. Then finally the van had slowed down in front of a

house, a nice house somewhere midway between the trees and the shit,

and Clara had felt a tide of gratitude roll over her. It was nice, not

as nice as she had hoped but not as bad as she had feared; it had two

small gardens front and back, a doormat, a doorbell, a toilet inside ..

. And she had not paid a high price. Only love. Just love. And whatever Corinthians might say, love is not such a hard thing to forfeit, not if you've never really felt it. She did not love Archie, but had made up her mind,

from that first moment on the steps, to devote herself to him if he

would take her away. And now he had; and, though it wasn't Morocco or

Belgium or Italy, it was nice not the promised land but nice, nicer

than anywhere she had ever been.

Clara understood that Archibald Jones was no romantic hero. Three

months spent in one stinking room in Cricklewood had been sufficient

revelation. Oh, he could be affectionate and sometimes even charming,

he could whistle a clear, crystal note first thing in the morning, he

drove calmly and responsibly and he was a surprisingly competent cook,

but romance was beyond , passion, unthinkable. And if you are saddled

with a man as age as this, Clara felt, he should at least be utterly devoted t^bi to your beauty, to your youth that's the least he could

do^wnake up for things. But not Archie. One month into their maiMce

and he already had that funny glazed look men have whel^fcey are

looking through you. He had already reverted back ^^ his bachelorhood:

pints with Samad Iqbal, dinner with Samac^Bbal, Sunday breakfasts with

Samad Iqbal, every spare moment with the man in that bloody place,

O'Connell's, in that bloody ABe. She tried to be reasonable. She asked him: Why are you nevemRre? Why do you spend so much time

with

the Indian? But a pat on[K back, a kiss on the cheek, he's grabbing

his coat, his foot's oJ'e door and always the same old answer: Me and

Sam? We go vifback. She couldn't argue with that. They went back to

befonMie was born.

No JBte knight, then, this Archibald Jones. No aims, no hopesJK

ambitions. A man whose greatest pleasures were Eng|>reakfasts and

DIY. A dull man. An old man. And yet 3d. He was a good man. And

good might not amount to i, good might not light up a life, but it is

something. She at ted it in him that first time on the stairs, simply,

directly, the same way she could point out a good mango on a Brixton

stall without so much as touching the skin.

These were the thoughts Clara clung to as she leant on her garden gate, three months after her wedding, silently watching the way



her husband's brow furrowed and shortened like an accordion,  
the way

his stomach hung pregnant over his belt, the whiteness of his  
skin, the

blueness of his veins, the way his 'elevens' were up those two  
ropes of

flesh that appear on a man's gullet (so they said in Jamaica)  
when his

time was drawing to a close.

Clara frowned. She hadn't noticed these afflictions at the  
wedding.

Why not? He had been smiling and he wore a white polo-neck,  
but no,

that wasn't it she hadn't been looking for them then, that was it.

Clara had spent most of her wedding day looking at her feet. It  
had

been a hot day, 14 February, but unusually warm, and there had  
been a

wait because the world had wanted to marry that day in a little  
registry office on Ludgate Hill. Clara remembered slipping off  
the

petite brown heels she was wearing and placing her bare feet on  
the

chilly floor, making sure to keep them firmly planted either side  
of a

dark crack in the tile, a balancing act upon which she had  
randomly

staked her future happiness.

Archie meanwhile had wiped some moisture from his upper lip  
and cursed

a persistent sunbeam that was sending a trickle of salty water  
down his

inside leg. For his second marriage he had chosen a mohair suit with a

white polo-neck and both were proving problematic. The heat prompted

rivulets of sweat to spring out all over his body, seeping through the

polo-neck to the mohair and giving off an unmistakable odour of damp

dog. Clara, of course, was all cat. She wore a long brown woollen

Jeff Banks dress and a perfect set of false teeth; the dress was backless, the teeth were white, and the overall effect was feline; a

panther in evening dress; where the wool stopped and Clara's skin

started was not clear to the naked eye. And like a cat she responded

to the dusty sunbeam that was coursing through a high window on to the

waiting couples. She warmed her bare back in it, she almost seemed to

unfurl. Even the registrar, who had seen it

all horsy women marrying weaselly men, elephantine men marrying

owlish

women raised an eyebrow at this most unnatural of unions as they

approached his desk. Cat and dog.

"Hullo, Father," said Archie.

"He's a registrar, Archibald, you old flake," said his friend Samad

Miah Iqbal, who, along with his wife Alsana, had been called in from

the exile of the Wedding Guest Room to witness the contract.

“Not a

Catholic priest

“Right. Of course. Sorry. Nervous.”

The stuffy registrar said, “Shall we get on? We’ve got a lot of you to

get through today.”

This and little more had constituted the ceremony. Archie was passed a

pen and put down his name (Alfred Archibald Jones), nationality

(English) and age (47). Hovering for a moment over the box entitled

“Occupation’, he decided upon “Advertising: (Printed Leaflets)’, then

signed himself away. Clara wrote down her name (Clara Iphegenia

Bowden), nationality (Jamaican) and age (19). Finding no box interested in her occupation, she went straight for the decisive dotted

line, swept her pen across it, and straightened up again, a Jones. A

Jones like no other that had come before her.

Then they had gone outside, on to the steps, where a breeze lifted

second-hand confetti and swept it over new couples, where Clara met her

only wedding guests formally for the first time: two Indians, both

dressed in purple silk. Samad Iqbal, a tall, handsome man with the

whitest teeth and a dead hand, who kept patting her on the back with

the one that worked.

“My idea this, you know,” he repeated again and again. “My idea, all

this marriage business. I have known the old boy since when?”

‘1945, Sam.’”

“That’s what I am trying to tell your lovely wife, 1945 when you know a

man that long, and you’ve fought alongside him, then it’s your mission

to make him happy if he is not. And

he wasn’t! Quite the opposite until you made an appearance! Wallowing

in the shit-heap, if you will pardon the French. Thankfully, she’s all

packed off now. There’s only one place for the mad, and that’s with

others like them,” said Samad, losing steam halfway through the sentence, for Clara clearly had no idea what he was talking about.

“Anyway, no need to dwell on ... My idea, though, you know, all

this.”

And then there was his wife, Alsana, who was tiny and tightlipped and

seemed to disapprove of Clara somehow (though she could only be a few

years older); said only “Oh yes, Mrs. Jones’ or “Oh no, Mrs. Jones’,

making Clara so nervous, so sheepish, she felt compelled to put her

shoes back on.

Archie felt bad for Clara that it wasn’t a bigger reception. But there

was no one else to invite. All other relatives and friends had declined the wedding invitation; some tersely, some horrified; others, thinking silence the best option, had spent the past week studiously stepping over the mail and avoiding the phone. The only well-wisher was Ibelgaufts, who had neither been invited nor informed of the event, but from whom, curiously, a note arrived in the morning mail:

14 February 1975 Dear Archibald,

Usually, there is something about weddings that brings out the misanthrope in me, but today, as I attempted to save a bed of petunias from extinction, I felt a not inconsiderable warmth at the thought of the union of one man and one woman in lifelong cohabitation. It is truly remarkable that we humans undertake such an impossible feat, don't you think? But to be serious for a moment: as you know, I am a man whose profession it is to look deep inside of' Woman and, like a psychiatrist, mark her with a full bill of health or otherwise. And I feel sure, my friend (to extend a metaphor), that you have explored your lady-wife-to-be in such a manner, both spiritually and mentally, and found her not lacking in any particular, and so what else can I offer but ike hearty congratulations of your earnest competitor, Horst Ibelgaufts

What other memories of that day could make it unique and lift it out of

the other 355 that made up 1975? Clara remembered a young black man

stood atop an apple crate, sweating in a black suit, who began pleading

to his brothers and sisters; an old bag-lady retrieving a carnation from the bin to put in her hair. But then it was all over: the ding-filmed sandwiches Clara had made had been forgotten and sat

suffering at the bottom of a bag, the sky had clouded over, and when

they walked up the hill to the King Ludd Pub, past the jeering Fleet

Street lads with their Saturday pints, it was discovered that Archie

had been given a parking ticket.

So it was that Clara spent the first three hours of married life in Cheapside Police Station, her shoes in her hands, watching her saviour

argue relentlessly with a traffic inspector who failed to understand

Archie's subtle interpretation of the Sunday parking laws.

"Clara, Clara, love "

It was Archie, struggling past her to the front door, partly obscured

by a coffee table.

"We've got the Ick-Balls coming round tonight, and I want to get this

house in some kind of order so mind out the way."

"You wan' help?" asked Clara patiently, though still half in daydream.

“I can lift so meting if-“

“No, no, no, no I’ll manage.”

Clara reached out to take one side of the table. “Let me jus’ -“

Archie battled to push through the narrow frame, trying to hold both

the legs and the table’s large removable glass top.

“It’s man’s work, love.”

52.

“But’ Clara lifted a large armchair with enviable ease and brought it

over to where Archie had collapsed, gasping for breath on the hall

steps. “Sno problem. If you wan’ help: jus’ arks farrit.” She brushed her hand softly across his forehead.

“Yes, yes, yes.” He shook her off in irritation, as if batting a fly.

“I’m quite capable, you know ‘

“I know dat ‘

“It’s man’s work.”

“Yes, yes, I see-I didn’t mean ‘

“Look, Clara, love, just get out of my way and I’ll get on with it, OK?”

Clara watched him roll up his sleeves with some determination, and

tackle the coffee table once more.

“If you really want to be of some help, love, you can start bringing in

some of your clothes. God knows there’s enough of ‘em to sink a bloody

battleship. How we’re going to fit them in what little space we have

I’m sure I don’t know.”

“I say before we can trow some dem out, if you tink it best.”

“Not up to me now, not up to me, is it? I mean, is it? And what about

the coat-stand?”

This was the man: never able to make a decision, never able to state a

position.

“I alreddy say: if ya nah like it, den send da damn ting back. I bought it ‘cos I taut you like it.”

“Well, love,” said Archie, cautious now that she had raised her voice,

‘it was my money it would have been nice at least to ask my opinion.”

“Man! It a coat-stand. It jus’ red. An’ red is red is red. What’s wrong wid red all of a sudden?”

“I’m just trying,” said Archie, lowering his voice to a hoarse, forced

whisper (a favourite voice-weapon in the marital arsenal: Not in front

of the neighbours children ‘to lift the tone in the house a bit. This

is a nice neighbourhood, new life, you know. Look, let’s not argue.

Let’s flip a coin; heads it stays, tails .. .”

True lovers row, then fall the next second back into each other’s arms;

more seasoned lovers will walk up the stairs or into the next room

before they relent and retrace their steps. A relationship on the brink of collapse will find one partner two blocks down the road or two



countries to the east before something tugs, some responsibility,  
some

memory, a pull of a child's hand or a heart string, which induces  
them

to make the long journey back to their other half. On this  
Richter

scale, then, Clara made only the tiniest of rumbles. She turned  
towards the gate, walked two steps only and stopped.

"Heads!" said Archie, seemingly without resentment. "It stays.  
See?

That wasn't too hard."

"I don't wanna argue." She turned round to face him, having  
made a

silent renewed resolution to remember her debt to him. "You  
said the

Iqbals are comin' to dinner. I was just thinkin' . . . if they're  
going

to want me to cook dem some curry I mean, I can cook curry but  
it's my

type of curry."

"For God's sake, they're not those kind of Indians," said Archie  
irritably, offended at the suggestion. "Sam'll have a Sunday  
roast

like the next man. He serves Indian food all the time, he doesn't  
want

to eat it too."

"I was just wondering "

"Well, don't, Clara. Please."

He gave her an affectionate kiss on the forehead, for which she  
bent

downwards a little.

“I’ve known Sam for years, and his wife seems a quiet sort.  
They’re  
not the royal family, you know. They’re not those kind of  
Indians,” he  
repeated, and shook his head, troubled by some problem, some  
knotty  
feeling he could not entirely unravel.  
Samad and Alsana Iqbal, who were not those kind of Indians  
(as, in  
Archie’s mind, Clara was not that kind of black), who were, in  
fact,  
not Indian at all but Bangladeshi, lived four blocks down on  
the wrong side of Willesden High Road. It had taken them a  
year to get  
there, a year of mercilessly hard graft to make the momentous  
move from  
the wrong side of Whitechapel to the wrong side of Willesden.  
A year’s  
worth of Alsana banging away at the old Singer that sat in the  
kitchen,  
sewing together pieces of black plastic for a shop called  
Domination in  
Soho (many were the nights Alsana would hold up a piece of  
clothing she  
had just made, following the pattern she was given, and wonder  
what on  
earth it was). A year’s worth of Samad softly inclining his head  
at  
exactly the correct deferential angle, pencil in his left hand,  
listening to the appalling pronunciation of the British, Spanish,  
American, French, Australian:  
Go Bye Ello Sag, please.  
Chicken Jail Fret See wiv Chips, fan ks

From six in the evening until three in the morning; and then every day was spent asleep, until daylight was as rare as a decent tip. For what is the point, Samad would think, pushing aside two mints and a receipt to find fifteen pence, what is the point of tipping a man the same amount you would throw in a fountain to chase a wish? But before the illegal thought of folding the fifteen pence discreetly in his napkin hand even had a chance to give itself form, Mukhul - Ardashir Mukhul, who ran the Palace and whose wiry frame paced the restaurant, one benevolent eye on the customers, one ever watchful eye on the staff- Mukhul was upon him.

“Saaamaad’ he had a cloying, oleaginous way of speaking ‘did you kiss the necessary backside this evening, cousin?’”

Samad and Ardashir were distant cousins, Samad the elder by six years.

With what joy (pure bliss!) had Ardashir opened the letter last January, to find his older, cleverer, handsomer cousin was finding it hard to get work in England and could he possibly.. .

“Fifteen pence, cousin,” said Samad, lifting his palm.

“Well, every little helps, every little helps,” said Ardashir, his dead-fish lips stretching into a stringy smile. “Into the Piss-Pot with it.”

The Piss-Pot was a black Balti pot that sat on a plinth outside the staff toilets and into which all tips were pooled and then split at the end of the night. For the younger, flashy, good-looking waiters like Shiva, this was a great injustice. Shiva was the only Hindu on the staff- this stood as tribute to his waite ring skills, which had triumphed over religious differences. Shiva could make a four quid tip in an evening if the blubberous white divorcee in the corner was lonely enough and he batted his long lashes at her effectively. He could also make his money out of the polo-necked directors and producers (the Palace sat in the centre of London's theatre land and these were still the days of the Royal Court, of pretty boys and kitchen-sink drama) who flattered the boy, watched his ass wiggle provocatively to the bar and back, and swore that if anyone ever adapted A Passage to India for the stage he could have whichever role tickled his fancy. For Shiva, then, the Piss-Pot system was simply daylight robbery and an insult to his unchallenged waite ring abilities. But for men like Samad, in his late forties, and for the even older, like the white-haired Muhammed

(Ardashir's great-uncle), who was eighty if he was a day, who had deep pathways dug into the sides of his mouth where he had smiled when he was young, for men like this the Piss-Pot could not be complained about. It made more sense to join the collective than pocket fifteen pence and risk being caught (and docked a week's tips). "You're all on my back!" Shiva would snarl, when he had to relinquish five pounds at the end of the night and drop it into the pot. "You all live off my back! Somebody get these losers off my back! That was my river and now it's going to be split sixty-five-fucking-million ways as a hand-out to these losers! What is this: communism?" And the rest would avoid his glare and busy themselves quietly with other things, until one evening, one fifteen pence evening, Samad said, "Shut up, boy," quietly, almost under his breath. "You!" Shiva swung round to where Samad stood, crushing a great tub of lentils for tomorrow's dal. "You're the worst of them! You're the worst fucking waiter I've ever seen! You couldn't get a tip if you mugged the bastards! I hear you trying to talk to the customer about biology this, politics that just serve the food, you idiot you're a waiter, for fuck's sake, you're not Michael Parkinson. "Did I hear you

say Delhi”” Shiva put his apron over his arm and began posturing around the kitchen (he was a pitiful mimic) - “I was there myself, you know, Delhi University, it was most fascinating, yes and I fought in the war, for England, yes yes, yes, charming, charming.”” Round and round the kitchen he went, bending his head and rubbing his hands over and over like Uriah Heep, bowing and genuflecting to the head cook, to the old man arranging great hunks of meat in the walk-in freezer, to the young boy scrubbing the underside of the oven. “Samad, Samad .. .” he said with what seemed infinite pity, then stopped abruptly, pulled the apron off and wrapped it round his waist. “You are such a sad little man.” Muhammed looked up from his pot-scrubbing and shook his head again and again. To no one in particular he said, “These young people what kind of talk? What kind of talk? What happened to respect? What kind of talk is this?” “And you can fuck off too,” said Shiva, brandishing a ladle in his direction, ‘you old fool. You’re not my father.” “Second cousin of your mother’s uncle,” a voice muttered from the back.

“Bollocks,” said Shiva. “Bollocks to that.”

He grabbed the mop and was heading off for the toilets, when he stopped

by Samad and placed the handle inches from Samad’s mouth.

“Kiss it,” he sneered; and then, impersonating Ardashir’s sluggish

drawl, “Who knows, cousin, you might get a rise!”

And that’s what it was like most nights: abuse from Shiva and others; condescension from Ardashir; never seeing Alsana; never seeing

the sun; clutching fifteen pence and then releasing it; wanting desperately to be wearing a sign, a large white placard that said:

I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A  
SCIENTIST, A

SOLDIER, MY WIFE IS CALLED AL SANA WE LIVE IN  
EAST

LONDON

BUT WE WOULD LIKE TO MOVE NORTH. I AM A  
MUSLIM BUT

ALLAH

HAS FORSAKEN ME OR I HAVE FORSAKEN ALLAH, i’m  
NOT

SURE. I

HAVE A FRIEND ARCHIE AND OTHERS. I AM FORTY-  
NINE BUT

WOMEN STILL TURN IN THE STREET. SOMETIMES.

But, no such placard existing, he had instead the urge, the need, to

speak to every man, and, like the Ancient Mariner, explain constantly,

constantly wanting to reassert something, anything. Wasn’t that

important? But then the heart-breaking disappointment to find out that

the inclining of one's head, poisoning of one's pen, these were important, so important it was important to be a good waiter, to listen

when someone said Lamb Dawn Sock and rice. With chips. Thank you.

And fifteen pence clinked on china. Thank you, sir. Thank you so very much.

On the Tuesday after Archie's wedding, Samad had waited till everyone

left, folded his white, flared trousers (made from the same fabric as

the tablecloths) into a perfect square, and then climbed the stairs to

Ardashir's office, for he had something to ask him.

"Cousin!" said Ardashir, with a friendly grimace at the sight of Samad's body curling cautiously round the door. He knew that Samad had

come to inquire about a pay increase, and he wanted

his cousin to feel that he had at least considered the case in all his

friendly judiciousness before he declined.

"Cousin, come in!"

"Good evening, Ardashir Mukhul," said Samad, stepping fully into the room.

"Sit down, sit down," said Ardashir warmly. "No point standing on

ceremony now, is there?"



Samad was glad this was so. He said as much. He took a moment to look with the necessary admiration around the room, with its relentless gold, with its triple-piled carpet, with its furnishings in various shades of yellow and green. One had to admire Ardashir's business sense. He had taken the simple idea of an Indian restaurant (small room, pink tablecloth, loud music, atrocious wallpaper, meals that do not exist in India, sauce carousel) and just made it bigger. He hadn't improved anything; everything was the same old crap, but it was all bigger in a bigger building in the biggest tourist trap in London, Leicester Square. You had to admire it and admire the man, who sat now like a benign locust, his slender in sectile body swamped in a black leather chair, leaning over the desk, all smiles, a parasite disguised as a philanthropist.

"Cousin, what can I do for you?"

Samad took a breath. The matter was this . . .

Ardashir's eyes glazed over a little as Samad explained his situation.

His skinny legs twitched underneath the desk, and in his fingers he manipulated a paper clip until it looked reasonably like an A. A for Ardashir. The matter was . . . what was the matter? The house was the

matter. Samad was moving out of East London (where one couldn't bring up children, indeed, one couldn't, not if one didn't wish them to come to bodily harm, he agreed), from East London with its NF gangs, to North London, north-west, where things were more . . . more . . . liberal.

Was it his turn to speak?

“Cousin . . .” said Ardashir, arranging his face, ‘you must understand . . . I cannot make it my business to buy houses for all my employees, cousin or not cousin . . . I pay a wage, cousin . That is business in this country.’”

Ardashir shrugged as he spoke as if to suggest he deeply disapproved of

“Business in this country’, but there it was. He was forced, his look

said, forced by the English to make an awful lot of money.

“You misunderstand me, Ardashir. I have the deposit for the house, it

is our house now, we have moved in ‘

How on earth has he afforded it, he must work his wife like a bloody

slave, thought Ardashir, pulling out another paper clip from the bottom

drawer.

“I need only a small wage increase to help me finance the move. To

make things a little easier as we settle in. And Alsana, well, she is

pregnant.”

Pregnant. Difficult. The case called for extreme diplomacy.

“Don’t mistake me, Samad, we are both intelligent, frank men and I

think I can speak frankly ... I know you’re not a fucking waiter’ he

whispered the expletive and smiled indulgently after it, as if it were

a naughty, private thing that brought them closer together “I see your

position ... of course I do ... but you must understand mine ... If I

made allowances for every relative I employ I’d be walking around like

bloody Mr. Gandhi. Without a pot to piss in. Spinning my thread by

the light of the moon. An example: at this very moment that wastrel

Fat Elvis brother-in law of mine, Hussein-Ishmael ‘

“The butcher?”

“The butcher, demands that I should raise the price I pay for his stinking meat! “But Ardashir, we are brothers-in-law!” he is saying

to me. And I am saying to him, but Mohammed, this is retail

It was Samad’s turn to glaze over. He thought of his wife, Alsana, who

was not as meek as he had assumed when they married, to whom he must

deliver the bad news; Alsana, who

was prone to moments, even fits yes, fits was not too strong a word of

rage. Cousins, aunts, brothers, thought it a bad sign, they worried if

there wasn't some 'funny mental history' in Alsana's family,  
they  
sympathized with him the way you sympathize with a man who  
has bought  
a  
stolen car with more mileage on it than first thought. In his  
naivety  
Samad had simply assumed a woman so young would be ...  
easy. But  
Alsana was not... no, she was not easy. It was, he supposed, the  
way  
with these young women these days. Archie's bride ... last  
Tuesday he  
had seen something in her eyes that wasn't easy either. It was  
the new  
way with these women.  
Ardashir came to the end of what he felt was his perfectly  
worded  
speech, sat back satisfied, and laid the M for Mukhul he had  
moulded  
next to the A for Ardashir that sat on his lap.  
"Thank you, sir," said Samad. "Thank you so very much."  
That evening there was an awful row. Alsana slung the sewing  
machine,  
with the black studded hot pants she was working on, to the  
floor.  
"Useless! Tell me, Samad Miah, what is the point of moving  
here nice  
house, yes, very nice, very nice but where is the food?"  
"It is a nice area, we have friends here."  
"Who are they?" She slammed her little fist on to the kitchen  
table,

sending the salt and pepper flying, to collide spectacularly with each

other in the air. "I don't know them! You fight in an old, forgotten

war with some Englishman . . . married to a black! Whose friends are

they? These are the people my child will grow up around? Their children half blacky-white? But tell me," she shouted, returning to

her favoured topic, "where is our food?" Theatrically, she threw open

every cupboard in the kitchen. "Where is it? Can we eat china?" Two

plates smashed to the floor. She patted her stomach to indicate her

unborn child and pointed to the pieces. "Hungry?"

Samad, who had an equally melodramatic nature when prompted, yanked

upon the freezer and pulled out a mountain of meat which he piled in

the middle of the room. His mother worked through the night preparing

meat for her family, he said. His mother did not, he said, spend the

household money, as Alsana did, on prepared meals, yoghurts and tinned

spaghetti.

Alsana punched him full square in the stomach.

"Samad Iqbal the traditionalist! Why don't I just squat in the street

over a bucket and wash clothes? Eh? In fact, what about my clothes?

Edible?"

As Samad clutched his winded belly, there in the kitchen she ripped to  
shreds every stitch she had on and added them to the pile of  
frozen  
lamb, spare cuts from the restaurant. She stood naked before  
him for a  
moment, the yet small mound of her pregnancy in full view,  
then put on  
a long, brown coat and left the house.  
But all the same, she reflected, slamming the door behind her, it  
was  
true: it was a nice area; she couldn't deny it as she stormed  
towards  
the high road, avoiding trees where previously, in Whitechapel,  
she  
avoided flung-out mattresses and the homeless. It would be  
good for  
the child, she couldn't deny it. Alsana had a deep-seated belief  
that  
living near green spaces was morally beneficial to the young,  
and there  
to her right was Gladstone Park, a sweeping horizon of green  
named  
after the Liberal Prime Minister (Alsana was from a respected  
old  
Bengal family and had read her English History; but look at her  
now; if  
they could see what depths ...!), and in the Liberal tradition it  
was a  
park without fences, unlike the more affluent Queens Park  
(Victoria's),  
with its pointed metal railings. Willesden was not as pretty as  
Queens

Park, but it was a nice area. No denying it. Not like  
Whitechapel,  
where that madman E-knock someoneoranother gave a speech  
that forced  
them into the basement while kids broke the windows with their  
steel-capped boots. Rivers of blood  
silly-billy nonsense. Now she was pregnant she needed a little  
bit of  
peace and quiet. Though it was the same here in a way: they all  
looked  
at her strangely, this tiny Indian woman stalking the high road in a  
mackintosh, her plentiful hair flying every which way. Mali's  
Kebabs,  
Mr. Cheungs, Raj's, Malkovich Bakeries she read the new,  
unfamiliar  
signs as she passed. She was shrewd. She saw what this was.  
"Liberal? Hosh-kosh nonsense!" No one was more liberal than  
anyone  
else anywhere anyway. It was only that here, in Willesden, there  
was  
just not enough of any one thing to gang up against any other  
thing and  
send it running to the cellars while windows were smashed.  
"Survival is what it is about!" she concluded out loud (she  
spoke to  
her baby; she liked to give it one sensible thought a day),  
making the  
bell above Crazy Shoes tinkle as she opened the door. Her niece  
Neena  
worked there. It was an old-fashioned cobblers. Neena fixed  
heels  
back on to stilettos.

“Alsana, you look like dog shit,” Neena called over in Bengali.

“What

is that horrible coat?”

“It’s none of your business, is what it is,” replied Alsana in English.

“I came to collect my husband’s shoes, not to chitchat with Niece-of-Shame.”

Neena was used to this, and now that Alsana had moved to Willesden

there would only be more of it. It used to come in longer sentences,

i.e.” You have brought nothing but shame ... or My niece, the shameful.. . but now because Alsana no longer had the time or energy

to summon up the necessary shock each time, it had become abridged to

Niece-of-Shame, an all-purpose tag that summed up the general feeling.

“See these soles?” said Neena, moving one of her dyed blonde bangs

from her eye, taking Samad’s shoes off a shelf and handing Alsana the

little blue ticket. “They were so worn through, Auntie Alsi, I had to

reconstruct them from the very base. From the base! What does he do

in them? Run marathons?”

“He works,” replied Alsana tersely. “And prays,” she added, for she liked to show people her respectability, and besides she was really

very traditional, very religious, lacking nothing except the faith.



“And don’t call me Auntie. I am two years older than you.”

Alsana

swept the shoes into a plastic carrier bag and turned to leave.

“I thought that praying was done on people’s knees said Neena, laughing

lightly.

“Both, both, asleep, waking, walking,” snapped Alsana, as she passed

under the tinkly bell once more. “We are never out of sight of the

Creator.”

“How’s the new house, then?” Neena called after her.

But she had gone; Neena shook her head and sighed as she watched her

young aunt disappear down the road like a little brown bullet. Alsana.

She was young and old at the same time, Neena reflected. She acted so

sensible, so straight-down the-line in her long sensible coat, but you

got the feeling . . .

“Oil Miss! There’s shoes back here that need your attention,” came a

voice from the store room.

“Keep your tits on,” said Neena.

At the corner of the road Alsana popped behind the post office and

removed her pinchy sandals in favour of Samad’s shoes. (It was an

oddity about Alsana. She was small but her feet were enormous. You

felt instinctively when looking at her that she had yet more growing to

do.) In seconds she whipped her hair into an efficient bun, and wrapped her coat tighter around her to keep out the wind. Then she set off up past the library and up a long green road she had never walked along before. “Survival is all, little Iqbal,” she said to her bump once more. “Survival.”

Halfway up the road, she crossed the street, intending to turn left and circle round back to the high road. But then, as she approached a large white van open at the back and looked enviously at the furniture that was piled up in it, she recognized the black lady who was leaning over a garden fence, looking dreamily into the air towards the library (half dressed, though! A lurid purple vest, underwear almost), as if her future lay in that direction. Before she could cross over once more to avoid her, Alsana found herself spotted.

“Mrs. Iqbal!” said Clara, waving her over.

“Mrs. Jones.”

Both women were momentarily embarrassed at what they were wearing, but, looking at the other, gained confidence.

“Now, isn’t that strange, Archie?” said Clara, filling in all her consonants. She was already some way to losing her accent and she liked to work on it at every opportunity.

“What? What?” said Archie, who was in the hallway, becoming exasperated with a bookcase.

“It’s just that we were just talking about you you’re coming to dinner

tonight, yes?”

Black people are often friendly, thought Alsana, smiling at Clara, and

adding this fact subconsciously to the short ‘pro’ side of the pro and

con list she had on the black girl. From every minority she disliked,

Alsana liked to single out one specimen for spiritual forgiveness. From

Whitechapel, there had been many such redeemed characters. Mr. Van,

the Chinese chiropodist, Mr. Segal, a Jewish carpenter, Rosie, a Dominican woman who continuously popped round, much to Alsana’s

grievance and delight, in an attempt to convert her into a Seventh-Day

Adventist all these lucky individuals were given Alsana’s golden

reprieve and magically extrapolated from their skins like Indian tigers.

“Yes, Samad mentioned it,” said Alsana, though Samad had not.

Clara beamed. “Good . . . good!”

There was a pause. Neither could think of what to say. They both

looked downwards.

“Those shoes look truly comfortable,” said Clara.

“Yes. Yes. I do a lot of walking, you see. And with this’ She patted

her stomach.

“You’re pregnant?” said Clara surprised. “Pickney, you so small  
me ky

ant even see it.”

Clara blushed the moment after she had spoken; she always  
dropped into

the vernacular when she was excited or pleased about  
something. Alsana

just smiled pleasantly, unsure what she had said.

“I wouldn’t have known,” said Clara, more subdued.

“Dear me,” said Alsana with a forced hilarity. “Don’t our  
husbands

tell each other anything?”

But as soon as she had said it, the weight of the other possibility  
rested on the brains of the two girl-wives. That their husbands  
told

each other everything. That it was they themselves who were  
kept in

the dark.

#### 4 Three Coming

Archie was at work when he heard the news. Clara was two and a half

months up the spout.

“You’re not, love!”

“I am!”

“You’re not!”

“I am! And I arks de doctor what it will look like, half black an’

half white an’ all dat biz ness And ‘im say any ting could happen.

Dere’s even a chance it may be blue-eyed! Kyan you imagine dat?”

Archie couldn’t imagine that. He couldn’t imagine any piece of him

slugging it out in the gene pool with a piece of Clara and winning. But

what a possibility! What a thing that would be! He dashed out of the

office on to the Euston Road for a box of cigars. Twenty minutes later

he swaggered back into Morgan Hero with a huge box of Indian sweets

and

started making his way round the room.

“Noel, have a sticky thing. That one’s good.”

Noel, the office junior, looked inside the oily box with suspicion.

“What’s all this in aid . . . ?”

Archie pounded him on the back. “Going to have a kid, ain’t I? Blue

eyes, would you credit it? I'm celebrating! Thing is, you can get

fourteen types of dal, but you can't get a bloody cigar in the Euston

Road for love nor money. Go on, Noel. How about this one?"

Archie held up a half-white, half-pink one with an unwelcoming odour.

"Em, Mr. Jones, that's very . . . But it's not really my cup of. . ."

Noel made as if to return to his filing. "I'd better get on with. . ."

"Oh, go on, Noel. I'm going to have a kid. Forty-seven and I'm going

to have a little baby. That calls for a bit of a party, don't it? Go on . . . you won't know till you try. Just give it a nibble."

"Just them Pakistani foods aren't always . . . I've got a bit of a funny

. . ."

Noel patted his stomach and looked desperate. Despite being in the

direct mail business, Noel hated to be spoken to directly. He liked

being the intermediary at Morgan Hero He liked putting calls through,

telling one person what another person said, forwarding letters.

"Bloody hell, Noel . . . it's just a sweet. I'm just trying to celebrate, mate. Don't you hippies eat sweets or something?"

Noel's hair was ever so slightly longer than everyone else's, and he

had once bought an incense stick to burn in the coffee room. It was a

small office, there was little to talk about, so these two things made

Noel second only to Janis Joplin, just as Archie was the white Jesse

Owens because he came thirteenth in the Olympics twenty-seven years

ago, Gary from Accounts had a French grandmother and blew cigarette

smoke out of his nose so he was Maurice Chevalier, and Elmott, Archie's

fellow paper folder, was Einstein because he could manage two thirds of

The Times crossword.

Noel looked pained. "Archie . . . Did you get my note from Mr. Hero

about the folds on the . . . ?"

Archie sighed. "On the Mothercare account. Yes, Noel, I've told

Elmott to move the perforation."

Noel looked thankful. "Well, congratulations about the . . . I'll be

getting on with . . ." Noel returned to his desk.

Archie left to try Maureen the receptionist. Maureen had good legs for

a woman her age legs like sausages tightly packed in their skins and

she'd always fancied him a bit.

"Maureen, love. I'm going to be a father!"

"Are you, love? Oh, I am pleased. Girl or "

"Too early to tell as yet. Blue eyes, though!" said Archie, for whom these eyes had passed from rare genetic possibility to solid fact.

“Would you credit it!”

“Did you say blue eyes, Archie, love?” said Maureen,  
speaking slowly

so she might find a way to phrase it. “I’m not being’ funny .  
but

in’t your wife, well, coloured?

Archie shook his head wonderingly. “I know! Her and me  
have a child,

the genes mix up, and blue eyes! Miracle of nature!”

“Oh yes, miracle,” said Maureen tersely, thinking that was a  
polite

word for what it was.

“Have a sweet?”

Maureen looked dubious. She patted her pitted pink thighs  
encased in

their white tights. “Oh, Archie, love, I shouldn’t. Goes straight  
on

the legs and hips, don’t it? An’ neither of us is getting any  
younger,

are we, eh? Are we, eh? None of us can turn back the clock,  
can we,

eh? That Joan Rivers, I wish I knew how she does it!”

Maureen laughed for a long time, her trademark laugh at  
Morgan Hero

shrill and loud, but with her mouth only slightly open, for  
Maureen had

a morbid dread of laughter lines.

She poked one of the sweets with a sceptical, blood-red  
fingernail.

“Indian, are they?”

“Yes, Maureen,” said Archie with a blokeish grin, ‘spicy and  
sweet at



the same time. Bit like you.”

“Oh, Archie, you are funny,” said Maureen sadly, for she had always

fancied Archie a bit but never more than a bit because of this strange

way he had about him, always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans like

he didn’t even notice and now he’d gone and married one and hadn’t even

thought it worth mentioning what colour she was until the office dinner

when she turned up black as anything and Maureen almost choked on her

prawn cocktail.

Maureen stretched over her desk to attend to a ringing telephone. “I

don’t think I will, Archie, love . . .”

“Please yourself. Don’t know what you’re missing, though.”

Maureen smiled weakly and picked up the receiver. “Yes, Mr. Hero,

he’s right here, he’s just found out he’s going to be a daddy . yes,

it’ll have blue eyes, apparently . . . yes, that’s what I said,

something to do with genes, I suppose . . . oh yes, all right . . .

I’ll

tell him, I’ll send him in . . . Oh, thank you, Mr. Hero, you’re very

kind.” Maureen stretched her talons across the receiver and spoke in a

stage-whisper to Archie, “Archibald, love, Mr. Hero wants to see you.

Urgent, he says. You been a naughty boy or som mink

“I should cocoa!” said Archie, heading for the lift.

The door said:

Kelvin Hero Company Director

Morgan Hero Direct Mail Specialists

It was meant to intimidate and Archie responded in kind, rapping the

door too lightly and then too hard and then kind of falling through it

when Kelvin Hero, dressed in moleskin, turned the handle to let him

in.

“Archie,” said Kelvin Hero, revealing a double row of pearly whites

that owed more to expensive dentistry than to regular brushing.

“Archie, Archie, Archie, Archie.”

“Mr. Hero,” said Archie.

“You puzzle me, Archie,” said Mr. Hero.

“Mr. Hero/ said Archie.

“Sit down there, Archie,” said Mr. Hero.

“Right you are, Mr. Hero,” said Archie.

Kelvin wiped a streak of grimy sweat from around his shirt collar,

turned his silver Parker pen over a few times in his hand and took a

series of deep breaths. “Now, this is quite delicate . . . and I have

never considered myself a racist, Archie . . .”

“Mr. Hero?”

Blimey, thought Kelvin, what an eye-to-face ratio. When you want to

say something delicate, you don't want that eye-to-face ratio  
staring

up at you. Big eyes, like a child's or a baby seal's; the  
physiognomy

of innocence looking at Archie Jones is like looking at  
something that

expects to be clubbed round the head any second.

Kelvin tried a softer tack. "Let me put it another way. Usually,  
when

confronted with this type of delicate situation, I would, as you  
know,

confer with you. Because I've always had a lot of time for  
you, Arch.

I respect you. You're not flashy, Archie, you've never been  
flashy,

but you're '

"Sturdy," finished Archie, because he knew this speech.

Kelvin smiled: a big gash across his face that came and went  
with the

sudden violence of a fat man marching through swing doors.

"Right,

yeah, sturdy. People trust you, Archie. I know you're getting  
on a

bit, and the old leg gives you a bit of trouble but when this  
business

changed hands, I kept you on, Arch, because I could see  
straight off:

people trust you. That's why you've stayed in the direct mail  
business

so long. And I'm trusting you, Arch, to take what I've got to  
say in

the right way."

“Mr. Hero?”

Kelvin shrugged. “I could have lied to you, Archie, I could have told

you that we’d made a mistake with the bookings, and there just wasn’t

room for you; I could have fished around in my arse and pulled out a

juicy one but you’re a big boy, Archie. You’d phone the restaurant,

you’re not a baboon, Archie, you’ve got something upstairs, you’d have

put two and two together ‘

“And made four.”

“And made four, exactly, Archie. You would have made four. Do you

understand what I’m saying to you, Archie?” said Mr. Hero.

“No, Mr. Hero,” said Archie.

Kelvin prepared to cut to the chase. “That company dinner last

7i

month it was awkward, Archie, it was unpleasant. And now there’s this

annual do coming up with our sister company from Sunderland, about

thirty of us, nothing fancy, you know, a curry, a lager and a bit of a

boogie ... as I say, it’s not that I’m a racist,

“A racist.. .”

“I’d spit on that Enoch Powell.. . but then again he does have a point, doesn’t he? There comes a point, a saturation point, and people

begin to feel a bit uncomfortable . . . You see, all he was saying

“Who?”

“Powell, Archie, Powell try and keep up- all he was saying is enough is

enough after a certain point, isn't it? I mean, it's like Delhi in Euston every Monday morning. And there's some people around here,

Arch

and I don't include myself here who just feel your attitude is a little

strange.”

“Strange?”

“You see the wives don't like it because, let's face it, she's a sort,

a real beauty incredible legs, Archie, I'd like to congratulate you on

them legs and the men, well, the men don't like it 'cos they don't like

to think they're wanting a bit of the other when they're sitting down

to a company dinner with their lady wives, especially when she's . . .

you know . . . they don't know what to make of that at all.”

“Who?”

“What?”

“Who are we talking about, Mr. Hero?”

“Look, Archie,” said Kelvin, the sweat now flowing freely, distasteful

for a man with his amount of chest hair, ‘take these.’ Kelvin pushed a

large wad of Luncheon Vouchers across the table. “They’re left over

from that raffle you remember, for the Biafrans.”

“Oh no I already won an oven mitt in that, Mr. Hero, there’s no

need’

“Take them, Archie. There’s fifty pounds’ worth of vouchers in there,

redeemable in over five thousand food outlets nationwide. Take them.

Have a few meals on me.”

Archie fingered the vouchers like they were so many fifty pound notes.

Kelvin thought for a moment he saw tears of happiness in his eyes.

“Well, I don’t know what to say. There’s a place I go to, pretty regular like. If they take these I’m made for life. Ta very much.”

Kelvin took a handkerchief to his forehead. “Think nothing of it,

Arch. Please.”

“Mr. Hero, could I.. .” Archie gestured towards the door. “It’s just that I’d like to phone some people, you know, give them the news

about the baby .. . if we’ve finished here.”

Kelvin nodded, relieved. Archie lifted himself out of his seat. He

had just reached for the handle of the door when Kelvin snatched up his

Parker pen once more and said, “Oh, Archie, one more thing.. . that

dinner with the Sunderland team ... I talked to Maureen and I think we

need to cut down on the numbers we put the names in a hat and yours

came out. Still, I don't suppose you'll be missing much, eh? These

things are always a bit of a bore."

"Right you are, Mr. Hero," said Archie, mind elsewhere; praying to God

that O'Connell's was a 'food outlet'; smiling to himself, imagining

Samad's reaction when he copped fifty quids' worth of bloody Luncheon

Vouchers.

Partly because Mrs. Jones becomes pregnant so soon after Mrs. Iqbal

and partly because of a daily proximity (by this point Clara is working

part time as a supervisor for a Kilburn youth group which looks like

the fifteen-man line-up of a ska and roots band six-inch Afros, Adidas

track suits brown ties, Velcro, sun-tinted shades and Alsana attends an

Asian Women's Pre-natal Class in Kilburn High Road round the corner),

the two women begin

to see more of each other. Hesitant in the beginning a few lunch dates

here and there, the occasional coffee what begins as a rear guard

action against their husbands' friendship soon develops. They have

resigned themselves to their husbands' mutual appreciation society and  
the free time this leaves is not altogether unpleasant; there is time  
for picnics and outings, for discussion and personal study; for old  
French movies where Alsana screams and covers her eyes at the  
suggestion of nudity ("Put it away! We are not wanting to see the  
dangly bits!") and Clara gets a glimpse of how the other half  
live: the  
half who live on romance, passion and joie de vivre. The other  
half  
who have sex. The life that might have been hers had she not  
been at  
the top of some stairs one fine day as Archibald Jones waited  
at the  
bottom.  
Then, when their bumps become too large and cinema seats no  
longer  
accommodate them, the women begin to meet up for lunch in  
Kilburn  
Park,  
often with the Niece-of-Shame, the three of them squeezed on  
to a  
generous bench where Alsana presses a thermos of P. G. Tips  
into  
Clara's hand, without milk, with lemon. Unwraps several  
layers of  
cling-film to reveal today's peculiar delight: savoury dough-  
like



balls, crumbly Indian sweets shot through with the colours of the

kaleidoscope, thin pastry with spiced beef inside, salad with onion;

saying to Clara, “Eat up! Stuff yourself silly! It’s in there, wallowing around in your belly, waiting for the menu. Woman, don’t

torture it! You want to starve the bump?” For, despite appearances,

there are six people on that bench (three living, three coming); one

girl for Clara, two boys for Alsana.

Alsana says, “Nobody’s complaining, let’s get that straight. Children

are a blessing, the more the merrier. But I tell you, when I turned my

head and saw that fancy ultra-business thingummybob ...”

“Ultrasound,” corrects Clara, through a mouthful of rice.

“Yes, I almost had the heart attack to finish me off! Two! Feeding

one is enough!”

Clara laughs and says she can imagine Samad’s face when he saw it.

“No, dearie.” Alsana is reproving, tucking her large feet underneath

the folds of her said. “He didn’t see anything. He wasn’t there. I

am not letting him see things like that. A woman has to have the

private things a husband needn’t be involved in body-business, in a

lady’s . . . parts.”

Niece-of-Shame, who is sitting between them, sucks her teeth.

“Bloody hell, Alsi, he must’ve been involved in your parts sometime, or

is this the immaculate bloody conception?”

“So rude,” says Alsana to Clara in a snooty, English way. “Too old to

be so rude and too young to know any better.”

And then Clara and Alsana, with the accidental mirroring that happens

when two people are sharing the same experience, both lay their hands

on their bulges.

Neena, to redeem herself: “Yeah . . . well . . . How are you doing on

names? Any ideas?”

Alsana is decisive. “Meena and Malana, if they are girls. If boys:

Magid and Millat. Ems are good. Ems are strong. Mahatma, Muhammad,

that funny Mr. Morecambe, from Morecambe and Wise letter you can

trust.”

But Clara is more cautious, because naming seems to her a fearful

responsibility, a god-like task for a mere mortal. “If it’s a girl, I

tink I like Irie. It patois. Means every ting OX, cool, peaceful, you

know?”

Alsana is horrified before the sentence is finished: ““O K”?

This is a

name for a child? You might as well call her

“Wouldsirlikeanypoppadomswiththat?” or “Niceweatherweare having”.”

‘ And Archie likes Sarah. Well, dere not much you can argue wid in

Sarah, but dere’s not much to get happy ‘bout either. I suppose if it

was good enough for the wife of Abraham’

“Ibrahim,” Alsana corrects, out of instinct more than Qur’anic pedantry, ‘popping out babies when she was a hundred years old, by the grace of Allah.’”

And then Neena, groaning at the turn the conversation is taking: “Well,

I like Me. It’s funky. It’s different.”

Alsana loves this. “For pity’s sake, what does Archibald know about

fimky. Or different. If I were you, dearie,” she says, patting

Clara’s knee, “I’d choose Sarah and let that be an end to it.

Sometimes you have to let these men have it their way.

Anything for a

little how do you say it in the English? For a little’ she puts her finger over tightly pursed lips, like a guard at the gate ‘shush.’”

But

in response Niece-of-Shame puts on the thick accent, bats her voluminous eyelashes, wraps her college scarf round her head like

purdah. “Oh yes, Auntie, yes, the little submissive Indian woman. You

don’t talk to him, he talks at you. You scream and shout at each

other, but there’s no communication. And in the end he wins anyway

because he does whatever he likes, when he likes. You don't even know

where he is, what he does, what he feels, half the time. It's 1975,

Alsi. You can't conduct relationships like that any more. It's not

like back home. There's got to be communication between men and

women

in the West, they've got to listen to each other, otherwise .. ."

Neena mimes a small mushroom cloud going off in her hand.

"What a load of the cod's wallop," says Alsana sonorously, closing her

eyes, shaking her head, 'it is you who do not listen. By Allah, I will

always give as good as I get. But you presume I care what he does. You

presume I want to know. The truth is, for a marriage to survive you

don't need all this talk, talk, talk; all this "I am this" and "I am really like this" like in the papers, all this revelation especially when your husband is old, when he is wrinkly and falling apart you do

not want to know what is slimy underneath the bed and rattling in the

wardrobe."

Neena frowns, Clara cannot raise serious objection, and the rice is

handed around once more.

"Moreover," says Alsana after a pause, folding her dimpled arms

underneath her breasts, pleased to be holding forth on a

subject close to this formidable bosom, ‘when you are from families

such as ours you should have learnt that silence, what is not said, is

the very best recipe for family life.’”

For all three have been brought up in strict, religious families, houses where God appeared at every meal, infiltrated every childhood

game, and sat in the lotus position under the bedclothes with a torch

to check nothing untoward was occurring.

“So let me get this straight,” says Neena derisively. “You’re saying

that a good dose of repression keeps a marriage healthy.”

And as if someone had pressed a button, Alsana is outraged.

“Repression! Nonsense silly-billy word! I’m just talking about common

sense. What is my husband? What is yours?” she says, pointing to

Clara. “Twenty-five years they live before we are even born. What are

they? What are they capable of? What blood do they have on their

hands? What is sticky and smelly in their private areas? Who knows?”

She throws her hands up, releasing the questions into the unhealthy

Kilburn air, sending a troupe of sparrows up with them.

“What you don’t understand, my Niece-of-Shame, what none of your

generation understands

At which point Neena cannot stop a piece of onion escaping from her

mouth due to the sheer strength of her objection. “My generation? For

fucks sake you’re two years older than me, Alsi.”

But Alsana continues regardless, miming a knife slicing through the

niece-of-shame tongue-of-obscenity, ‘. . . is that not everybody wants

to see into everybody else’s sweaty, secret parts.”

“But Auntie,” begs Neena, raising her voice, because this is what she

really wants to argue about, the largest sticking point between the two

of them, Alsana’s arranged marriage. “How can you bear to live with

somebody you don’t know from Adam?”

In response, an infuriating -wink: Alsana always likes to appear jovial

at the very moment that her interlocutor becomes hot under the collar.

“Because, Miss Smarty-pants, it is by far the easier

option. It was exactly because Eve did not know Adam from Adam that

they got on so A-OK. Let me explain. Yes, I was married to Samad

Iqbal the same evening of the very day I met him. Yes, I didn’t know

him from Adam. But I liked him well enough. We met in the breakfast

room on a steaming Delhi day and he fanned me with The Times. I

thought he had a good face, a sweet voice, and his backside was high

and well formed for a man of his age. Very good. Now, every time I

learn something more about him, I like him less. So you see, we were

better off the way we were.”

Neena stamps her foot in exasperation at the skewed logic.

“Besides, I will never know him well. Getting anything out of my

husband is like trying to squeeze water out when you’re stoned.”

Neena laughs despite herself. “Water out of a stone.”

“Yes, yes. You think I’m so stupid. But I am wise about things like

men. I tell you’ - Alsana prepares to deliver her summation as she has

seen it done many years previously by the young Delhi lawyers with

their slick side partings. Then are the last mystery. God is easy compared with men. Now, enough of the philosophy: samosa?” She peels

the lid off the plastic tub and sits fat, pretty and satisfied on her

conclusion.

“Shame that you’re having them,” says Neena to her aunt, lighting a

fag. “Boys, I mean. Shame that you’re going to have boys.”

“What do you mean?”

This is Clara, who is the recipient of a secret (kept secret from Alsana and Archie) lending library of Neena’s through which she reads,

in a few short months, Greer's Female Eunuch, Jong's Fear of Flying and

The Second Sex, all in a clandestine attempt, on Neena's part, to rid

Clara of her 'false consciousness'.

"I mean, I just think men have caused enough chaos this century.

There's enough fucking men in the world. If I knew I was going to have

a boy' she pauses to prepare her two falsely

conscious friends for this new concept I'd have to seriously consider

abortion."

Alsana screams, claps her hands over one of her own ears and one of

Clara's, and then almost chokes on a piece of aubergine. For some

reason the remark simultaneously strikes Clara as funny; hysterically,

desperately funny; miserably funny; and the Niece-of-Shame sits between

the two, nonplussed, while the two egg-shaped women bend over

themselves, one in laughter, the other in horror and asphyxiation.

"Are you all right, ladies?"

It is Sol Jozefowicz, the old guy who back then took it upon himself to

police the park (though his job as park keeper had long since been

swept away in council cuts), Sol Jozefowicz stands in front of them,



ready as always to be of aid.

“We are all going to burn in hell, Mr. Jozefowicz, if you call that

being all right,” explains Alsana, pulling herself together.

Niece-of-Shame rolls her eyes. “Speak for yourself

But Alsana is faster than any sniper when it comes to firing back. “I

do, I do thankfully Allah has arranged it that way.”

“Good afternoon, Neena, good afternoon, Mrs. Jones,” says Sol,

offering a neat bow to each. “Are you sure you are all right? Mrs.

Jones?”

Clara cannot stop the tears from squeezing out of the corners of her

eyes. She cannot work out, at this moment, whether it is crying or

laughing.

“I’m fine . . . fine, sorry to have worried you, Mr. Jozefowicz . . . really, I’m fine.”

“I do not see what’s so very funny-funny,” mutters Alsana. The murder

of innocents is this funny?”

“Not in my experience, Mrs. Iqbal, no,” says Sol Jozefowicz, in the

collected manner in which he said everything, passing his handkerchief

to Clara. It strikes all three women the way history will, embarrassingly, without warning, like a blush what the ex-park keeper’s

experience might have been. They fall silent.

“Well, as long as you ladies are fine, I’ll be getting on,” says Sol,  
motioning that Clara can keep the handkerchief and replacing the hat he  
had removed in the old fashion. He bows his neat little bow  
once more,  
and sets off slowly, anti-clockwise round the park.  
Once Sol is out of earshot: “OK, Auntie Alsi, I apologize, I  
apologize  
.. . For fuck’s sake, what more do you want?”  
“Oh, every-bloody-thing,” says Alsana, her voice losing the  
fight,  
becoming vulnerable. “The whole bloody universe made clear  
in a little  
nutshell. I cannot understand a thing any more, and I am just  
beginning. You understand?”  
She sighs, not waiting for an answer, not looking at Neena, but  
across  
the way at the hunched, disappearing figure of Sol winding in  
and out  
of the yew trees. “You may be right about Samad .. . about  
many  
things. Maybe there are no good men, not even the two I might  
have in  
this belly .. . and maybe I do not talk enough with mine,  
maybe I have  
married a stranger. You might see the truth better than I. What  
do I  
know .. . barefoot country girl.. . never went to the  
universities.”  
“Oh, Alsi,” Neena is saying, weaving in and out of Alsana’s  
words like

tapestry; feeling bad. “You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“But I cannot be worrying-worrying all the time about the truth. I

have to worry about the truth that can be lived with. And that is the

difference between losing your marbles drinking the salty sea, or

swallowing the stuff from the streams. My Niece-of Shame believes in

the talking cure, eh?” says Alsana, with something of a grin.

“Talk,

talk, talk and it will be better. Be honest, slice open your heart and

spread the red stuff around. But the past is made of more than words,

dearie. We married old men, you see? These bumps’ - Alsana pats them

both ‘they will always have daddy-long-legs for fathers. One leg in

the present, one in the past. No talking will change this. Their roots will always be tangled. And roots get dug up. Just look in my

garden birds at the coriander every bloody day . . .”

Just as he reaches the far gate, Sol Jozefowicz turns round to wave,

and three women wave back. Clara feels a little theatrical, flying his

cream handkerchief above her head. Like she is seeing someone off for

a train journey crossing the border of two countries.

“How did they meet?” asks Neena, trying to lift the cloud that has

somehow descended on their picnic. “I mean Mr. Jones and Samad

Miah.”

Alsana throws her head back, a dismissive gesture. “Oh, in the war.

Off killing some poor bastards who didn’t deserve it, no doubt. And

what did they get for their trouble? A broken hand for Samad Miah and

for the other one a funny leg. Some use, some use, all this.”

“Archie’s right leg,” says Clara quietly, pointing to a place in her

own thigh. “A piece of metal, I tink. But he don’ really tell me nuttin’.”

“Oh, who cares!” Alsana bursts out. “I’d trust Vishnu the many handed

pick-pocket before I believed a word those men say.”

But Clara holds dear the image of the young soldier Archie, particularly when the old, flabby Direct Mail Archie is on top of her.

“Oh, come now . . . we don’ know what’

Alsana spits quite frankly on the grass. “Shitty lies! If they are heroes, where are their hero things? Where are the hero bits and bobs?

Heroes they have things. They have hero stuff. You can spot them ten

miles away. I’ve never seen a medal . . . and not so much as a photograph.” Alsana makes an unpleasant noise at the back of her

throat, her signal for disbelief. “So look at it no, dearie, it must

be done look at it close up. Look at what is left. Samad has one hand; says he wants to find God but the fact is God's given him the slip; and he has been in that curry house for two years already, serving up stringy goat to the whiteys who don't know any better, and Archibald well, look at the thing close up .. .”

Alsana stops to check with Clara if she could speak her mind young girl looking at an old man close up; finishing Alsana's sentence

with the beginning of a smile spreading across her face, ‘... folds

paper for a living, dear Jesus.”

5 The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal

Apropos it's all very well, this instruction of Alsana's to look at the

thing close up; to look at it dead-straight between the eyes; an unflinching and honest stare, a meticulous inspection that would go

beyond the heart of the matter to its marrow, beyond the marrow to the

root but the question is how far back do you want? How far will do?

The old American question: what do you want blood? Most probably

more

than blood is required: whispered asides; lost conversations; medals

and photographs; lists and certificates, yellowing paper bearing the

faint imprint of brown dates. Back, back, back. Well, all right,  
then. Back to Archie spit-clean, pink-faced and polished,  
looking just

old enough at seventeen to fool the men from the medical  
board with

their pencils and their measuring tape. Back to Samad, two  
years older

and the warm colour of baked bread. Back to the day when  
they were

first assigned to each other, Samad Miah Iqbal (row 2, Over  
here now,

soldier!) and Alfred Archibald Jones (Move it, move it, move  
it), the

day Archie involuntarily forgot that most fundamental  
principle of

English manners. He stared. They were standing side by side  
on a

stretch of black dirt-track Russian ground, dressed identically  
in

little triangular caps perched on their heads like paper sailing-  
boats,

wearing the same itchy standard uniform, their ice-pinched  
toes resting

in the same black boots scattered with the same dust. But  
Archie

couldn't help but stare. And Samad put up with it, waited and  
waited

for it to pass, until after a week of being cramped in their tank,  
hot

and suffocated by the airless machine and subjected to  
Archie's

relentless gaze, he had putted-up-with as much as his hot-head  
ever

could put up with anything.

“You what?” said Archie, flustered, for he was not one to have private

conversations on army time. “Nobody, I mean, nothing I mean, well,

what do you mean?”

They both spoke under their breath, for the conversation was not

private in the other sense, there being two other privates and a captain in their five-man Churchill rolling through Athens on its way

to Thessaloniki. It was in April 1945. Archie Jones was the driver of

the tank, Samad was the wireless operator, Roy Mackintosh was the

co-driver, Will Johnson was crunched on a bin as the gunner, and Thomas

Dickinson-Smith was sitting on the slightly elevated chair, which, even

though it squashed his head against the ceiling, his newly granted

captaincy would not permit his pride to relinquish. None of them had

seen anyone else but each other for three weeks.

“I mean merely that it is likely we have another two years stuck in

this thing.”

A voice crackled through the wireless, and Samad, not wishing to be

seen neglecting his duties, answered it speedily and efficiently.

“And?” asked Archie, after Samad had given their coordinates.

“And there is only so much of that eyeballing that a man can

countenance. Is it that you are doing some research into wireless

operators or are you just in a passion over my arse?"

Their captain, Dickinson-Smith, who was in a passion over Samad's arse

(but not only that; also his mind; also two slender muscular arms that

could only make sense wrapped around a lover; also those luscious light

green brown eyes) silenced the conversation immediately.

"Tck-Ball! Jones! Get on with it. Do you see anyone else here chewing the fat?"

"I was just making an objection, sir. It is hard, sir, for a man to concentrate on his Foxtrot F's and his Zebra Z's and then his assume such eyes belonged to a man filled with "

"Shut it, Sultan, you poof said Roy, who hated Samad and his ponceyradiooperator-ways.

"Mackintosh," said Dickinson-Smith, "come now, let's not stop the

Sultan. Continue, Sultan."

To avoid the possible suggestion that he was partial to Samad, Captain

Dickinson-Smith made a practice of picking on him and encouraging his

hateful Sultan nickname, but he never did it in the right way; it was

always too soft, too similar to Samad's own luxurious language and only

resulted in Roy and the other eighty Roys under his direct command



hating Dickinson-Smith, ridiculing him, openly displaying their

disrespect; by April 1945 they were utterly filled with contempt for

him and sickened by his poncey-commander-queer-boy-ways. Archie,

new

to the First Assault Regiment R. E.” was just learning this.

“I just told him to shut it, and he’ll shut it if he knows what’s good

for him, the Indian Sultan bastard. No disrespect to you, sir, ‘course,” added Roy, as a polite gesture.

Dickinson-Smith knew in other regiments, in other tanks, it simply was

not the case that people spoke back to their superiors or even spoke at

all. Even Roy’s Polite Gesture was a sign of Dickinson-Smith’s

failure. In those other tanks, in the Shermans, Churchills and Matildas dotted over the waste of Europe like resilient cockroaches,

there was no question of respect or disrespect. Only Obey, Disobey,

Punish.

“Sultan . . . Sultan.. .” Samad mused. “Do you know, I wouldn’t mind

the epithet, Mr. Mackintosh, if it were at least accurate. It’s not historically accurate, you know. It is not, even geographically speaking, accurate. I am sure I have explained to you that I am from

Bengal. The word “Sultan” refers to certain men of the Arab lands many

hundreds of miles west of Bengal. To call me Sultan is about as

accurate, in terms of the mileage,

you understand, as if I referred to you as a Jerry-Hun fat bastard.”

“I called you Sultan and I’m calling you it again, all right?”

“Oh, Mr. Mackintosh. Is it so complex, is it so impossible, that you

and I, stuck in this British machine, could find it in ourselves to

fight together as British subjects?”

Will Johnson, who was a bit simple, took off his cap as he always did

when someone said “British”.

“What’s the poof on about?” asked Mackintosh, adjusting his beer-gut.

“Nothing,” said Samad. “I’m afraid I was not “on” about anything; I

was just talking, talking, just trying the shooting of the breeze as

they say, and trying to get Sapper Jones here to stop his staring business, his goggly eyes, just this and only this . . . and I have failed on both counts, it seems.”

He seemed genuinely wounded, and Archie felt the sudden un soldier-like

desire to remove pain. But it was not the place and not the time.

“All right. Enough, all of you. Jones, check the map,” said Dickinson-Smith.

Archie checked the map.

Their journey was a long tiresome one, rarely punctuated by any action.

Archie's tank was a bridge-builder, one of the specialist divisions not

tied to English county allegiances or to a type of weaponry, but

providing service across the army and from country to country, recovering damaged equipment, laying bridges, creating passages for

battle, creating routes where routes had been destroyed. Their job was

not so much to fight the war as to make sure it ran smoothly.

By the

time Archie joined the conflict, it was clear that the cruel, bloody

decisions would be made by air, not in the 30-centimetre difference

between the width of a German armour piercing shell and an English one.

The real war, the one where cities were brought to their knees, the war

with the deathly calculations of size, detonation,

The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal

population, went on many miles above Archie's head.

Meanwhile, on the

ground, their heavy, armour-plated scout-tank had a simpler task: to

avoid the civil war in the mountains a war within a war between the

EARN and the EL AS; to pick their way through the glazed eyes of dead

statistics and the 'wasted youth'; to make sure the roads of

communication stretching from one end of hell to the other  
were fully  
communicable.

“The bombed ammunition factory is twenty miles southwest,  
sir. We are  
to collect what we can, sir. Private Ick-Ball has passed to me at  
16.47 hours a radio message that informs me that the area, as  
far as  
can be seen from the air, sir, is unoccupied, sir,” said Archie.  
“This is not war,” Samad had said quietly.

Two weeks later, as Archie checked their route to Sofia, to no  
one in  
particular Samad said, “I should not be here.”

As usual he was ignored; most fiercely and resolutely by  
Archie, who  
wanted somehow to listen.

“I mean, I am educated. I am trained. I should be soaring with  
the

Royal Airborne Force, shelling from on high! I am an officer!  
Not

some mullah, some sepoy, wearing out my chap pals in hard  
service. My

great-grandfather Mangal Pande’ he looked around for the  
recognition

the name deserved but, being met only with blank pancake  
English faces,

he continued ‘was the great hero of the Indian Mutiny!’”

Silence.

“Of 1857! It was he who shot the first hateful pig fat-smearred  
bullet

and sent it spinning off into oblivion!”

A longer, denser silence.

“If it wasn’t for this buggery hand’ - Samad, inwardly cursing the

English goldfish-memory for history, lifted five dead, tightly curled

fingers from their usual resting place on his chest ‘this shitty hand

that the useless Indian army gave me for my troubles, I would have

matched his achievements. And why am I crippled? Because the Indian

army knows more about the kissing of arses

than it does about the heat and sweat of battle! Never go to India,

Sapper Jones, my dear friend, it is a place for fools and worse than

fools. Fools, Hindus, Sikhs and Punjabis. And now there is all this

murmuring about independence give Bengal independence, Archie, is what

I say leave India in bed with the British, if that’s what she likes.”

His arm crashed to his side with the dead weight and rested itself like

an old man after an angry fit. Samad always addressed Archie as if

they were in league together against the rest of the tank. No matter

how much Archie shunned him, those four days of eyeballing had created

a kind of silk-thread bond between the two men that Samad tugged

whenever he got the opportunity.

“You see, Jones,” said Samad, “the real mistake the viceroy made was to  
give the Sikhs any position of power, you see? Just because they have  
some limited success with the kaffir in Africa, he says Yes, Mr. Man,  
with your sweaty fat face and your silly fake English moustache and  
your pagri balanced like a large shit on the top of your head, you can  
be an officer, we will Indianize the army; go, go and fight in Italy,  
Rissaldar Major Pugri, Daffadar Pugri, with my grand old English  
troops! Mistake! And then they take me, hero of the 9th North Bengal  
Mounted Rifles, hero of the Bengal flying corps, and say, “Samad Miah  
Iqbal, Samad, we are going to confer on you a great honour. You will  
fight in mainland Europe not starve and drink your own piss in Egypt or  
Malaya, no you will fight the Hun where you find him.” On his very  
doorstep, Sapper Jones, on his very doorstep. So! I went. Italy, I  
thought, well, this is where I will show the English army that the  
Muslim men of Bengal can fight like any Sikh. Better! Stronger! And  
are the best educated and are those with the good blood, we who are  
truly of Officer Material.”

“Indian officers? That’ll be the bloody day,” said Roy.

“On my first day there,” continued Samad, “I destroyed a Nazi hide-out

from the air. Like a swooping eagle.”

“Bollocks,” said Roy.

“On my second day, I shot from the air the enemy as he approached the

Gothic Line, breaking the Argenta Gap and pushing the Allies through to

the Po Valley. Lord Mounthatten himself was to have congratulated me

himself in his own person. He would have shaken this hand. But this

was all prevented. Do you know what occurred on my third day, Sapper

Jones? Do you know how I was crippled? A young man in his prime?”

“No,” said Archie quietly.

“A bastard Sikh, Sapper Jones, a bastard fool. As we stood in a trench, his gun went off and shot me through the wrist. But I wouldn’t

have it amputated. Every bit of my body comes from Allah. Every bit

will return to him.”

So Samad had ended up in the unfeted bridge-laying division of His

Majesty’s Army with the rest of the losers; with men like Archie, with

men like Dickinson-Smith (whose government file included the phrase

“Risk: Homosexual’), with frontal lobotomy cases like Mackintosh and

Johnson. The rejects of war. As Roy affectionately called it:  
the

Buggered Battalion. Much of the problem with the outfit lay  
with the

captain of the First Assault Regiment: Dickinson-Smith was  
no soldier.

And certainly no commander, though commanding was in his  
genes.

Against

his will he had been dragged out of his father's college, shaken  
free

of his father's gown, and made to Fight A War, as his father  
had. And

his father before him, and his father before him, ad infinitum.  
Young

Thomas had resigned himself to his fate and was engaged in a  
concerted

and prolonged effort (four years now) to get his name on the  
ever

extending list of Dickinson-Smiths carved on a long slab of  
death-stone

in the village of Little Marlow, to be buried on top of them all  
in the

family's sardine-can tomb that proudly dominated the historic  
churtyard.

Killed by the Hun, the Wogs, the Chinks, the Kaffirs, the  
Frogs, the

Scots, the Spies, the Zulus, the Indians (South, East and Red),  
and

accidentally mistaken for a darting okapi by a

Swede on a big-game hunt in Nairobi, traditionally the  
Dickinson Smiths



were insatiable in their desire to see Dickinson-Smith blood spilled on foreign soil. And on the occasions when there wasn't a war the Dickinson-Smiths busied themselves with the Irish Situation, a kind of Dickinson-Smith holiday resort of death, which had been going since 1600 and showed no sign of letting up. But dying's no easy trick. And though the chance to hurl themselves in front of any sort of lethal weaponry had held a magnetic attraction for the family throughout the ages, this Dickinson-Smith couldn't seem to manage it. Poor Thomas had a different kind of lust for exotic ground. He wanted to know it, to nurture it, to learn from it, to love it. He was a simple non-starter at the war game.

The long story of how Samad went from the pinnacle of military achievement in the Bengal corps to the Buggered Battalion was told and retold to Archie, in different versions and with elaborations upon it, once a day for another two weeks, whether he listened or not. Tedious as it was, it was a highlight next to the other tales of failure that filled those long nights, and kept the men of the Buggered Battalion in their preferred state of de motivation and despair. Amongst the

well-worn canon was the Tragic Death of Roy's Fiancee, a  
hairdresser  
who slipped on a set of rollers and broke her neck on the sink;  
Archie's Failure to Go to Grammar School because his mother  
couldn't  
afford to buy the uniform; Dickinson-Smith's many murdered  
relatives;  
as for Will Johnson, he did not speak in the day but  
whimpered as he  
slept, and his face spoke eloquently of more miserable  
misereries than  
anyone dare inquire into. The Bugged Battalion continued  
like this  
for some time, a travelling circus of discontents roaming  
aimlessly  
through Eastern Europe; freaks and fools with no audience but  
each  
other. Who performed and stared in turns. Until finally the  
tank  
rolled into a day that History has not remembered. That  
Memory has  
made no effort to retain. A  
sudden stone submerged. False teeth floating silently to the  
bottom of  
a glass. 6 May 1945.  
At about 18.00 hours on the 6th of May 1945 something in the  
tank blew  
up. It wasn't a bomb noise but an engineering disaster noise,  
and the  
tank slowly ground to a halt. They were in a tiny Bulgarian  
village  
bordering Greece and Turkey, which the war had got bored  
with and left,

returning the people to almost normal routine.

“Right,” said Roy, having had a look at the problem. “The engine’s

buggered and one of the tracks has broken. We’re gonna have to radio

for help, and then sit tight till it arrives. Nothing we can do.”

“We’re going to make no effort at all to repair it?” asked Samad.

“No,” said Dickinson-Smith. “Private Mackintosh is right. There’s no

way we could deal with this kind of damage with the equipment we have

at hand. We’ll just have to wait here until help arrives.”

“How long will this be?”

“A day,” piped up Johnson. “We’re way off from the rest.”

“Are we required, Captain Smith, to remain in the vehicle for these

twenty-four hours?” asked Samad, who despaired of Roy’s personal

hygiene and was loath to spend a stationary, sultry evening with him.

“Bloody right we are what d’ya think this is, a day off?” growled

Roy.

“No, no ... I don’t see why you shouldn’t wander a bit there’s no point

in us all being holed up here. You and Jones go, report back, and then

Privates Mackintosh, Johnson and I will go when you come back.”

So Samad and Archie went into the village and spent three hours

drinking Sambucca and listening to the cafe owner tell of the miniature

invasion of two Nazis who turned up in the town,

9i

ate all his supplies, had sex with two loose village girls and shot a

man in the head for failing to give them directions to the next town

swiftly enough.

“In everything they were impatient,” said the old man, shaking his

head. Samad settled the bill.

Walking back, Archie said, “Cor, they don’t need many of’em to conquer

and pillage,” in an attempt to make conversation.

“One strong man and one weak is a colony, Sapper Jones,” said Samad.

When Archie and Samad reached the tank, they found Privates Mackintosh

and Johnson and Captain Thomas Dickinson-Smith dead.

Johnson

strangled

with cheese wire, Roy shot in the back. Roy’s jaw had been forced

open, his silver fillings removed; a pair of pliers now sat in his mouth like an iron tongue. It appeared that Thomas Dickinson-Smith

had, as his attacker moved towards him, turned from his allotted fate

and shot himself in the face. The only Dickinson-Smith to die by

English hands.

While Archie and Samad assessed this situation as best they could,  
Colonel-General Jodl sat in a small red schoolhouse in Reims and shook  
his fountain pen. Once. Twice. Then led the ink a solemn dance along  
the dotted line and wrote history in his name. The end of war in  
Europe. As the paper was whisked away by a man at his shoulder, Jodl  
hung his head, struck by the full realization of the deed. But it  
would be a full two weeks before either Archie or Samad were to hear  
about it.

These were strange times, strange enough for an Iqbal and a Jones to  
strike up a friendship. That day, while the rest of Europe celebrated,  
Samad and Archie stood on a Bulgarian roadside, Samad clutching a  
handful of wires, chip board and metal casing in his good fist.  
“This radio is stripped to buggery,” said Samad. “We’ll need to  
begin from the beginning. This is a very bad business, Jones. Very  
bad. We have lost our means of communication, transport and defence.  
Worst: we have lost our command. A man of war without a commander is  
a  
very bad business indeed.”

Archie turned from Samad and threw up violently in a bush.  
Private

Mackintosh, for all his big talk, had shat himself at St. Peter's Gate, and the smell had forced itself into Archie's lungs and dragged

up his nerves, his fear and his breakfast.

As far as fixing the radio went, Samad knew how, he knew the theory,

but Archie had the hands, and a certain knack when it came to wires and

nails and glue. And it was a funny kind of struggle between knowledge

and practical ability which went on between them as they pieced

together the tiny metal strips that might save them both.

"Pass me the three-ohm resistor, will you?"

Archie went very red, unsure which item Samad was referring to. His

hand wavered across the box of wires and bits and bobs. Samad

discreetly coughed as Archie's little finger strayed towards the correct item. It was awkward, an Indian telling an Englishman what to

do but somehow the quietness of it, the manliness of it, got them over

it. It was during this time that Archie learnt the true power of do-it-yourself, how it uses a hammer and nails to replace nouns and

adjectives, how it allows men to communicate. A lesson he kept with

him all his life.

"Good man," said Samad, as Archie passed him the electrode, but then,

finding one hand not enough to manipulate the wires or to pin them to

the radio board, he passed the item back to Archie and signalled where

it was to be put.

“We’ll get this done in no time,” said Archie cheerfully.

“Bubblegum! Please, mister!”

By the fourth day, a gang of village children had begun to gather round

the tank, attracted by the grisly murders, Samad’s green-eyed glamour,

and Archie’s American bubblegum.

“Mr. Soldier,” said one chestnut-hued sparrow-weight boy in careful

English, ‘bubblegum please thank you

Archie reached into his pocket and pulled out five thin pink strips.

The boy distributed them snootily amongst his friends. They began

chewing wildly, eyes bursting from their heads with the effort. Then,

as the flavour subsided, they stood in silent, awed contemplation of

their benefactor. After a few minutes the same scrawny boy was sent up

as the People’s Representative once more.

“Mr. Soldier.” He held out his hand. “Bubblegum please thank you

“No more,” said Archie, going through an elaborate sign language.

“I’ve got no more.”

“Please, thank you Please?” repeated the boy urgently.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” snapped Samad. “We have to fix the radio and get

this thing moving. Let’s get on with it, OK?”

“Bubblegum, mister, Mr. Soldier, bubblegum.” It became a chant,

almost; the children mixing up the few words they had learnt, placing

them in any order.

“Please?” The boy stretched out his arm in such a strenuous manner

that it pushed him on to the very tips of his toes.

Suddenly he opened his palm, and then smiled coquettishly, preparing to

bargain. There in his open fist four green notes were screwed into a

bundle like a handful of grass.

“Dollars, mister!”

“Where did you get this?” asked Samad, making a snatch for it. The

boy seized back his hand. He moved constantly from one foot to another

the impish dance that children learn from war. The simplest version of

being on your guard.

“First bubblegum, mister.”

“Tell me where you got this. I warn you not to play the fool with

me.”

Samad made a grab for the boy and caught him by the arm of his shirt.

He tried desperately to wriggle free. The boy’s friends



began to slink off, deserting their quickly sinking champion.

“Did you kill a man for this?”

A vein in Samad’s forehead was fighting passionately to escape his

skin. He wished to defend a country that wasn’t his and revenge the

killing of men who would not have acknowledged him in a civilian

street. Archie was amazed. It was his country; in his small, cold-blooded, average way he was one of the many essential vertebrae in

its backbone, yet he could feel nothing comparable for it.

“No, mister, no, no. From him. Him.”

He stretched his free arm and pointed to a large derelict house that

sat like a fat brooding hen on the horizon.

“Did someone in that house kill our men?” barked Samad.

“What you say, mister?” squeaked the boy.

“Who is there?”

“He is doctor. He is there. But sick. Can’t move. Dr. Sick.”

A few remaining children excitedly confirmed the name. Dr. Sick,

mister, Dr. Sick.

“What’s wrong with him?”

The boy, now enjoying the attention, theatrically mimed a man crying.

“English? Like us? German? French? Bulgarian? Greek?”  
Samad

released the boy, tired from the misplaced energy.

“He no one. He Dr. Sick, only,” said the boy dismissively.

“Bubblegum?”

A few days later and still no help had arrived. The strain of having to be continually at war in such a pleasant village began to pull at

Archie and Samad, and bit by bit they relaxed more and more into a kind

of civilian life. Every evening they ate dinner in the old man Gozan’s

kitchen-cafe. Watery soup cost five cigarettes each. Any kind of fish

cost a low-ranking bronze medal. As Archie was now wearing one of

Dickinson-Smith’s uniforms, his own having fallen apart, he had a few

of the dead man’s medals to

spare and with them purchased other niceties and necessities: coffee,

soap, chocolate. For some pork Archie handed over a fag-card of

Dorothy Lamour that had been pressed against his arse in his back

pocket ever since he joined up.

“Go on, Sam we’ll use them as tokens, like food stamps; we can buy them

back when we have the means, if you like.”

“I’m a Muslim,” said Samad, pushing a plate of pork away.

“And my Rita

Hayworth leaves me only with my own soul.”

“Why don’t you eat it?” said Archie, guzzling his two chops down like

a madman. “Strange business, if you ask me.”

“I don’t eat it for the same reason you as an Englishman will never

truly satisfy a woman.”

“Why’s that?” said Archie, pausing from his feast.

“It’s in our cultures, my friend.” He thought for a minute.

“Maybe

deeper. Maybe in our bones.”

After dinner, they would make a pretence of scouring the village for

the killers, rushing through the town, searching the same three disreputable bars and looking in the back bedrooms of pretty women’s

houses, but after a time this too was abandoned and they sat instead

smoking cheap cigars outside the tank, enjoying the lingering crimson

sunsets and chatting about their previous incarnations as newspaper boy

(Archie) and biology student (Samad). They knocked around ideas that

Archie did not entirely understand, and Samad offered secrets into the

cool night that he had never spoken out loud. Long, comfortable

silences passed between them like those between women who have known

each other for years. They looked out on to stars that lit up unknown

country, but neither man clung particularly to home. In short, it was

precisely the kind of friendship an Englishman makes on holiday, that

he can make only on holiday. A friendship that crosses class and

colour, a friendship that takes as its basis physical proximity and

survives because the Englishman assumes the physical proximity will not

continue.

The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah  
la bal

A week and a half since the radio had been repaired and there was still

no reply to the aid signals they sent bouncing along the airwaves in

search of ears to hear them. (By now, the village knew the war was

over, but they felt disinclined to reveal the fact to their two

visitors, whose daily bartering had proved such a boost to the local

economy.) In the stretches of empty time Archie would lever up sections

of the wheel track with an iron pole, while Samad investigated the

problem. Across continents, both men's families presumed them dead.

"Is there a woman that you have back in Brighton City?" asked Samad,

anchoring his head between the lion jaws of track and tank.

Archie was not a good-looking boy. He was dashing if you took a photo

and put your thumb over his nose and mouth, but otherwise he was quite

unremarkable. Girls would be attracted to his large, sad Sinatra blue

eyes, but then be put off by the Bing Crosby ears and the nose that

ended in a natural onion-bulb swelling like W. C. Fields's.

"A few," he said nonchalantly. "You know, here and there. You?"

"A young lady has already been picked out for me. A Miss Begum

daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Begum. The "in-laws", as you say.

Dear

God, those two are so far up the rectums of the establishment in Bengal

that even the Lord Governor sits snivelling waiting for his mullah to

come in carrying a dinner invitation from them!"

Samad laughed loudly and waited for company, but Archie, not

understanding a word, stayed poker-faced as usual.

"Oh, they are the best people," continued Samad, only slightly dispirited. "The very best people. Extremely good blood . . . and as

an added bonus, there is a propensity amongst their women traditionally, throughout the ages, you understand for really enormous

melons."

Samad performed the necessary mime, and then returned his attention to realigning each tooth of track with its appropriate groove.

"And?" asked Archie.

"And what?"

"Are they . . . ?" Archie repeated the mime, but this time with the

kind of anatomical exaggeration that leaves air-traced women  
unable to

stand upright.

“Oh, but I have still some time to wait,” he said, smiling  
wistfully.

“Unfortunately, the Begum family do not yet have a female  
child of my  
generation.”

“You mean your wife’s not bloody born yet?”

“What of it?” asked Samad, pulling a cigarette from Archie’s  
top

pocket. He scratched a match along the side of the tank and lit  
it.

Archie wiped the sweat off his face with a greasy hand.

“Where I come from,” said Archie, ‘a bloke likes to get to  
know a girl

before he marries her.”

“Where you come from it is customary to boil vegetables until  
they fall

apart. This does not mean,” said Samad tersely, ‘that it is a  
good

idea.”

Their final evening in the village was absolutely dark, silent.  
The

muggy air made it unpleasant to smoke, so Archie and Samad  
tapped their

fingers on the cold stone steps of a church, for lack of other  
hand-employment. For a moment, in the twilight, Archie  
forgot the war

that had actually ceased to exist anyway. A past tense, future  
perfect

kind of night.

It was while they were still innocent of peace, during this last night

of ignorance, that Samad decided to cement his friendship with Archie.

Often this is done by passing on a singular piece of information: some

sexual peccadillo, some emotional secret or obscure hidden passion that

the reticence of new acquaintance has prevented being spoken.

But for

Samad, nothing was closer or meant more to him than his blood. It was

natural, then, as they sat on holy ground, that he should speak of what

was holy

to him. And there was no stronger evocation of the blood that ran

through him, and the ground which that blood had stained over the

centuries, than the story of his great-grandfather. So Samad told

Archie the much neglected, loo-year-old, mildewed yarn of Mangal

Pande.

“So, he was your grandfather?” said Archie, after the tale had been

told, the moon had passed behind clouds, and he had been suitably

impressed. “Your real, blood grandfather?”

“Great-grandfather.”

“Well, that is something. Do you know: I remember it from school -I

do- History of the Colonies, Mr. Juggs. Bald, bug-eyed, nasty old

duffer Mr. Juggs, I mean, not your grandfather. Got the message

through, though, even if it took a ruler to the back of your hand.. .

You know, you still hear people in the regiments calling each other

Pandies, you know, if the bloke's a bit of a rebel... I never thought

where it came from .. . Pande was the rebel, didn't like the English,

shot the first bullet of the Mutiny. I remember it now, clear as a

bell. And that was your grandfather!"

"Great-grandfather."

"Well, well. That's something, isn't it?" said Archie, placing his

hands behind his head and lying back to look at the stars. "To have a

bit of history in your blood like that. Motivates you, I'd imagine.

I'm a Jones, you see. "Slike a "Smith". We're nobody . My father

used to say: "We're the chaff, boy, we're the chaff." Not that I've

ever been much bothered, mind. Proud all the same, you know. Good

honest English stock. But in your family you had a hero!"

Samad puffed up with pride. "Yes, Archibald, that is exactly the word.

Naturally, you will get these petty English academics trying to



discredit him, because they cannot bear to give an Indian his due. But

he was a hero and every act I have undertaken in this war has been in

the shadow of his example.”

That’s true, you know,” said Archie thoughtfully. “They don’t speak

well about Indians back home; they certainly wouldn’t like

it if you said an Indian was a hero . . . everybody would look at you a

bit funny.”

Suddenly Samad grabbed his hand. It was hot, almost fevered, Archie

thought. He’d never had another man grab his hand; his first instinct

was to move or punch him or something, but then he reconsidered because

Indians were emotional, weren’t they? All that spicy food and that.

“Please. Do me this one, great favour, Jones. If ever you hear anyone, when you are back home if you, if we, get back to our respective homes if ever you hear anyone speak of the East,” and here

his voice plummeted a register, and the tone was full and sad, ‘hold

your judgement. If you are told “they are all this” or “they do this”

or “their opinions are these”, withhold your judgement until all the

facts are upon you. Because that land they call “India” goes by a

thousand names and is populated by millions, and if you think you have

found two men the same amongst that multitude, then you are mistaken.

It is merely a trick of the moonlight.”

Samad released his hand and rummaged in his pocket, dabbing his finger

into a repository of white dust he kept in there, slipping it

discreetly into his mouth. He leant against the wall and drew his

fingertips along the stone. It was a tiny missionary church, converted

into a hospital and then abandoned after two months when the sound of

shells began to shake the windowsills. Samad and Archie had taken to

sleeping there because of the thin mattresses and the large airy windows. Samad had taken an interest too (due to loneliness, he told

himself; due to melancholy) in the powdered morphine to be found in

stray storage cabinets throughout the building; hidden eggs on an

addictive Easter trail. Whenever Archie went to piss or to try the

radio once more, Samad roved up and down his little church, looting

cabinet after cabinet, like a sinner moving from confessional to

confessional. Then, having found his little bottle of sin, he would

take the opportunity to rub a little into his gums or smoke a little in

his

pipe, and then lay back on the cool terra cotta floor, looking up into

the exquisite curve of the church dome. It was covered in words, this

church. Words left three hundred years earlier by dissenters, unwilling to pay a burial tax during a cholera epidemic, locked in the

church by a corrupt landlord and left to die in there

but not before they covered every wall with letters to family, poems,

statements of eternal disobedience. Samad liked the story well enough

when he first heard it, but it only truly struck him when the morphine

hit. Then every nerve in his body would be alive, and the information,

all the information contained in the universe, all the information on

walls, would pop its cork and flow through him like electricity through

a ground wire. Then his head would open out like a deck chair  
And he

would sit in it a while and watch his world go by. Tonight, after just

more than enough, Samad felt particularly lucid. Like his tongue was

battered and like the world was a polished marble egg. And he felt a

kinship with the dead dissenters, they were Pande's brothers

every rebel, it seemed to Samad tonight, was his brother he wished he

could speak with them about the mark they made on the world.  
Had it

been enough? When death came, was it really enough? Were  
they

satisfied with the thousand words they left behind?

Till tell you something for nothing,” said Archie, following  
Samad’s

eyes and catching the church dome’s reflection in them. “If I’d  
only

had a few hours left, I wouldn’t have spent it painting pictures  
on the

ceiling.”

“Tell me,” inquired Samad, irritated to have been dragged  
from his

pleasant contemplation, ‘what great challenge would you  
undertake in

the hours before your death? Unravel Fermat’s Theorem,  
perhaps? Master

Aristotelian philosophy?”

“What? Who? No ... I’d you know ... make love to a lady,”  
said

Archie, whose inexperience made him prudish. “You know for  
the last

time.”

Samad broke into a laugh. “For the first time, is more likely.”

“Oh, go on, I’m serious.”

“All right. And if there were no “ladies” in the vicinity?”

“Well, you can always,” and here Archie went a pillar-box red,  
this

being his own version of cementing a friendship, ‘slap the  
salami, as

the GIs say!”

“Slap,” repeated Samad contemptuously, ‘the salami . . . and that is it,

is it? The last thing you would wish to do before you shuffled off

this mortal coil is “slap your salami”. Achieve orgasm.”

Archie, who came from Brighton, where nobody ever, ever said words like

orgasm, began to convulse with hysterical embarrassment.

“Who is funny? Something is funny?” asked Samad, lighting a fag

distractedly despite the heat, his mind carried elsewhere by the morphine.

“Nobody,” began Archie haltingly, ‘nothing.”

“Can’t you see it, Jones? Can’t you see . . .” Samad lay half in, half

out of the doorway, his arms stretched up to the ceiling, ‘. . . the

intention? They weren’t slapping their salamis spreading the white

stuff- they were looking for something a little more permanent.”

“I can’t see the difference, frankly,” said Archie. “When you’re dead,

you’re dead.”

“Oh no, Archibald, no,” whispered Samad, melancholic. “You don’t

believe that. You must live life with the full knowledge that your

actions will remain. We are creatures of consequence, Archibald,” he

said, gesturing to the church walls. “They knew it. My

great-grandfather knew it. Some day our children will know it.”

“Our children!” sniggered Archie, simply amused. The possibility of offspring seemed so distant.

“Our children will be born of our actions. Our accidents will become their destinies. Oh, the actions will remain. It is a simple matter of what you will do when the chips are down, my friend.

The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samoa1 Miah Iqbal

When the fat lady is singing. When the walls are falling in, and the

sky is dark, and the ground is rumbling. In that moment our actions

will define us. And it makes no difference whether you are being

watched by Allah, Jesus, Buddha, or whether you are not. On cold days

a man can see his breath, on a hot day he can't. On both occasions,

the man breathes.”

“Do you know,” said Archie, after a pause, just before I left from

Felixstowe I saw this new drill they have now which breaks in two and

you can put different things on the end spanner, hammer, even a

bottle-opener. Very useful in a tight spot, I'd imagine. I tell you,

I'd bloody love one of those.”

Samad looked at Archie for a moment and then shook his head. "Come

on,

let's get inside. This Bulgarian food. Turns my stomach over. I need

a bit of sleep."

"You look pale," said Archie, helping him up.

"It's for my sins, Jones, for my sins and yet I am more sinned against

than sinning." Samad giggled to himself.

"You what?"

Archie bore the weight of Samad on one side as they walked inside.

"I have eaten something," said Samad, putting on a cut-glass English

accent, 'that is about to disagree with me.'"

Archie knew very well that Samad sneaked morphine from the cabinets,

but he could see Samad wanted him not to know, so "Let's get you into

bed," was all he said, bringing Samad over to a mattress.

"When this is over, we will meet again in England, OK?" said Samad,

lunging towards his mattress.

"Yes," said Archie, trying to imagine walking along Brighton pier with

Samad.

"Because you are a rare Englishman, Sapper Jones. I consider you my

friend."

Archie was not sure what he considered Samad, but he smiled  
gently in

recognition of the sentiment.

“You will have dinner with my wife and I in the year 1975.

When we are

big-bellied men sitting on our money-mountains. Somehow  
we will

meet.”

Archie, dubious of foreign food, smiled weakly.

“We will know each other throughout our lives!”

Archie laid Samad down, got himself a mattress and  
manoeuvred himself

into a position for sleep.

“Goodnight, friend,” said Samad, pure contentment in his  
voice.

In the morning, the circus came to town. Woken by shouts and  
whooping

laughter, Samad struggled into uniform and wrapped one hand  
around his

gun. He stepped into the sun-drenched courtyard to find  
Russian

soldiers in their dun-coloured uniforms leapfrogging over each  
other,

shooting tin cans off each other’s heads and throwing knives at  
potatoes stuck on sticks, each potato sporting a short black  
twig

moustache. With all the exhaustion of revelation, Samad  
collapsed on

to the front steps, sighed, and sat with his hands on his knees,  
his

face turned up towards the heat. A moment later Archie  
tripped out,



trousers half-mast, waving his gun, looking for the enemy, and shot a

frightened bullet in the air. The circus continued, without noticing.

Samad pulled Archie wearily by the trouser leg and gestured for him to

sit down.

“What’s going on?” demanded Archie, watery-eyed.

“Nothing. Nothing absolutely is going on. In fact, it’s gone off.”

“But these might be the men who ‘

“Look at the potatoes, Jones.”

Archie looked wildly about him. “What have potatoes got to do with

it?”

“They’re Hitler potatoes, my friend. They are vegetable dictators.

Ex-dictators.” He pulled one off its stick. “See the little moustaches? It’s over, Jones. Someone has finished it for us.”

Archie took the potato in his hand.

The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miaft Iqbal

“Like a bus, Jones. We have missed the bloody war.”

Archie shouted over to a lanky Russian in mid-spear of a Hitler potato.

“Speak English? How long has it been over?”

“The fighting?” he laughed incredulously. “Two weeks, comrade! You

will have to go to Japan if you want any more!”

“Like a bus,” repeated Samad, shaking his head. A great fury was

rising in him, bile blocking his throat. This war was to have been his

opportunity. He was expected to come home covered in glory, and then

to return to Delhi triumphant. When would he ever have another chance?

There were going to be no more wars like this one, everybody knew that.

The soldier who had spoken to Archie wandered over. He was dressed in

the summer uniform of the Russians: the thin material, high-necked

collar and oversized, floppy cap; he wore a belt around a substantial

waist, the buckle of which caught the sun and shot a beam into Archie's

eye. When the glare passed, Archie focused on a big, open face, a

squint in the left eye, and a head of sandy hair that struck off in

several directions. He was altogether a rather jolly apparition on a

bright morning, and when he spoke it was in a fluent, American-accented

English that lapped at your ears like surf.

"The war has been over for two weeks and you were not aware?"

"Our radio ... it wasn't.. ." Archie's sentence gave up on itself.

The soldier grinned widely and shook each man's hand vigorously.

"Welcome to peace-time, gentlemen! And we thought the Russians were

an

ill-informed nation!” He laughed his big laugh again.

Directing his

question to Samad, he asked, “Now, where are the rest of you?”

“There is no rest of us, comrade. The rest of the men in our tank are

dead, and there is no sign of our battalion.”

“You’re not here for any purpose?”

“Er . . . no,” said Archie, suddenly abashed.

“Purpose, comrade,” said Samad, feeling quite sick to his stomach. “The war is over and so we find ourselves here quite without

purpose.” He smiled grimly and shook the Russian’s hand with his good

hand. “I’m going in. Sun,” he said, squinting. “Hurts my little peepers. It was nice to have met you.”

“Yes, indeed,” said the Russian, following Samad with his eyes until he

had disappeared into the recesses of the church. Then he turned his

attention to Archie.

“Strange guy.”

“Hmm,” said Archie. “Why are you here?” he asked, taking a hand-rolled cigarette the Russian offered him. It turned out the Russian and the seven men with him were on their way to Poland, to

liberate the work-camps one heard about sometimes in hushed tones. They

had stopped here, west of Tokat, to catch themselves a Nazi.

“But there’s no one here, mate,” said Archie affably. “No one but me

and the Indian and some old folk and children from the village.

Everyone else is dead or fled.”

“Dead or fled . . . dead or fled,” said the Russian, highly amused,

turning a matchstick over and over between his finger and thumb. “Good

phrase this . . . funny phrase. No, well, you see, I would have thought

the same, but we have reliable information from your own secret

service, in fact that there is a senior officer, at this very moment,

hiding in that house. There.” He pointed to the house on the horizon.

“The Doctor? Some little lads told us about him. I mean, he must be

shitting himself with fear if you lot are after him,” said Archie, by

way of a compliment, ‘but I’m sure they said he’s just some sick bloke;

they called him Dr. Sick. Oi: he ain’t English, is he? Traitor or something?”

“Hmm? Oh no. No, no, no, no. Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret. A young

Frenchman. A prodigy Very brilliant. He has worked in a scientific

capacity for the Nazis since before the war. On the sterilization programme, and later the euthanasia policy. Internal German matters.

He was one of the very loyal.”

“Blimey,” said Archie, wishing he knew what it all meant.

“Wotchyagunnadoo?”

“Catch him and take him to Poland, where he will be dealt with by the authorities.”

“Authorities,” said Archie, still impressed but not really paying attention. “Blimey.”

Archie’s attention span was always short, and he had become distracted

by the big, amiable Russian’s strange habit of looking in two directions at once.

“As the information we received was from your secret service and as you

are the highest-ranking officer here Captain . . . Captain . . .”

A glass eye. It was a glass eye with a muscle behind it that would not

behave.

“I’m afraid I don’t know your name or rank,” said the Russian, looking

at Archie with one eye and at some ivy creeping round the church door

with the other.

“Who? Me? Jones,” said Archie, following the eye’s revolving path:

tree, potato, Archie, potato.

“Well, Captain Jones, it would be an honour if you would lead the

expedition up the hill.”

“Captain what? Blimey, no, you’ve got it arse-ways-up,” said Archie,

escaping the magnetic force of the eye, and refocusing on himself,

dressed in Dickinson-Smith's shiny buttoned uniform.

"I'm not a bloody "

The Lieutenant and I would be pleased to take charge," broke in a voice

behind him. "We've been out of the action for quite a while. It is

about time we got back in the thick of it, as they say."

Samad had stepped out on to the front steps silently as a shadow, in

another of Dickinson-Smith's uniforms and with a cigarette hanging

casually off his lower lip like a sophisticated sentence. He was always a good-looking boy, and dressed in the shiny buttons of authority this was only accentuated; in the sharp daylight, framed by the church door, he cut quite an awesome figure.

"What my friend meant," said Samad in his most charming Anglo-Indian

lilt, "is that he is not the bloody captain. I am the bloody captain.

Captain Samad Iqbal."

"Comrade Nikolai Nick Pesotsky."

Samad and the Russian laughed together heartily, shook hands again.

Samad lit a cigarette.

"He is my lieutenant. Archibald Jones. I must apologize if I behaved

strangely earlier; the food's been disagreeing with me. Now: we'll set

off tonight, after dark shall we? Lieutenant?" said Samad, looking at

Archie with a private encoded intensity.

"Yes," blurted Archie.

"By the way, comrade," said Samad, striking a match off the wall and

lighting up, "I hope you do not mind if I ask is that a glass eye? It

is most realistic."

"Yes! I purchased it in St. Petersburg. I was separated from my own

in Berlin. It's a quite incredible likeness, don't you think?"

The friendly Russian popped the eye out of its socket, and laid the

slimy pearl in his palm for Samad and Archie to see. When the war

started, thought Archie, all us boys were crowded around a fag-card of

Grable's legs. Now the war's ended we're huddled round some poor

bastard's eye. Blimey.

For a moment the eye slid up and down each side of the Russian's hand,

then came to a restful halt in the centre of his longish, creased life-line. It looked up at Lieutenant Archie and Captain Samad with an

unblinking stare.

That evening Lieutenant Jones got his first taste of real war. In two

army jeeps, Archie, the eight Russians, Gozan the cafe owner and

Gozan's nephew were led by Samad on a mission up the hill to catch a

Nazi. While the Russians swigged away at bottles of Sambucca until not

a man among them could remember the first

lines of their own national anthem, while Gozan sold roasted chicken

pieces to the highest bidders, Samad stood atop the first jeep, high as

a kite on his white dust, his arms flailing around, cutting the night

into bits and pieces, screaming instructions that his battalion were

too drunk to listen to and he himself was too far gone to understand.

Archie sat at the back of the second jeep, quiet, sober, frightened and

in awe of his friend. Archie had never had a hero: he was five when

his father went out for a proverbial pack of fags and neglected to

return, and, never being much of a reader, the many awful books written

to provide young men with famous heroes had never crossed his path no

swashbucklers, no one eyed pirates, no fearless rascallions for

Archie. But Samad, as he stood up there with his shiny officer buttons

glistening in the moonlight like coins in a wishing-well, had struck

the seventeen year-old Archie full square, an uppercut to the jaw that



said: here is a man for whom no life-path is too steep. Here was a raving lunatic standing on a tank, here was a friend, here was a hero, in a form Archie had never expected. Three quarters of the way up, however, the ad hoc road the tanks had been following thinned unexpectedly, forcing the tank to brake suddenly and throwing the heroic Captain in a backward somersault over the tank, arse in the air.

“No one comes here for long, long time,” said Gozan’s nephew, munching on a chicken bone, philosophically. “This?” He looked at Samad (who had landed next to him) and pointed to the jeep they sat in. “No way.”

So Samad gathered his now paralytic battalion around him and began the march up the mountain in search of a war he could one day tell his grandchildren about, as his great-grandfather’s exploits had been told to him. Their progress was hampered by large clods of earth, torn from parts of the hill by the reverberation of past bombs and left at intervals along the pathway. From many, the roots of trees shot up impotently and languished in the air; to get by, it was necessary for

them to be hacked away with the bayonets of the Russian guns.

“Look like hell!” snorted Gozan’s nephew, drunkenly scrambling through

one such set of roots. “Everything look like hell!”

“Pardon him. He feel strongly because he is young. But it is the

truth. It was not how do you say not argument of ours, Lieutenant

Jones,” said Gozan, who had been bribed two pairs of boots to keep

quiet about his friends’ sudden rise in rank. “What do we have to do

with all this?” He wiped a tear, half inebriated, half overcome with

emotion. “What we have to do with? We peaceful people. We don’t want

be in war! This hill once beautiful. Flowers, birds, they were singing, you understand? We are from the East. What have the battles

of the West to do with us?”

Instinctively, Archie turned to Samad, expecting one of his speeches;

but before Gozan had even finished, Samad had suddenly picked up his

pace, and within a minute was running, pushing ahead of the intoxicated

Russians, who were flailing about with their bayonets. Such was his

speed that he was soon out of sight, turning a blind corner and disappearing into the swallowing night. Archie dithered for a few

minutes, but then loosened himself from Gozan's nephew's  
merciless grip

(he was just embarking upon the tale of a Cuban prostitute he  
had met

in Amsterdam) and began to run to where he had last seen the  
flicker of

a silver button, another one of the sharp turnings that the  
mountain

path took whenever it liked.

"Captain Ick-Ball! Wait, Captain Ick-Ball!"

He ran on, repeating the phrase, waving his torch, which did  
nothing

but light up the undergrowth in increasingly bizarre  
anthropomorphisms;

here a man, here a woman on her knees, here three dogs  
howling at the

moon. He spent some time like this, stumbling about in the  
darkness.

"Put your light on! Captain Ick-Ball! Captain Ick-Ball!"

No answer.

no

"Captain Ick-Ball!"

"Why do you call me that," said a voice, close, on his right,  
'when you

know I am no such thing?"

"Ick-Ball?" and as he asked the question, Archie's flash  
stumbled upon

him, sitting on a boulder, head in hands.

"Why1 mean, you are not really so much of an idiot, are you  
you do know, I presume you know that I am in fact a private of  
His

Majesty's Army?"

"Course. We have to keep it up, though, don't we? Our cover, and that."

"Our cover? Boy." Samad chuckled to himself in a way that struck

Archie as sinister, and when he lifted his head his eyes were both

bloodshot and on the brink of tears. "What do you think this is? Are

we playing silly-buggers?"

"No, I... are you all right, Sam? You look out of sorts."

Samad was dimly aware that he looked out of sorts. Earlier that

evening he had put a tiny line of the white stuff in the cup of each

eyelid. The morphine had sharpened his mind to a knife edge and cut it

open. It had been a luscious, eloquent high while it lasted, but then

the thoughts thus released had been left to wallow in a pool of alcohol

and had landed Samad in a malevolent trough. He saw his reflection

this evening, and it was ugly. He saw where he was at the farewell

party for the end of Europe

and he longed for the East. He looked down at his useless hand with

its five useless appendages; at his skin, burnt to a chocolate-brown by

the sun; he saw into his brain, made stupid by stupid  
conversation and

the dull stimuli of death, and longed for the man he once was:  
erudite,

handsome, light-skinned Samad Miah; so precious his mother  
kept him in

from the sun's rays, sent him to the best tutors and covered  
him in

linseed oil twice a day.

"Sam? Sam? You don't look right, Sam. Please, they'll be here  
in a

minute . . . Sam?"

Self-hatred makes a man turn on the first person he sees. But  
in

it was particularly aggravating to Samad that this should be  
Archie,

who looked down at him with a gentle concern, with a mix of  
fear and

anger all mingled up in that shapeless face so ill-equipped to  
express

emotion.

"Don't call me Sam," he growled, in a voice Archie did not  
recognize,

I'm not one of your English matey-boys. My name is Samad  
Miah Iqbal.

Not Sam. Not Sammy. And not God forbid Samuel. It is  
Samad."

Archie looked crestfallen.

"Well, anyway," said Samad, suddenly officious and wishing  
to avoid an

emotional scene, "I am glad you are here because I wanted to  
tell you

that I am the worse for wear, Lieutenant Jones. I am, as you say, out

of sorts. I am very much the worse for wear.”

He stood, but then stumbled on to his boulder once more.

“Get up,” hissed Archie between his teeth. “Get up. What’s the matter

with you?”

“It’s true, I am very much the worse for the wearing. But I have been

thinking,” said Samad, taking his gun in his good hand.

“Put that away.”

“I have been thinking that I am buggered, Lieutenant Jones. I see no

future. I realize this may come as a surprise to you my upper lip, I’m

afraid is not of the required stiffness but the fact remains. I see only ‘

“Put that away.”

“Blackness. I’m a cripple, Jones.” The gun did a merry dance in his

good hand as he swung himself from side to side. “And my faith is

crippled, do you understand? I’m fit for nothing now, not even Allah,

who is all powerful in his mercy. What am I going to do, after this

war is over, this war that is already over what am I going to do? Go

back to Bengal? Or to Delhi? Who would have such an Englishman

there?

To England? Who would have such an Indian? They promise us

independence in exchange for the men we were. But it is a devilish

deal. What should I do?

The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samoa1 Mtak Iqbal

Stay here? Go elsewhere? What laboratory needs one-handed men?

What

am I suited for?"

"Look, Sam . . . you're making a fool of yourself."

"Really? And is that how it is to be, friend?" asked Samad, standing,

tripping over a stone and colliding back into Archie. "In one afternoon I promote you from Private Shitbag to lieutenant of the

British army and this is my thanks? Where are you in my hour of need?

Gozan!" he shouted to the fat cafe owner, who was struggling round the

bend, at the very back, sweating profusely. "Gozan my fellow Muslim in

Allah's name, is this right?"

"Shut up," snapped Archie. "Do you want everyone to hear you? Put it

down."

Samad's gun arm shot out of the darkness and wrapped itself around

Archie's neck, so the gun and both their heads were pressed together in

an odious group hug.

“What am I good for, Jones? If I were to pull this trigger, what will

I leave behind? An Indian, a turncoat English Indian with a limp wrist

like a faggot and no medals that they can ship home with me.” He let

go of Archie and grabbed his own collar instead.

“Have some of these, for God’s sake,” said Archie, taking three from

his lapel and throwing them at him. “I’ve got loads.”

“And what about that little matter? Do you realize we’re deserters?

Effectively deserters? Step back a minute, my friend, and look at us.

Our captain is dead. We are dressed in his uniforms, taking control of

officers, men of higher rank than ourselves, and how? By deceit.

Doesn’t that make us deserters?”

“The war was over! I mean, we made an effort to contact the rest.”

“Did we? Archie, my friend, did we? Really? Or did we sit around on

our arses like deserters, hiding in a church while the world was falling apart around our ears, while men were dying in the fields?”

They tussled a little as Archie tried to get the gun from him, Samad

lashing out at him with not inconsiderable strength. In the distance,

Archie could see the rest of their motley crew turning the corner, a



great grey mass in the twilight, pitching from side to side,  
singing

“Lydia the Tattooed Lady”.

“Look, keep your voice down. And calm down,” said Archie,  
releasing

him.

“We’re impostors; turncoats in other people’s coats. Did we do  
our

duty, Archibald? Did we? In all honesty? I have dragged you  
down

with me, Archie, and for that I am sorry. The truth is, this was  
my

fate. This was all written for me long ago.”

O Lydia O Lydia O have you met Lydia O Lydia the  
Taaaatooooed Lady!

Samad put the pistol absent-mindedly in his mouth and cocked  
the

trigger.

“Tck-Ball, listen to me,” said Archie. “When we were in that  
tank with

the Captain, with Roy and the rest.”

O Lydia the Queen of tattoos! On her back is the battle of  
Waterloo..

.

“You were always going on about being a hero and all that like  
your

great-uncle whasisname.”

Beside it the wreck of the Hesperus too ... Samad took the gun  
out of

his mouth.

“Pande,” he said. “Great-grandfather,” and put the gun back  
in.

“And here it is a chance it’s staring you in the face. You didn’t want

to miss the bus and we’re not going to, not if we do this properly. So

don’t be such a silly fucker about it.”

And proudly above waves the red, white and bloooo,

You can learn a lot from Lydia!

“Comrade! What in God’s name.”

Without them noticing, the friendly Russian had ambled up behind them

and was looking in horror at Samad, sucking his gun like a lollipop.

“Cleaning it,” stuttered Samad, dearly shaken, removing the gun from

his mouth.

That’s how they do it,” Archie explained, ‘in Bengal.’”

The war that twelve men expected to find in the grand old house on the

hill, the war that Samad wanted pickled in ajar to hand to his grandchildren as a souvenir of his youth, was not there. Dr. Sick was

as good as his name, sitting in an armchair in front of a wood-burning

fire. Sick. Huddled in a rug. Pale. Very thin. In no uniform, just

an open-neck white shirt and some dark coloured trousers. He was a

young man too, not over twenty-five, and he did not flinch or make any

protest when they all burst in, guns at the ready. It was as if they

had just dropped in on a pleasant French farmhouse, making the faux pas of coming without invitation and bringing guns to the dinner table. The room was lit entirely by gas lamps in their tiny lady-shaped casings, and the light danced up the wall, illuminating a set of eight paintings that showed a continuous scene of Bulgarian countryside. In the fifth one Samad recognized his church, a blip of sandy paint on the horizon. The paintings were placed at intervals and wrapped round the room in a panoramic. Untrained and in a mawkish attempt at the modern style, a ninth sat a little too close to the fireplace on an easel, the paint still wet. Twelve guns were pointed at the artist. And when the Artist-Doctor turned to face them, he had what looked like blood-tinged tears rolling down his face. Samad stepped forward. He had had a gun in his mouth and was emboldened by it. He had eaten an absurd amount of morphine, fallen through the hole morphine creates, and survived. You are never stronger, thought Samad as he approached the Doctor, than when you land on the other side of despair. “Are you Dr. Ferret?” he demanded, making the Frenchman wince at the

anglicized pronunciation, sending more bloody tears down his cheeks.

Samad kept his gun pointed at him.

“Yes, I am he.”

“What is that? That in your eyes?” asked Samad.

“I have diabetic retinopathy, monsieur.”

“What?” asked Samad, still pointing the gun, determined not to

undermine his moment of glory with an unheroic medical debate.

“It means that when I do not receive insulin, I excrete blood, my

friend. Through my eyes. It makes my hobby,” he gestured at the

paintings that surrounded him, ‘not a little difficult. There were to

be ten. A 180-degree view. But it seems you have come to disturb me.”

He sighed and stood up. “So. Are you going to kill me, my friend?”

“I’m not your friend.”

“No, I do not suppose that you are. But is it your intention to kill

me? Pardon me if I say you do not look old enough to squash flies.” He

looked at Samad’s uniform. “Mon Dieu, you are very young to have got

so far in life, Captain.” Samad shifted uncomfortably, catching

Archie’s look of panic in the corner of his vision. Samad placed his

feet a little further apart and stood firm.

“I’m sorry if I seem tiresome on this point but ... is it your

intention, then, to kill me?"

Samad's arm stayed perfectly still, the gun unmoving. He could kill

him, he could kill him in cold blood. Samad did not need the cover of

darkness or the excuse of war. He could kill him and they both knew

it. The Russian, seeing the look in the Indian's eye, stepped forward.

"Pardon me, Captain."

Samad remained silent, facing the Doctor, so the Russian stepped

forward. "We do not have intentions in this matter," said the Russian,

addressing Dr. Sick. "We have orders to bring you to Poland."

"And there, will I be killed?"

"That will be for the proper authorities to decide

The Doctor cocked his head at an angle and narrowed his eyes. "It is just ... it is just a thing a man likes to be told. It is curiously significant to a man to be told. It is only polite, at the very least. To be told whether he shall die or whether he shall be

spared."

"That will be for the proper authorities to decide," repeated the Russian.

Samad walked behind the Doctor and stuck the gun into the back of his

head. "Walk," he said.

"For the proper authorities to decide ... Isn't peacetime civilized?"

remarked Dr. Sick, as a group of twelve men, all pointing guns at his

head, led him out of the house.

Later that night, at the bottom of the hill, the battalion left Dr. Sick handcuffed to the jeep and adjourned to the cafe.

“You play poker?” asked a very merry Nikolai, addressing Samad and

Archie as they entered the room.

“I play anything, me,” said Archie.

The more pertinent question,” said Samad, taking his seat with a wry

smile, ‘is: do I play it well?’”

“And do you, Captain Iqbal?”

“Like a master,” said Samad, picking up the cards dealt to him and

fanning them out in his one hand.

“Well,” said Nikolai, pouring more Sambucca for everyone, ‘since our

friend Iqbal is so confident, it may be best to start relatively small.

We’ll start with cigarettes and let’s see where that takes us.”

Cigarettes took them to medals, which took them to guns, which took

them to radios, which took them to jeeps. By midnight, Samad had won

three jeeps, seven guns, fourteen medals, the land attached to Gozan’s

sister’s house, and an IOU for four horses, three chickens and a

duck.

“My friend,” said Nikolai Pesotsky, his warm, open manner replaced by an anxious gravity. “You must give us a chance to win back our possessions. We cannot possibly leave things as they are.”

“I want the Doctor,” said Samad, refusing to catch the eye of Archibald

Jones, who sat open-mouthed and drunk in his chair. “In exchange for the things I have won.”

“What on earth for?” said Nikolai, astonished, leaning back in his chair. “What possible use ‘

“My own reasons. I wish to take him tonight and not to be followed, and for the incident to go unreported.”

Nikolai Pesotsky looked at his hands, looked round the table, and then

at his hands once more. Then he reached into his pocket and threw

Samad the keys.

Once outside, Samad and Archie got into the jeep containing Dr. Sick,

who was asleep on the dashboard, started the engine and drove into the

blackness.

Thirty miles from the village, Dr. Sick woke up to a hushed argument

concerning his imminent future.

“But why?” hissed Archie.

“Because, from my point of view, the very problem is that we need blood

on our hands, you see? As an atonement. Do you not see, Jones? We

have been playing silly buggers in this war, you and I. There is a

great evil that we have failed to fight and now it is too late. Except

we have him, this opportunity. Let me ask you: why was this war

fought?”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” blustered Archie, in lieu of an answer.

“So that in the future we may be free. The question was always: What

kind of a world do you want your children to grow up in? And we have

done nothing. We are at a moral crossroads.”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re on about and I don’t want to know,”

snapped Archie. “We’re going to dump this one’ he motioned to the

semi-conscious Sick ‘at the first barracks we come across, then you and

me are going our separate ways and that’s the only crossroads I care

about.”

“What I have realized, is that the generations,” Samad continued as

they sped through miles and miles of unchanging flatlands, ‘they speak

to each other, Jones. It’s not a line, life is not a line this is not



palm-reading it's a circle, and they speak to us. That is why  
you

cannot read fate; you must experience it." Samad could feel  
the

morphine bringing the information to him again all the  
information in

the universe and all the information on walls in one fantastic  
revelation.

"Do you know who this man is, Jones?" Samad grabbed the  
Doctor by the

back of his hair and bent his neck over the back seat. "The  
Russians

told me. He's a scientist, like me but what is his science?  
Choosing

who shall be born and who shall not breeding people as if they  
were so

many chickens, destroying them if the specifications are not  
correct.

He wants to control, to dictate the future. He wants a race of  
men, a

race of indestructible men, that will survive the last days of  
this

earth. But it cannot be done in a laboratory. It must be done, it  
can

only be done, with faith! Only Allah saves! I am no religious  
man!

have never possessed the strength but I am not fool enough to  
deny the

truth!"

"Ah, now, but you said, didn't you, you said it wasn't your  
argument.

On the hill that's what you said," gabbled Archie, excited to  
have

caught Samad out on something. “So, so, so so what if this bloke does

.. . whatever he does you said that was our problem, us in the West,

that’s what you said.”

Dr. Sick, watery eye-blood now streaming like rivers, was still being

held by the hair by Samad and was gagging, now, on his own tongue.

“Watch out, you’re choking him,” said Archie.

“What of it!” yelled Samad into the echoless landscape. Then like him

believe that living organs should answer to design. They worship the

science of the body, but not who has given it to us! He’s a Nazi. The

worst kind.”

“But you said’ Archie pressed on, determined to make his point. “You said that was nothing to do with you. Not your argument.

If anyone in this jeep should have a score to settle with mad Jerry

here’

“French. He’s French.”

“All right, French well if anyone’s got a score to settle it’d probably

have to be me. It’s England’s future we’ve been fighting for. For

England. You know,” said Archie, searching his brain, ‘democracy and

Sunday dinners, and .. . and .. . promenades and piers, and bangers and

mash and the things that are ours. Not yours.”

“Precisely,” said Samad.

“You what?”

tom must do it, Archie.”

“I should cocoa!”

“Jones, your destiny is staring you in the face and here you are slapping the salami,” said Samad with a nasty laugh in his voice, and

still holding the Doctor by the hair across the front seat.

“Steady on,” said Archie, trying to keep an eye on the road, as Samad

bent the Doctor’s neck almost to breaking point. “Look, I’m not saying

that he doesn’t deserve to die.”

“Then do it. Do it.”

“But why’s it so bloody important to you that I do it? You know, I’ve

never killed a man not like that, not face to face. A man shouldn’t

die in a car ... I can’t do that.”

Jones, it is simply a question of what you will do when the chips are

down. This is a question that interests me a great deal. Call tonight

the practical application of a long-held belief. An experiment, if you

like.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I want to know what kind of a man you are, Jones. I want to know what

you are capable of. Are you a coward, Jones?”

Archie brought the jeep to a shattering halt.

“You’re bloody asking for it, you are.”

“You don’t stand for anything, Jones,” continued Samad. “Not for a faith, not for a politics. Not even for your country. How your

lot ever conquered my lot is a bloody mystery. You’re a cipher, no?”

“A what?”

“And an idiot. What are you going to tell your children when they ask

who you are, what you are? Will you know? Will you ever know?”

“What are you that’s so bloody fantastic?”

“I’m a Muslim and a Man and a Son and a Believer. I will survive the

last days.”

“You’re a bloody drunkard, and you’re you’re drugged, you’re drugged

tonight, aren’t you?”

“I am a Muslim and a Man and a Son and a Believer. I will survive the

last days,” Samad repeated, as if it were a chant.

“And what the bloody hell does that mean?” As he shouted, Archie made

a grab for Dr. Sick. Pulled his now blood-covered face near his own

until their noses touched.

“You,” Archie barked. “You’re coming with me.”

“I would but, monsieur . . .” The Doctor held up his handcuffed wrists.

Archie wrestled them open with the rusty key, pulled the Doctor out of

the jeep and started walking away from the road into the darkness, a

gun pointed at the base point of Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret's cranium.

"Are you going to kill me, boy?" asked Dr. Sick as they walked..

"Looks like it, dun nit said Archie. "May I plead for my life?"  
"If

you like," said Archie, pushing him on.

Sitting in the jeep, some five minutes later, Samad heard a shot ring

out. It made him jump. He slapped dead an insect that had been

winding its way round his wrist, looking for enough flesh to bite.

Lifting his head, he saw in front of him that Archie was returning: bleeding and limping badly, made visible, then invisible, illuminated, obscured, as he wound in and out of the headlights. He looked his tender age, the lamps making his blond hair

translucent, his moon-shaped face lit up like a big baby, head first,

entering life.

1984,1857

"The cricket test -which side do they cheer for? .. . Are you still

looking back to where you came from or where you are?"

Norman Tebbit

6 The Temptation of Samad Iqbal

Children. Samad had caught children like a disease. Yes, he had sired two of them willingly as willingly as a man can but he had not bargained for this other thing. This thing that no one tells you about. This thing of knowing children. For forty-odd years, travelling happily along life's highway, Samad had been unaware that dotted along that road, in the creche facilities of each service station, there lived a subclass of society, a mewling, puking underclass; he knew nothing of them and it did not concern him. Then suddenly, in the early eighties, he became infected with children; other people's children, children who were friends of his children, and then their friends; then children in children's programmes on children's TV. By 1984 at least 30 per cent of his social and cultural circle was under the age of nine and this all led, inevitably, to the position he now found himself in. He was a parent-governor. By a strange process of symmetry, being a parent-governor perfectly mirrors the process of becoming a parent. It starts innocently. Casually. You turn up at the annual Spring Fair full of beans, help with the raffle tickets (because the pretty red-haired music teacher asks you to) and win a bottle of whisky (all school raffles are fixed), and, before you know where you are, you're turning up at the weekly

school council meetings, organizing concerts, discussing plans for a

new music department, donating funds for the rejuvenation of the

water-fountains you're implicated in the school, you're involved in it.

Sooner or later you stop dropping your child at the school gates. You

start following them in.

"Put your hand down."

"I will not put it down."

"Put it down, please."

"Let go of me."

"Samad, why are you so eager to mortify me? Put it down."

"I have an opinion. I have a right to an opinion. And I have a right

to express that opinion."

"Yes, but do you have to express it so often?" This was the hissed

exchange between Samad and Alsana Iqbal, as they sat at the back of a

Wednesday school governors meeting in early July '84, Alsana trying her

best to force Samad's determined left arm back to his side.

"Get off, woman!"

Alsana put her two tiny hands to his wrist and tried applying a Chinese

burn. "Samad Miah, can't you understand that I am only trying to save

you from yourself?"

As the covert wrestling continued, the chairwoman Katie Miniver, a lanky white divorcee with tight jeans, extremely curly hair and buck teeth, tried desperately to avoid Samad's eye. She silently cursed Mrs. Hanson, the fat lady just behind him, who was speaking about the woodworm in the school orchard, inadvertently making it impossible to pretend that Samad's persistent raised hand had gone unseen. Sooner or later she was going to have to let him speak. In between nodding at Mrs. Hanson, she snatched a surreptitious glance at the minutes which the secretary, Mrs. Khilnani, was scribbling away on her left. She wanted to check that it was not her imagination, that she was not being unfair or undemocratic, or worse still racist (but she had read Colour Blind, a seminal leaflet from the Rainbow Coalition, she had scored well on the self-test), racist in ways that were so deeply ingrained and socially determining that they escaped her attention. But no, no. She wasn't crazy. Any random extract highlighted the problem:

13.0 Mrs. Janet Trott wishes to propose a second climbing frame be



built in the playground to accommodate the large number of children who enjoy the present climbing frame but unfortunately have made it a safety risk through dangerous overcrowding. Mrs. Trott's husband, the architect Hanover Trott, is willing to design and oversee the building of such a frame at no cost to the school.

13.1 Chairwoman can see no objection. Moves to put the proposition to a vote.

13.2 Mr. Iqbal wishes to know why the Western education system privileges activity of the body over activity of the mind and soul.

13.3 The Chairwoman wonders if this is quite relevant.

13.4 Mr. Iqbal demands the vote be delayed until he can present

per detailing the main arguments and emphasizes that his sons, Magid

and MiUat, get all the exercise they need via head stands that strengthen the muscles and send blood to stimulate the somatosensory cortex in the brain.

13.5 Mrs. Wolfe asks whether Mr. Iqbal expects her Susan to undertake

compulsory head stands

13.6 Mr. Iqbal infers that, considering Susan's academic performance

and weight problems, a head stand regime might be desirable.

"Yes, Mr. Iqbal?"

Samad forcefully removed Alsana's fingers from the clamp grip they had assumed on his lapel, stood up quite unnecessarily and sorted through a number of papers he had on a clipboard, removing the one he wanted and holding it out before him.

"Yes, yes. I have a motion. I have a motion."

The subtlest manifestation of a groan went round the group of governors, followed by a short period of shifting, scratching, leg-crossing, bag-rifling and the repositioning of coats-on-chairs.

"Another one, Mr. Iqbal?"

"Oh yes, Mrs. Miniver."

"Only you've tabled twelve motions already this evening; I think

possibly somebody else '

"Oh, it is much too important to be delayed, Mrs. Miniver. Now, if I

can just '

"Ms Miniver."

"Pardon me?"

"It's just... it's Ms Miniver. All evening you've been ... and it's, umm ... actually not Mrs. It's Ms. Ms."

Samad looked quizzically at Katie Miniver, then at his papers as if to

find the answer there, then at the beleaguered chairwoman again.

"I'm sorry? You are not married?"

"Divorced, actually, yes, divorced. I'm keeping the name."

“I see. You have my condolences, Miss Miniver. Now, the matter I ‘

“I’m sorry,” said Katie, pulling her fingers through her intractable

hair. “Umm, it’s not Miss, either. I’m sorry. I have been married

you see, so’

Ellen Corcoran and Janine Lanzerano, two friends from the Women’s

Action Group, gave Katie a supportive smile. Ellen shook her head to

indicate that Katie mustn’t cry (because you’re doing well, really

well); Janine mouthed Go On and gave her a furtive thumbs-up.

“I really wouldn’t feel comfortable - I just feel marital status shouldn’t

be an issue it’s not that I want to embarrass you, Mr. Iqbal. I just

would feel more if you it’s Ms.”

“Mzzz?”

“Ms.”

“And this is some kind of linguistic conflation between the words Mrs.

and Miss?” asked Samad, genuinely curious and oblivious to the nether

wobblings of Katie Miniver’s bottom lip. “Something to describe the

woman who has either lost her husband or has no prospect of finding

another?”

12,8

Alsana groaned and put her head in her hands.

Samad looked at his clipboard, underlined something in pen three times

and turned to the parent-governors once more.

“The Harvest Festival.”

Shifting, scratching, leg-crossing, coat-repositioning.

“Yes, Mr. Iqbal,” said Katie Miniver. “What about the Harvest Festival?”

That is precisely what I want to know. What is all this about the

Harvest Festival? What is it? Why is it? And why must my children

celebrate it?”

The headmistress, Mrs. Owens, a genteel woman with a soft face half

hidden behind a fiercely cut blonde bob, motioned to Katie Miniver that

she would handle this.

“Mr. Iqbal, we have been through the matter of religious festivals

quite thoroughly in the autumn review. As I am sure you are aware, the

school already recognizes a great variety of religious and secular

events: amongst them, Christmas, Ramadan, Chinese New Year, Diwali,

Yom

Kippur, Hanukkah, the birthday of Haile Selassie, and the death of

Martin Luther King. The Harvest Festival is part of the school’s

ongoing commitment to religious diversity, Mr. Iqbal.”

“I see. And are there many pagans, Mrs. Owens, at Manor School?”

“Pagan I’m afraid I don’t understand ‘

“It is very simple. The Christian calendar has thirty-seven religious

events. Thirty-seven. The Muslim calendar has nine. Only nine. And

they are squeezed out by this incredible rash of Christian festivals.

Now my motion is simple. If we removed all the pagan festivals from

the Christian calendar, there would be an average of Samad paused to

look at his clipboard ‘of twenty days freed up in which the children

could celebrate Lailat-ul-Qadr in December, Eid-ul-Fitr in January and

Eid-ul-Adha in April, for example. And the first festival that must

go, in my opinion, is this Harvest Festival business.”

“I’m afraid,” said Mrs. Owens, doing her pleasant-but-firm smile and

playing her punchline to the crowd, ‘removing Christian festivals from

the face of the earth is a little beyond my jurisdiction.

Otherwise I

would remove Christmas Eve and save myself a lot of work in stocking-stuffing.”

Samad ignored the general giggle this prompted and pressed on. “But

this is my whole point. This Harvest Festival is not a Christian

festival. Where in the bible does it say, For thou must steal foodstuffs from thy parents' cupboards and bring them into school

assembly, and thou shall force thy mother to bake a loaf of bread in

the shape of a fish? These are pagan ideals! Tell me where does it

say, Thou shah take a box of frozen fish fingers to an aged crone who

lives in Wembley1!"

Mrs. Owens frowned, unaccustomed to sarcasm unless it was of the

teacher variety, i.e." Do we live in a barn? And I suppose you treat

your own house like that!

"Surely, Mr. Iqbal, it is precisely the charity aspect of the Harvest

Festival that makes it worth retaining? Taking food to the elderly

seems to me a laudable idea, whether it has scriptural support or not.

Certainly, nothing in the bible suggests we should sit down to a turkey

meal on Christmas Day, but few people would condemn it on those

grounds. To be honest, Mr. Iqbal, we like to think of these things as

more about community than religion as such."

"A man's god is his community!" said Samad, raising his voice.

"Yes, umm . . . well, shall we vote on the motion?"

Mrs. Owens looked nervously around the room for hands.

“Will anyone

second it?”

Samad pressed Alsana’s hand. She kicked him in the ankle. He stamped

on her toe. She pinched his flank. He bent back her little finger and

she grudgingly raised her right arm while deftly elbowing him in the

crotch with her left.

“Thank you, Mrs. Iqbal,” said Mrs. Owens, as Janice and Ellen

looked over to her with the piteous, saddened smiles they reserved for

subjugated Muslim women.

“All those in favour of the motion to remove the Harvest Festival from

the school calendar ‘

“On the grounds of its pagan roots

“On the grounds of certain pagan . . . connotations. Raise your hands.”

Mrs. Owens scanned the room. One hand, that of the pretty red-headed

music teacher Poppy Burt-Jones, shot up, sending her many bracelets

jangling down her wrist. Then the Chalfens, Marcus and Joyce, an

ageing hippy couple both dressed in pseudo-Indian garb, raised their

hands defiantly. Then Samad looked pointedly at Clara and Archie,

sitting sheepishly on the other side of the hall, and two more hands

moved slowly above the crowd.

“All those against?”

The remaining thirty-six hands lifted into the air.

“Motion not passed.”

“I am certain the Solar Covenant of Manor School Witches and Goblins

will be delighted with that decision,” said Samad, retaking his seat.

After the meeting, as Samad emerged from the toilets, having relieved

himself with some difficulty in a miniature urinal, the pretty red-headed music teacher Poppy Butt-Jones accosted him in the

corridor.

“Mr. Iqbal.”

“Hmm?”

She extended a long, pale, lightly freckled arm. “Poppy Burt-Jones. I

take Magid and Millat for orchestra and singing.”

Samad replaced the dead right hand she meant to shake with his working

left.

“Oh! I’m sorry.”

“No, no. It’s not painful. It just does not work.”

“Oh, good! I mean, I’m glad there’s no, you know, pain.”

She was what you would call effortlessly pretty. About twenty-eight,

maybe thirty-two at most. Slim, but not at all hard-bodied, and with a

curved ribcage like a child; long, flat breasts that lifted at their



tips; an open-neck white shirt, some well-worn Levis and grey trainers,

a lot of dark red hair swished up in a sloppy ponytail. Wispy bits

falling at the neck. Freckled. A very pleasant, slightly goofy smile

which she was showing Samad right now.

“Was there something you wanted to discuss about the twins?

A

problem?”

“Oh no, no ... well, you know, they’re fine. Magid has a little difficulty, but with his good marks I’m sure playing the recorder isn’t

high on his list, and Millat has a real flair for the sax. No, I just wanted to say that I thought you made a good point, you know,” she

said, chucking her thumb over her shoulder in the direction of the

hall. “In the meeting. The Harvest Festival always seemed so ridiculous to me. I mean, if you want to help old people, you know,

well, vote for a different government, don’t send them cans of Heinz

spaghetti.” She smiled at him again and tucked a piece of hair behind

her ear.

“It is a great shame more people do not agree,” said Samad, flattered

somehow by the second smile and sucking in his well-toned 57-year-old

stomach. “We seemed very much in the minority this evening.”

“Well, the Chalfens were behind you they’re such nice people intellectuals,” she whispered, as if it were some exotic disease of the tropics. “He’s a scientist and she’s something in gardening but both very down to earth with it. I talked to them and they thought you should pursue it. You know, actually, I was thinking that maybe we could get together at some point in the next few months and work on a second motion for the September meeting you know, nearer the actual time, make it a little more coherent, maybe, print out leaflets, that sort of thing. Because you know,

132.

I’m really interested in Indian culture. I just think those festivals you mentioned would be so much more . . . colourful, and we could tie it in with art work, music. It could be really exciting,” said Poppy Burt-Jones, getting really excited. “And I think it would be really good, you know, for the kids.”

It was not possible, Samad knew, for this woman to have any erotic interest in him whatsoever. But still he glanced around for Alsana, still he jangled his car keys nervously in his pockets, still he felt a cold thing land on his heart and knew it was fear of his God.

“I’m not actually from India, you know,” said Samad, with infinitely more patience than he had ever previously employed the many times he had been required to repeat this sentence since moving to England.

Poppy Burt-Jones looked surprised and disappointed. “You’re not?”

“No. I’m from Bangladesh.”

“Bangladesh

“Previously Pakistan. Previous to that, Bengal.”

“Oh, right. Same sort of ball-park, then.”

“Just about the same stadium, yes.”

There was a bit of a difficult pause, in which Samad saw clearly that

he wanted her more than any woman he had met in the past ten years.

Just like that. Desire didn’t even bother casing the joint, checking

whether the neighbours were in desire just kicked down the door and

made himself at home. He felt queasy. Then he became aware that his

face was moving from arousal to horror in a grotesque parody of the

movements of his mind, as he weighed up Poppy Burt-Jones and all the

physical and metaphysical consequences she suggested. He must speak

before it got any worse.

“Well.. . hmm, it is a good idea, re tabling the motion,” he said

against his will, for something more bestial than his will was now  
doing the talking. "If you could spare the time."  
"Well, we can talk about it. I'll give you a call about it in a few weeks. We could meet after orchestra, maybe?"  
"That would be ... fine  
"Great! That's agreed, then. You know, your boys are really adorable  
they're very unusual. I was saying it to the Chalfens, and Marcus put  
his finger on it: he said that Indian children, if you don't mind me  
saying, are usually a lot more '  
"More?"  
"Quiet. Beautifully behaved but very, I don't know, subdued."  
Samad winced inside, imagining Alsana listening to this.  
"And Magid and Millat are just so ... loud."  
Samad tried to smile.  
"Magid is so impressive intellectually for a nine-year-old everybody  
says so. I mean, he's really remarkable. You must be so proud. He's  
like a little adult. Even his clothes ... I don't think I've ever  
known a nine-year-old to dress so so severely."  
Both twins had always been determined to choose their own clothes, but  
where Millat bullied Alsana into purchases of red-stripe Nike, Osh-Kosh  
Begosh and strange jumpers that had patterns on the inside and the out,

Magid could be found, whatever the weather, in grey pullover,  
grey

shirt and black tie with his shiny black shoes and NHS specs  
perched

upon his nose, like some dwarf librarian. Alsana would say,  
“Little

man, how about the blue one for Amma, hmm?” pushing him  
into the

primary colours section of Mothercare. “Just one blue one. Go  
so nice

with your eyes. For Amma, Magid. How can you not care for  
blue? It’s

the colour of the sky!”

“No, Amma. The sky isn’t blue. There’s just white light.  
White light

has all of the colours of the rainbow in it, and when it is  
scattered

through the squill ions of molecules in the sky, the short-wave  
colours

blue, violet they are the ones you see. The sky isn’t really blue.  
It

just looks that way. It’s called Rayleigh scattering.”

A strange child with a cold intellect.

“You must be so proud,” Poppy repeated with a huge smile. “I  
would

be.”

“Sadly,” said Samad sighing, distracted from his erection by  
the dismal

thought of his second son (by two minutes), “Millat is a  
good-for-nothing.”

Poppy looked mortified at this. “Oh no! No, I didn’t mean that  
at

all... I mean, I think he's probably a little intimidated by Magid in

that way, but he's such a personality! He's just not so . academic.

But everybody just loves him such a beautiful boy, as well. Of course," she said, giving him a wink and a knock on the shoulder, 'good genes."

Good genes? What did she mean, good genes'?

"Hullo!" said Archie, who had walked up behind them, giving Samad a

strong thud on the back. "Hullo!" he said again, shaking Poppy's

hand, with the almost mock-aristocratic manner he used when confronted

with educated people. "Archie Jones. Father of Me, for my sins."

"Poppy Butt-Jones. I take Me for '

"Music, yes, I know. Talks about you constantly. Bit disappointed you

passed her over for first violin, though . . . maybe next year, eh? So!"

said Archie, looking from Poppy to Samad, who was standing slightly

apart from the other two and had a queer look, Archie thought, a bloody

queer look on his face. "You've met the notorious Ick-Ball! You were a

bit much in that meeting, Samad, eh? Wasn't he, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Poppy sweetly. "I thought Mr. Iqbal made

some good points, actually. I was really impressed by a lot of what he

said. I'd like to be that knowledgeable on so many subjects. Sadly,

I'm a bit of a one-trick pony. Are you, I don't know, a professor of

some kind, Mr. Iqbal?"

"No, no," said Samad, furious that he was unable to lie because of

Archie, and finding the word 'waiter' stopping in his throat.

"No, the

fact is I work in a restaurant. I did some study in younger days, but

the war came and .. ." Samad shrugged as an end to the

sentence, and watched with sinking heart as Poppy Burt Jones freckled

face contorted into one large, red, perplexed question mark.

"War?" she said, as if he had said wireless or piano la or water-closet. "The Falklands?"

"No," said Samad flatly. "The Second World."

"Oh, Mr. Iqbal, you'd never guess. You must have been ever so

young."

"There were tanks there older than us, love," said Archie with a

grin.

"Well, Mr. Iqbal, that is a surprise! But they say dark skin wrinkles

less, don't they?"

"Do they?" said Samad, forcing himself to imagine her taut, pink skin,

folded over in layer after layer of dead epidermis. “I thought it was

children that kept a man young.”

Poppy laughed. “That too, I’d imagine. Well!” she said, looking

flushed, coy and sure of herself, all at the same time. “You look very

good on it. I’m sure the Omar Sharif comparison’s been made before,

Mr. Iqbal.”



“No, no, no, no,” said Samad, glowing with pleasure. “The only comparison lies in our mutual love of bridge. No, no, no ... And it’s Samad,” he added. “Call me Samad, please.”

“You’ll have to call him Samad some other time, Miss,” said Archie, who always persisted in calling teachers Miss. “Because we’ve got to go. Wives waiting in the driveway. Dinner, apparently.”

“Well, it was nice talking to you,” said Poppy, reaching for the wrong hand again, and blushing as he met her with the left.

“Yes. Goodbye.”

“Come on, come on,” said Archie, fielding Samad out of the door and down the sloping driveway to the front gates. “Dear God, fit as a butcher’s dog, that one! Phee-yooo. Nice, very nice. Dear me, you were trying it on ... And what were you on about mutual love of bridge. I’ve known you decades and I’ve never seen you play bridge. Five-card poker’s more your game.”

“Shut up, Archibald.”

“No, no, fair dues, you did very well. It’s not like you, though, Samad having found God and all that not like you to be distracted by the attractions of the flesh.”

Samad shook Archie’s hand from where it was resting on his shoulder.

“Why are you so irredeemably vulgar?”

7 wasn't the one

But Samad wasn't listening, he was already reciting in his head,

repeating two English phrases that he tried hard to believe in, words

he had learnt these past ten years in England, words he hoped could

protect him from the abominable heat in his trousers:

To the pure all things are pure. To the pure all things are pure. To

the pure all things are pure. Can't say fairer than that. Can't say

fairer than that. Can't say fairer than that. But let's rewind a little.

i. To the pure all things are pure

Sex, at least the temptation of sex, had long been a problem. When the

fear of God first began to creep into Samad's bones, circa 1976, just

after his marriage to the small-palmed, weak wristed and disinterested

Alsana, he had inquired of an elderly alim in the mosque in Croydon

whether it was permitted that a man might... with his hand on his ..

.

Before he had got halfway through this tentative mime, the old scholar

had silently passed him a leaflet from a pile on a table and drawn his

wrinkled digit firmly underneath point number three.

There are nine acts which invalidate fast:

- (i) Eating and drinking
- (ii) Sexual intercourse
- (iii) Masturbation (istimna), which means self-abuse, resulting in ejaculation
- (iv) Ascribing false things to Almighty Allah, or his Prophet, or to the successors of the Holy Prophet
- (v) Swallowing thick dust
- (vi) Immersing one's complete head in water
- (vii) Remaining in Janabat or Haidh or Nifas till the Adhan for Fajr prayers
- (viii) Enema with liquids
- (ix) Vomiting

“And what, Alim,” Samad had inquired, dismayed, ‘if he is not fasting?’”

The old scholar looked grave. “Ibn ‘Umar was asked about it and is

reported to have answered: it is nothing except the rubbing of the male

member until its water comes out. It is only a nerve that one kneads.”

Samad had taken heart at this, but the Alim continued.

“However, he

answered in another report: it has been forbidden that one should have

intercourse with oneself.”

“But which is the correct belief? Is it hal al or hara am There are

some who say ...” Samad had begun sheepishly, “To the pure all things

are pure. If one is truthful and firm in oneself, it can harm nobody

else, nor offend . . .”

But the Alim laughed at this. “And we know who they are. Allah have

pity on the Anglicans! Samad, when the male organ of a man stands

erect, two thirds of his intellect go away,” said the Alim, shaking his

head. “And one third of his religion. There is an hadith of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon Him! it is as follows: O Allah, I seek

refuge in you from the evil of my hearing, of my sight, of my tongue,

of my heart, and of my private parts.”

“But surely . . . surely if the man himself is pure, then ‘ “Show me the

pure man, Samad! Show me the pure act! Oh, Samad Miah . . . my advice

to you is stay away from your right hand.”

Of course. Samad, being Samad, had employed the best of his Western

pragmatism, gone home and vigorously tackled the job with his

functional left hand, repeating To the pure all things are pure. To

the pure all things are pure, until orgasm finally arrived: sticky, sad, depressing. And that ritual continued for some five years, in the

little bedroom at the top of the house where he slept alone (so as not to wake Alsana) after crawling back from the restaurant at three in the morning each and every morning; secretly, silently; for he was, believe it or not, tortured by it, by this furtive yanking and squeezing and spilling, by the fear that he was not pure, that his acts were not pure, that he would never be pure, and always his God seemed to be sending him small signs, small warnings, small curses (a urethra infection, 1976, castration dream, 1978, dirty, encrusted sheet discovered but misunderstood by Alsana's great-aunt, 1979) until 1980 brought crisis point and Samad heard Allah roaring in his ear like the waves in a conch-shell and it seemed time to make a deal.

2. Can't say fairer than that

The deal was this: on 1 January 1980, like a New Year dieter who gives

up cheese on the condition that they can have chocolate, Samad gave up

masturbation so that he might drink. It was a deal, a business proposition, that he had made with God: Samad being the party of the

first part, God being the sleeping partner. And since that day Samad

had enjoyed relative spiritual peace and many a frothy Guinness with

Archibald Jones; he had even developed the habit of taking his last

gulp looking up at the sky like a Christian, thinking: I'm basically a

good man. I don't slap

the salami. Give me a break. I have the odd drink. Can't say fairer

than that.. .

But of course he was in the wrong religion for compromises, deals,

pacts, weaknesses and can't say fairer than that. He was supporting

the wrong team if it was empathy and concessions he wanted, if he

wanted liberal exegesis, if he wanted to be given a break. His God was

not like that charming white-bearded bungler of the Anglican, Methodist

or Catholic churches. His God was not in the business of giving people

breaks. The moment Samad set eyes on the pretty red-haired music

teacher Poppy Burt Jones that July of 1984, he knew finally the truth

of this. He knew his God was having his revenge, he knew the game was

up, he saw that the contract had been broken, and the sanity clause did

not, after all, exist, that temptation had been deliberately and maliciously thrown in his path. In short, all deals were off.

Masturbation recommenced in earnest. Those two months, between seeing

the pretty red-haired music teacher once and seeing her again,  
were the

longest, stickiest, smelliest, guiltiest fifty-six days of Samad's  
life. Wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he found  
himself

suddenly accosted by some kind of synaesthetic fixation with  
the woman:

hearing the colour of her hair in the mosque, smelling the  
touch of her

hand on the tube, tasting her smile while innocently walking  
the

streets on his way to work; and this in turn led to a knowledge  
of

every public convenience in London, led to the kind of  
masturbation

that even a fifteen-year-old boy living in the Shetlands might  
find

excessive. His only comfort was that he, like Roosevelt, had  
made a

New Deal: he was going to beat but he wasn't going to eat. He  
meant

somehow to purge himself of the sights and smells of Poppy  
Burt-Jones,

of the sin of istimna, and, though it wasn't fasting season and  
these

were the longest days of the year, still no substance passed  
Samad's

lips between sunrise and sunset, not even, thanks to a little  
china

spittoon, his own saliva. And

because there was no food going in the one end, what came  
out of the

other end was so thin and so negligible, so meagre and translucent,  
that Samad could almost convince himself that the sin was lessened,  
that one wonderful day he would be able to massage one-eyed-Jack as vigorously as he liked and nothing would come out but air.  
But despite the intensity of the hunger spiritual, physical, sexual  
Samad still did his twelve hours daily in the restaurant.  
Frankly, he  
found the restaurant about the only place he could bear to be.  
He  
couldn't bear to see his family, he couldn't bear to go to O'Connell's, he couldn't bear to give Archie the satisfaction of seeing  
him in such a state. By mid August he had upped his working hours to  
fourteen a day; something in the ritual of it picking up his basket of  
pink swan-shaped napkins and following the trail of Shiva's plastic  
carnations, correcting the order of a knife or fork, polishing a glass,  
removing the smear of a finger from the china plates soothed him. No  
matter how bad a Muslim he might be, no one could say Samad wasn't a  
consummate waiter. He had taken one tedious skill and honed it to  
perfection. Here at least he could show others the right path:  
how to



disguise a stale onion bhaji, how to make fewer prawns look like more,

how to explain to an Australian that he doesn't want the amount of

chilli he thinks he wants. Outside the doors of the Palace he was a

masturbator, a bad husband, an indifferent father, with all the morals

of an Anglican. But inside here, within these four green and yellow

paisley walls, he was a one-handed genius.

“Shiva! Flower missing. Here.”

It was two weeks into Samad's New Deal and an average Friday afternoon

at the Palace, setting up.

“You've missed this vase, Shiva!”

Shiva wandered over to examine the empty, pencil-thin, aquamarine vase

on table nineteen.

“And there is some lime pickle afloat in the mango chutney in the sauce

carousel on table fifteen.”

“Really?” said Shiva drily. Poor Shiva; nearly thirty now; not so

pretty; still here. It had never happened for him, whatever he thought

was going to happen for him. He did leave the restaurant, Samad

remembered vaguely, for a short time in 1979 to start up a security

firm, but 'nobody wanted to hire Paki bouncers' and he had come back, a

little less aggressive, a little more despairing, like a broken horse.

“Yes, Shiva. Really and truly.”

“And that’s what’s driving you crazy, is it?”

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say crazy, no ... it is troubling me.”

“Because something,” interrupted Shiva, ‘has got right up your arse

recently. We’ve all noticed it.”

“We?”

“Us. The boys. Yesterday it was a grain of salt in a napkin. The day

before Gandhi wasn’t hung straight on the wall. The past week you’ve

been acting like Fuhrer-gee,” said Shiva nodding in Ardashir’s direction. “Like a crazy man. You don’t smile. You don’t eat. You’re

constantly on everybody’s case. And when the head waiter’s not all

there it puts everybody off. Like a football captain.”

“I am certain I do not know to what you are referring,” said Samad,

tight-lipped, passing him the vase.

“And I’m certain you do,” said Shiva provocatively, placing the empty

vase back on the table.

“If I am concerned about something, there is no reason why it should

disrupt my work here,” said Samad, becoming panicked, passing him back

the vase. “I do not wish to inconvenience others.”

Shiva returned the vase to the table once more. “So there is

something. Come on, man ... I know we haven't always seen eye to eye,

but we've got to stick together in this place. How long have we worked

together? Samad Miah?"

Samad looked up suddenly at Shiva, and Shiva saw he was sweating, that

he seemed almost dazed. "Yes, yes ... there is ... something."

Shiva put his hand on Samad's shoulder. "So why don't we sod the

fucking carnation and go and cook you a curry sun'll be down in twenty

minutes. Come on, you can tell Shiva all about it. Not because I give

a fuck, you understand, but I have to work here too and you're driving

me mad, mate."

Samad, oddly touched by this inelegant offer of a listening ear, laid

down his pink swans and followed Shiva into the kitchens.

"Animal, vegetable, mineral?"

Shiva stood at a work surface and began chopping a breast of chicken

into perfect cubes and dousing them in corn flour.

"Pardon me?"

"Is it animal, vegetable or mineral?" repeated Shiva impatiently. The

thing that's bothering you."

"Animal, mainly."

"Female?"

Samad dropped on to a nearby stool and hung his head.

“Female,” Shiva concluded. “Wife?”

The shame of it, the pain of it will come to my wife, but no .  
she is

not the cause.”

“Another bird. My specialist subject.” Shiva performed the  
action of

rolling a camera, sang the theme to Mastermind and jumped  
into shot.

“Shiva Bhagwati, you have thirty seconds on shagging women  
other than

your wife. First question: is it right? Answer: depends. Second  
question: shall I go to hell? -‘

Samad cut in, disgusted. “I am not.. . making love to her.”

“I’ve started so I’ll finish: shall I go to hell? Answer ‘

“Enough. Forget it. Please, forget that I mentioned anything of  
this.”

“Do you want aubergine in this?”

“No .. . green peppers are sufficient.”

“Alrighty,” said Shiva, throwing a green pepper up in the air  
and catching it on the tip of his knife. “One Chicken Bhuna  
coming up.

How long’s it been going on, then?”

“Nothing is going on. I met her only once. I barely know her.”

“So: what’s the damage? A grope? A snog?”

“A handshake, only. She is my sons’ teacher.”

Shiva tossed the onions and peppers into hot oil. “You’ve had  
the odd

stray thought. So what?”

Samad stood up. “It is more than stray thoughts, Shiva. My  
whole body

is mutinous, nothing will do what I tell it. Never before have I been

subjected to such physical indignities. For example: I am constantly

‘

“Yeah,” said Shiva, indicating Samad’s crotch. “We noticed that too.

Why don’t you do the five-knuckle-shuffle before you get to work?”

“I do . . . I am . . . but it makes no difference. Besides, Allah forbids it.”

“Oh, you should never have got religious, Samad. It don’t suit you.”

Shiva wiped an onion-tear away. “All that guilt’s not healthy.”

“It is not guilt. It is fear. I am fifty-seven, Shiva. When you get to my age, you become . . . concerned about your faith, you don’t want

to leave things too late. I have been corrupted by England, I see that

now my children, my wife, they too have been corrupted. I think maybe

I have made the wrong friends. Maybe I have been frivolous. Maybe I

have thought intellect more important than faith. And now it seems

this final temptation has been put in front of me. To punish me, you

understand. Shiva, you know about women. Help me. How can this

feeling be possible? I have known of the woman’s existence for no more

than a few months, I have spoken to her only once.”

“As you said: you’re fifty-seven. Mid-life crisis.”

“Mid-life? What does this mean?” snapped Samad irritably.

“Dammit,

Shiva, I don’t plan to live for one hundred and fourteen years.”

“It’s a manner of speaking. You read about it in the magazines these days. It’s when a man gets to a certain point in life, he starts

feeling he’s over the hill. . . and you’re as young as the girl you feel, if you get my meaning.”

“I am at a moral crossroads in my life and you are talking nonsense to me.”

“You’ve got to learn this stuff, mate,” said Shiva, speaking slowly,

patiently. “Female organism, gee-spot, testicle cancer, the menopause mid-life crisis is one of them. Information the modern

man needs at his fingertips.”

“But I don’t wish for such information!” cried Samad, standing up and

pacing the kitchen. “That is precisely the point! I don’t wish to be

a modern man! I wish to live as I was always meant to! I wish to

return to the East!”

“Ah, well . . . we all do, don’t we?” murmured Shiva, pushing the

peppers and onion around the pan. “I left when I was three. Fuck

knows I haven’t made anything of this country. But who’s got the money

for the air fare? And who wants to live in a shack with  
fourteen

servants on the payroll? Who knows what Shiva Bagwhati  
would have

turned out like back in Calcutta? Prince or pauper? And who,”  
said

Shiva, some of his old beauty returning to his face, ‘can pull  
the West

out of ‘em once it’s in?”

Samad continued to pace. “I should never have come here  
that’s where

every problem has come from. Never should have brought my  
sons here,

so far from God. Willesden Green! Calling cards in sweetshop  
windows,

Judy Blume in the school, condom on the pavement, Harvest  
Festival,

teacher-temptresses!” roared Samad, picking items at random.  
“Shiva!

tell you, in confidence: my dearest friend, Archibald Jones, is  
an

unbeliever! Now: what kind of a model am I for my children?”

“Iqbal, sit down. Be calm. Listen: you just want somebody.  
People

want people. It happens from Delhi to Deptford. And it’s not  
the end

of the world.”

“Of this, I wish I could be certain.”

“When are you next seeing her?”

“We are meeting for school-related business . . . the first  
Wednesday of

September.”

“I see. Is she Hindu? Muslim? She ain’t Sikh, is she?”

“That is the worst of it,” said Samad, his voice breaking.

“English.

White. English.”

Shiva shook his head. “I been out with a lot of white birds,  
Samad. A

lot. Sometimes it’s worked, sometimes it ain’t. Two lovely  
American

girls. Fell head-over-heels for a Parisian stunner. Even spent a  
year

with a Romanian. But never an English girl. Never works.  
Never.”

“Why?” asked Samad, attacking his thumbnail with his teeth  
and

awaiting some fearful answer, some edict from on high. “Why  
not, Shiva

Bhagwati?”

“Too much history,” was Shiva’s enigmatic answer, as he  
dished up the

Chicken Bhuna. “Too much bloody history.”

8.30 a.m.” the first Wednesday of September, 1984. Samad,  
lost in

thought somewhat, heard the passenger door of his Austin  
Mini Metro

open and close far away in the real world and turned to his left  
to

find Millat climbing in next to him. Or at least a Millat-shaped  
thing

from the neck down: the head replaced by a Tomytronic - a  
basic

computer game that looked like a large pair of binoculars.

Within it,



Samad knew from experience, a little red car that represented his son

was racing a green car and a yellow car along a three-dimensional road

of l.e.d.“s.

Millat parked his tiny backside on the brown plastic seat.

“Ooh! Cold

seat! Cold seat! Frozen bum!”

“Millat, where are Magid and Me?”

“Coming.”

“Coming with the speed of a train or coming with the speed of a

snail?”

“Eeek!” squealed Millat, in response to a virtual blockade that threatened to send his red car spinning off into oblivion.

“Please, Millat. Take this off.”

“Can’t. Need one, oh, two, seven, three points.”

“Millat, you need to begin to understand numbers. Repeat: ten thousand, two hundred and seventy-three.”

Then blousand, poo bum dred and weventy-wee.”

Take it off, Millat.”

“Can’t. I’ll die. Do you want me to die, Abba?”

Samad wasn’t listening. It was imperative that he be at school before

nine if this trip were going to have any purpose whatsoever.

By nine,

she’d be in class. By nine-oh-two, she’d be opening the register with

those long fingers, by nine-oh-three she’d be tapping her high-mooned

nails on a wooden desk somewhere out of sight.

“Where are they? Do they want to be late for school?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Are they always this late?” asked Samad, for this was not his regular

routine the school run was usually Alsana’s or Clara’s assignment. It

was for a glimpse of Burt-Jones (though their meeting was only seven

hours and fifty-seven minutes away, seven hours and fifty-six minutes

away, seven hours .. .) that he had undertaken the most odious parental

responsibility in the book. And he’d had a hard time convincing Alsana

there was nothing peculiar in this sudden desire to participate fully

in the educational transportation of his and Archie’s offspring:

“But Samad, you don’t get in the house ‘til three in the morning. Are

you going peculiar?”

“I want to see my boys! I want to see Me! Every morning they are

growing up! I never see it! Two inches Millat has grown.”

“But not at eight thirty in the morning. It is very funnily enough

that he grows all the time praise Allah! It must be some kind of a

miracle. What is this about, hmm?” She dug her fingernail into the

overhang of his belly. “Some hokery-pokery. I can smell it like goat’s tongue gone off.”

Ah, Alsana's culinary nose for guilt, deceit and fear was without equal

in the borough of Brent, and Samad was useless in the face

Samad 1984, 1SJ7

of it. Did she know? Had she guessed? These anxieties Samad had

slept on all night (when he wasn't slapping the salami) and then

brought to his car first thing so that he might take them out on his

children.

"Where in hell's name are they?"

"Hell's bells!"

"Millat!"

"You swore," said Millat, taking lap fourteen and getting a five-oh-oh

bonus for causing the combustion of Yellow Car. "You always do. So

does M'ster Jones."

"Well, we have special swearing licences."

Headless Millat needed no face to express his outrage. "NO SUCH THING AS-

"OK, OK, OK," back-pedalled Samad, knowing there is no joy to be had in

arguing ontology with a nine-year-old, "I have been caught out. No

such thing as a licence to swear. Millat, where's your saxophone? You

have orchestra today."

"In the boot," said Millat, his voice at once incredulous and

disgusted: a man who didn't know the saxophone went in the boot on

Sunday night was some kind of a social retard. "Why're you picking us

up? M'ster Jones picks us up on Mondays. You don't know anything

about picking us up. Or taking us in."

"I'm sure somehow I will muddle through, thank you, Millat. It is

hardly rocket science, after all. Where are those two!" he shouted,

beeping the horn, unhinged by his nine-year-old son's ability to

recognize the irregularity in his behaviour. "And will you please be

taking that damn thing off!" Samad made a grab for the Tomytronic and

pulled it down around Millat's neck.

"YOU KILLED ME!" Millat looked back in the Tomytronic, horrified,

and

just in time to witness his tiny red alter-ego swerving into the barriers and disappearing in a catastrophic light show of showering

yellow sparks. "YOU KILLED ME WHEN I WAS WINNING!"

Samad closed his eyes and forced his eyeballs to roll up as far as possible in his head, in the hope that his brain might impact upon

them, a self-blinding, if he could achieve it, on a par with that other

victim of Western corruption, Oedipus. Think: I want another woman.

Think: I've killed my son. I swear. I eat bacon. I regularly slap the salami. I drink Guinness. My best friend is a kafir non-believer. I tell myself if I rub up and down without using hands it

does not count. But oh it does count. It all counts on the great counting board of He who counts. What will happen come Mahshar?

How

will I absolve myself when the Last Judgement comes? .  
Click-slam.

Click-slam. One Magid, one Irie. Samad opened his eyes and looked in

the rear-view mirror. In the back seat were the two children he had

been waiting for: both with their little glasses, Irie with her wilful

Afro (not a pretty child: she had got her genes mixed up, Archie's nose

with Clara's awfully buck teeth), Magid with his thick black hair

slicked into an unappealing middle-parting. Magid carrying a recorder,

Irie with violin. But beyond these basic details, everything was not

as it should be. Unless he was very much mistaken, something was

rotten in this Mini Metro something was afoot. Both children were

dressed in black from head to toe. Both wore white armbands on their

left arms upon which were painted crude renditions of baskets of

vegetables. Both had pads of writing paper and a pen tied around their

necks with string.

“Who did this to you?”

Silence.

“Was it Amma? And Mrs. Jones?”

Silence.

“Magid! Irie! Cat got your tongues?”

More silence; children’s silence, so desperately desired by adults yet

eerie when it finally occurs.

“Millat, do you know what this is about?”

“Sboring,” whined Millat. “They’re just being clever, clever, snotty,

dumb-bum, Lord Magoo and Mrs. Ugly Poo.”

Samad twisted in his car seat to face the two dissenters. “Am I meant

to ask you what this is about?”

Magid grasped his pen and, in his neat, clinical hand, printed: if you

want to, then ripped off the piece of paper and handed it to Samad.

“A Vow of Silence. I see. You too, Me? I would have thought you were

too sensible for such nonsense.”

Me scribbled for a moment on her pad and passed the missive forward. we

are pros testing

“Pros-testing? What are Pros and why are you testing them?  
Did your

mother teach you this word?”

Me looked like she was going to burst with the sheer force of her

explanation, but Magid mimed the zipping up of her mouth,  
snatched back

the piece of paper and crossed out the first s.

“Oh, I see. Protesting.”

Magid and Me nodded maniacally.

“Well, that is indeed fascinating. And I suppose your mothers  
engineered this whole scenario? The costumes? The  
notepads?”

Silence.

“You are quite the political prisoners . . . not giving a thing  
away.

All right: may one ask what it is that you are protesting  
about?”

Both children pointed urgently to their armbands.

“Vegetables? You are protesting for the rights of vegetables?”

Me held one hand over her mouth to stop herself screaming  
the answer,

while Magid set about his writing pad in a flurry. we

ARE PROTESTING ABOUT THE HARVEST FESTIVAL.

Samad growled, “I told you already. I don’t want you  
participating in

that nonsense. It has nothing to do with us, Magid. Why are  
you

always trying to be somebody you are not?”

There was a mutual, silent anger as each acknowledged the  
painful

incident that was being referred to. A few months earlier, on Magid's

ninth birthday, a group of very nice-looking white

boys with meticulous manners had turned up on the doorstep and asked

for Mark Smith.

"Mark? No Mark here," Alsana had said, bending down to their level

with a genial smile. "Only the family Iqbal in here. You have the

wrong house."

But before she had finished the sentence, Magid had dashed to the door,

ushering his mother out of view.

"Hi, guys."

"Hi, Mark."

"Off to the chess club, Mum."

"Yes, M - M - Mark," said Alsana, close to tears at this final snub,

the replacement of "Mum" for "Ammah". "Do not be late, now."

"I GIVE YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAG ID

MAHFOOZMURSHEDMUBTASIM IQBAL!" Samad had yelled after

Magid when he

returned home that evening and whipped up the stairs like a bullet to

hide in his room. "AND

YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH!"

But this was just a symptom of a far deeper malaise. Magid really



wanted to be in some other family. He wanted to own cats and not  
cockroaches, he wanted his mother to make the music of the  
cello, not  
the sound of the sewing machine; he wanted to have a trellis of  
flowers  
growing up one side of the house instead of the ever growing  
pile of  
other people's rubbish; he wanted a piano in the hallway in  
place of  
the broken door off cousin Kurshed's car; he wanted to go on  
biking  
holidays to France, not day-trips to Blackpool to visit aunties;  
he  
wanted the floor of his room to be shiny wood, not the orange  
and green  
swirled carpet left over from the restaurant; he wanted his  
father to  
be a doctor, not a one-handed waiter; and this month Magid  
had  
converted all these desires into a wish to join in with the  
Harvest  
Festival like Mark Smith would. Like everybody else would.  
BUT WE WANT TO DO IT. OR WE'LL GET A  
DETENTION.  
MRS OWENS SAID IT IS TRADITION.  
Samad blew his top. "Whose tradition?" he bellowed, as a  
tearful  
Magid began to scribble frantically once more. "Dammit, you  
are a  
Muslim, not a wood sprite! I told you, Magid, I told you the  
condition

upon which you would be allowed. You come with me on haj.  
If I am to  
touch that black stone before I die I will do it with my eldest  
son by  
my side.”

Magid broke the pencil halfway through his reply, scrawling  
the second

half with blunt lead. it's not fair! i can't go on

HAJI'VE GOT TO GO TO SCHOOL. I DON'T HAVE TIME  
TO

GO TO MECCA. ITS NOT FAIR!

“Welcome to the twentieth century. It's not fair. It's never  
fair.”

Magid ripped the next piece of paper from the pad and held it  
up in

front of his father's face. you told her dad not to

LET HER GO.

Samad couldn't deny it. Last Tuesday he had asked Archie to  
show

solidarity by keeping Me at home the week of the festival.

Archie had

hedged and haggled, fearing Clara's wrath, but Samad had  
reassured him:

Take a leaf from my book, Archibald. Who wears the trousers  
in my

house? Archie had thought about Alsana, so often found in  
those lovely

silken trousers with the tapered ankle, and of Samad, who  
regularly

wore a long piece of embroidered grey cotton, a lungi,  
wrapped round

his waist, to all intents and purposes, a skirt. But he kept the

thought to himself.

we won't speak if you don't let us go. we won't

SPEAK EVER, EVER, EVER, EVER AGAIN. WHEN WE  
DIE

EVERYONE WILL SAY IT WAS YOU. YOU YOU YOU.

Great, thought Samad, more blood and sticky guilt on my one  
good

hand.

Samad didn't know anything about conducting, but he knew  
what he liked.

True, it probably wasn't very complex, the way she did it, just  
a

simple three four just a one-dimensional metro 152

nome drawn in the air with her index finger but aaah, what a  
joy it was

to watch her do it! Her back to him; her bare feet lifting on  
every

third beat out of her slip-on shoes; her backside protruding  
ever so

slightly, pressing up against the jeans each time she lunged  
forward

for one of the orchestra's ham-fisted crescendos what a joy it  
was!

What a vision! It was all he could do to stop himself rushing at  
her

and carrying her off; it frightened him, the extent to which he  
could

not take his eyes off her. But he had to rationalize: the  
orchestra

needed her God knows they were never going to get through  
this

adaptation of Swan Lake (more reminiscent of ducks waddling through an

oil slick) without her. Yet what a terrific waste it seemed akin to

watching a toddler on a bus mindlessly grabbing the breast of the

stranger sitting next to him what a waste, that something of such

beauty should be at the disposal of those too young to know what to do

with it. The second he tasted this thought he brought it back up:

Samad Miah , . , surely a man has reached his lowest when he is

jealous of the child at a woman's breast, when he is jealous of the

young, of the future . . . And then, not for the first time that afternoon, as Poppy Burt-Jones lifted out of her shoes once more and

the ducks finally succumbed to the environmental disaster, he asked

himself: Why, in the name of Allah, am I here? And the answer returned

once more with the persistence of vomit: Because I simply cannot be

anywhere else.

Tic, tic, tic. Samad was thankful for the sound of baton hitting on

music-stand, which interrupted him from these thoughts, these thoughts

that were something close to delirium.

“Now, kids, kids. Stop. Shhh, quieten down. Mouths away from

instruments, bows down. Down, Anita. That's it, yes, right on the

floor. Thank you. Now: you've probably noticed we have a visitor

today." She turned to him and he tried hard to find some part of her

on which to focus, some inch that did not heat his troubled blood. This

is Mr. Iqbal, Magid's and Millat's father."

Samad stood up as if he'd been called to attention, draped his wide-lapel led overcoat carefully over his volatile crotch, waved

rather lamely, sat back down.

"Say "Hello, Mr. Iqbal.""

"HELLO, MR ICK-BALL," came the resounding chorus from all but two

of

the musicians.

"Now: don't we want to play thrice as well because we have an

audience?"

"YES, MISS BURT JONES

"And not only is Mr. Iqbal our audience for today, but he's a very

special audience. It's because of Mr. Iqbal that next week we won't

be playing Swan Lake any more."

A great roar met this announcement, accompanied by a stray chorus of

trumpet hoots, drum rolls, a cymbal.

“All right, all right, enough. I didn’t expect quite so much joyous approval.”

Samad smiled. She had humour, then. There was wit there, a bit of

sharpness but why think the more reasons there were to sin, the smaller

the sin was? He was thinking like a Christian again; he was saying

Can’t say fairer than that to the Creator.

“Instruments down. Yes, you, Marvin. Thank you very much.”

“What’ll we be doin’ instead, then, Miss?”

“Well.. .” began Poppy Burt-Jones, the same half-coy, half daring

smile he had noticed before. “Something very exciting. Next week I

want to try to experiment with some Indian music.”

The cymbal player, dubious of what place he would occupy in such a

radical change of genre, took it upon himself to be the first to ridicule the scheme. “What, you mean that Eeeee EEEAAaaaa EEEeeee

AAOoooo music?” he said, doing a creditable impression of the strains

to be found at the beginning of a Hindi musical, or in the back-room of

an “Indian’ restaurant, along with attendant head movements. The class

let out a blast of laughter as loud as the brass section and echoed the

gag en masse: Eeee Eaaaoo OOOAaaah Eeee OOOiiiiiii . . . This, along

with screeching parodic violins, penetrated Samad's deep,  
erotic

half-slumber and sent his imagination into a garden, a garden  
encased

in marble where he found himself dressed in white and hiding  
behind a

large tree, spying on a be-saried, bindi-wearing Poppy Butt-  
Jones, as

she wound flirtatiously in and out of some fountains;  
sometimes

visible, sometimes not.

"I don't think-" began Poppy Burt-Jones, trying to force her  
voice

above the hoo-hah, then, raising it several decibels, "I DON'T  
THINK IT

IS VERY NICE TO' and here her voice slipped back to  
normal as the class

registered the angry tone and quietened down. "I don't think it  
is

very nice to make fan of somebody else's culture."

The orchestra, unaware that this is what they had been doing,  
but aware

that this was the most heinous crime in the Manor School rule  
book,

looked to their collective feet.

"Do you? Do you? How would you like it, Sophie, if someone  
made fan

of Queen?"

Sophie, a vaguely retarded twelve-year-old covered from head  
to toe in

that particular rock band's paraphernalia, glared over a pair of

bottle-top spectacles.

“Wouldn’t like it, Miss.”

“No, you wouldn’t, would you?”

“No, Miss.”

“Because Freddie Mercury is from your culture.”

Samad had heard the rumours that ran through the rank and file of the

Palace waiters to the effect that this Mercury character was in actual

fact a very light-skin Persian called Farookh, whom the head chef

remembered from school in Panchgani, near Bombay. But who wished to

split hairs? Not wanting to stop the lovely Burt-Jones while she was

in something of a flow, Samad kept the information to himself.

“Sometimes we find other people’s music strange because their culture

is different from ours,” said Miss Burt-Jones solemnly. “But that

doesn’t mean it isn’t equally good, now does it?”

“NO, MISS

“And we can learn about each other through each other’s culture, can’t

we?”

“YES, MISS.”

For example, what music do you like, Millat?”

Millat thought for a moment, swung his saxophone to his side and began

fingering it like a guitar. “Bo-orn to ruuun! Da da da da daaa!  
Bruce



Springsteen, Miss! Da da da da daaa! Baby, we were bo-orn ‘

“Umm, nothing nothing else? Something you listen to at home, maybe?”

Millat’s face fell, troubled that his answer did not seem to be the

right one. He looked over at his father, who was gesticulating wildly

behind the teacher, trying to convey the jerky head and hand movements

of bharata That yarn the form of dance Alsana had once enjoyed before

sadness weighted her heart, and babies tied down her hands and feet.

“Thriiiii-ller!” sang Millat, full throated, believing he had caught

his father’s gist. “Thriii-ller night! Michael Jackson, Miss! Michael

Jackson!”

Samad put his head in his hands. Miss Burt-Jones looked queerly at the

small child standing on a chair, gyrating and grabbing his crotch

before her. “OK, thank you, Millat. Thank you for sharing . . . that.”

Millat grinned. “No problem, Miss.”

While the children queued up to exchange twenty pence for two dry

digestives and a cup of tasteless squash, Samad followed the light foot

of Poppy Burt-Jones like a predator into the music cupboard, a tiny

room, windowless, with no means of escape, and full of instruments,  
filing cabinets over brimming with sheet music, and a scent Samad had  
thought hers but now identified as the maturing leather of violin cases  
mixed with the mellowing odour of catgut.

“This,” said Samad, spotting a desk beneath a mountain of paper, ‘is  
where you work?’”

Poppy blushed. “Tiny, isn’t it? Music budgets get cut every year  
until this year there was nothing left to cut from. It’s got to the  
point where they’re putting desks in cupboards and calling them  
offices. If it wasn’t for the GLC, there wouldn’t even be a desk.”

“It is certainly small,” said Samad, scanning the room desperately for  
some spot where he might stand that would put her out of arm’s reach.

“One might almost say, claustrophobic.”

“I know, it’s awful but won’t you sit down?”

Samad looked for the chair she might be referring to.

“Oh God! I’m sorry! It’s here.” She swept paper, books and rubbish

on to the floor with one hand, revealing a perilous looking stool. “I

made it but it’s pretty safe.”

“You excel in carpentry?” inquired Samad, searching once again for

more good reasons to commit a bad sin. “An artisan as well as a musician?”

“No, no, no I went to a few night classes nothing special. I made that and a foot stool, and the foot stool broke. I’m no do you know I can’t think of a single carpenter!”

“There is always Jesus.”

“But I can’t very well say “I’m no Jesus” ... I mean, obviously I’m not, but for other reasons.”

Samad took his wobbly seat as Poppy Burt-Jones went to sit behind her

desk. “Meaning you are not a good person?”

Samad saw that he had flustered her with the accidental solemnity of

the question; she drew her fingers through her fringe, fiddled with a

small tortoiseshell button on her blouse, laughed shakily. “I like to

think I’m not all bad.”

“And that is enough?”

“Well.. . I.. .”

“Oh my dear, I apologize .. .” began Samad. “I was not being serious,

Miss Burt Jones

“Well.. . Let’s say I’m no Mr. Chippendale that’ll do.”

“Yes,” said Samad kindly, thinking to himself that she had far better

legs than a Queen Anne chair, ‘that will do.’”

“Now: where were we?”

Samad leant a little over the desk, to face her. “Were we somewhere,

Miss Burt Jones

(He used his eyes; he remembered people used to say that it was his

eyes that new boy in Delhi, Samad Miah, they said, he has eyes to die

for.)

“I was looking looking I was looking for my notes where are my notes?”

She began rifling through the catastrophe of her desk, and Samad leant

back once more on his stool, taking what little satisfaction he could

from the fact that her fingers, if he was not mistaken, appeared to be

trembling. Had there been a moment, just then? He was fifty-seven it

was a good ten years since he'd had a moment he was not at all sure he

would recognize a moment if one came along. You old man, he told

himself as he dabbed at his face with a handkerchief, you old fool.

Leave now leave before you drown in your own guilty excrescence (for he

was sweating like a pig), leave before you make it worse. But was it

possible? Was it possible that this past month the month that he had

been squeezing and spilling, praying and begging, making deals and

thinking, thinking always about her that she had been thinking of

him?

“Oh! While I’m looking ... I remember there was something I wanted to

ask you

Yes! said the anthropomorphized voice that had taken up residence in

Samad’s right testicle. Whatever the question the answer is yes yes

yes. Yes, we will make love upon this very table, yes, we will burn

for it, and yes, Miss Burt-Jones, yes, the answer is inevitably, inescapably, YES. Yet somehow, out there where conversation continued,

in the rational world four feet above his ball-bag, the answer turned

out to be “Wednesday.”

Poppy laughed. “No, I don’t mean what day it is I don’t look that ditsy

do I? No, I meant what day is it; I mean, for Muslims. Only I saw

Magid was in some kind of costume, and when I asked him what it was for

he wouldn’t speak. I was terribly worried that I’d offended him

somehow.”

Samad frowned. It is odious to be reminded of one’s children when one

is calculating the exact shade and rigidity of a nipple that could so

assert itself through bra and shirt.

“Magid? Please do not worry yourself about Magid. I am sure he was not offended.”

“So I was right,” said Poppy gleefully. “Is it like a type of, I don’t know, vocal fasting?”

“Er . . . yes, yes,” stumbled Samad, not wishing to divulge his family

dilemma, ‘it is a symbol of the Qur’an’s . . . assertion that the day of

reckoning would first strike us all unconscious. Silent, you see. So,

so, so the eldest son of the family dresses in black and, umm, disdains

speech for a . . . a period of . . . of time as a process of- of purification.”

Dear God.

“I see. That’s just fascinating. And Magid is the elder?”

“By two minutes.”

Poppy smiled. “Only just, then.”

“Two minutes,” said Samad patiently, because he was speaking to one

with no knowledge of the impact such small periods of time had amounted

to throughout the history of the Iqbal family, ‘made all the difference.”

“And does the process have a name?”

“Amar durbol lagche.”

“What does it mean?”

Literal translation: 7 feel weak. It means, Miss Butt-Jones, that

every strand of me feels weakened by the desire to kiss you.  
“It means,” said Samad aloud, without missing a beat, ‘closed  
mouth  
worship of the Creator.”  
“Amar durbol lagche. Wow,” said Poppy Burt Jones  
“Indeed,” said Samad Miah.  
Poppy Burt-Jones leant forward in her chair. “I don’t know . . .  
To me,  
it’s just like this incredible act of self-control. We just don’t  
have  
that in the West that sense of sacrifice I just have so much  
admiration  
for the sense your people have of abstinence, of self-restraint.”  
At which point Samad kicked the stool from under him like a  
man hanging  
himself, and met the loquacious lips of Poppy Burt-Jones with  
his own  
feverish pair.  
7 Molars  
And the sins of the Eastern father shall be visited upon the  
Western  
sons. Often taking their time, stored up in the genes like  
baldness or  
testicular carcinoma, but sometimes on the very same day.  
Sometimes at  
the very same moment. At least, that would explain how two  
weeks  
later, during the old Druid festival of harvest, Samad can be  
found  
quietly packing the one shirt he’s never worn to mosque (To  
the pure

all things are pure) into a plastic bag, so that he might change later

and meet Miss Burt Jones (4.30, Harlesden Clock) without arousing

suspicion . . . while Magid and a change-of-heart Millat slip only four

cans of past their-sell-by-date chickpeas, a bag of variety crisps and

some apples into two rucksacks (Can't say fairer than that), in preparation for a meeting with Me (4.30, ice-cream van) and a visit to

their assigned old man, the one to whom they will offer pagan charity,

one Mr. J. P. Hamilton of Kensal Rise.

Unbeknownst to all involved, ancient ley-lines run underneath these two

journeys or, to put it in the modern parlance, this is a rerun. We

have been here before. This is like watching TV in Bombay or Kingston

or Dhaka, watching the same old British sitcoms spewed out to the old

colonies in one tedious, eternal loop. Because immigrants have always

been particularly prone to repetition it's something to do with that

experience of moving from West to East or East to West or from island

to island. Even when you arrive, you're still going back and forth;

your children are going round and round. There's no proper term for it



original sin seems too harsh; maybe original trauma would be better. A

trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all, and this is the

tragedy of the Iqbals that they can't help

but re-enact the dash they once made from one land to another, from one

faith to another, from one brown mother country into the pale, freckled

arms of an imperial sovereign. It will take a few replays before they

move on to the next tune. And this is what is happening as Alsana sews

loudly on her monstrous Singer machine, double-stitching around the

vacancy of a crotchless knicker, oblivious to the father and the sons

who are creeping around the house, packing clothes, packing provisions.

It is a visitation of repetition. It is a dash across continents. It is a rerun. But one at a time, now, one at a time . . .

Now, how do the young prepare to meet the old? The same way the old

prepare to meet the young: with a little condescension; with low

expectation of the other's rationality; with the knowledge that the

other will find what they say hard to understand, that it will go beyond them (not so much over the head as between the legs); and with

the feeling that they must arrive with something the other will like,

something suitable. Like Garibaldi biscuits.

They like them,” explained Me when the twins queried her choice, as the

three of them rumbled to their destination on the top of the 52 bus,

“they like the raisins in them. Old people like raisins.”

Millat, from under the cocoon of his Tomytronic, sniffed, “Nobody likes

raisins. Dead grapes bleurgh. Who wants to eat them!”

“Old people do,” We insisted, stuffing the biscuits back into her bag.

“And they’re not dead, akchully, they’re dried.”

“Yeah, after they’ve died.”

“Shut up, Millat. Magid, tell him to shut up!”

Magid pushed his glasses up to the bridge of his nose and diplomatically changed the subject. “What else have you got?”

Me reached into her bag. “A coconut.”

“A coconut!”

“For your information,” snapped Me, moving the nut out of Millat’s

reach, ‘old people like coconuts. They can use the milk for their

tea.”

Irie pressed on in the face of Millat retching. “And I got some crusty

French bread and some cheese-singlets and some apples ‘

“We got apples, you chief,” cut in Millat, ‘chief, for some inexplicable reason hidden in the etymology of North London slang,

meaning fool, arse, wanker, a loser of the most colossal proportions.

“Well, I got some more and better apples, akchully, and some Kendal

mint cake and some ackee and salt fish

“I hate ackee and salt fish

“Who said you were eating it?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Well, you’re not going to.”

“Well, good, ‘cos I don’t want to.”

“Well, good, ‘cos I wouldn’t let you even if you wanted to.”

“Well, that’s lucky ‘cos I don’t. So shame,” said Millat; and, without

removing his Tomytronic, he delivered shame, as was traditionally the

way, by dragging his palm along Irie’s forehead. “Shame in the

brain.”

“Well, akchully, don’t worry ‘cos you’re not going to get it’

“Oooh, feel the heat, feel the heat!” squealed Magid, rubbing his

little palm in. “You been shamed, man!”

“Akchully, I’m not shamed, you’re shamed ‘cos it’s for Mr. J. P.

Hamilton ‘

“Our stop!” cried Magid, shooting to his feet and pulling the bell

cord too many times.

“If you ask me,” said one disgruntled OAP to another, “they should all

go back to their own

But this, the oldest sentence in the world, found itself stifled by the

ringing of bells and the stamping of feet, until it retreated  
under the

seats with the chewing gum.

“Shame, shame, know your name,” trilled Magid. The three of  
them

hurtled down the stairs and off the bus.

And the 52 bus goes two ways. From the Willesden  
kaleidoscope, one can

catch it west like the children; through Kensal Rise, to  
Portobello, to

Knightsbridge, and watch the many colours shade off into the  
bright

white lights of town; or you can get it east, as Samad did;  
Willesden,

Dollis Hill, Harlesden, and watch with dread (if you are fearful  
like

Samad, if all you have learnt from the city is to cross the road  
at the

sight of dark-skinned men) as white fades to yellow fades to  
brown, and

then Harlesden Clock comes into view, standing like Queen  
Victoria’s

statue in Kingston - a tall stone surrounded by black.

Samad had been surprised, yes surprised, that it was Harlesden  
she had

whispered to him when he pressed her hand after the kiss that  
kiss he

could still taste and demanded where it was he might find her,  
away

from here, far from here (“My children, my wife,” he had  
mumbled,

incoherent); expecting “Islington’ or maybe “West  
Hampstead’ or at

least “Swiss Cottage’ and getting instead, “Harlesden. I live in Harlesden.”

“Stonebridge Estate?” Samad had asked, alarmed; wide-eyed at the

creative ways Allah found to punish him, envisioning himself atop his

new lover with a gangster’s four-inch knife in his back.

“No but not far from there. Do you want to meet up?”

Samad’s mouth had been the lone gunman on the grassy knoll that day,

killing off his brain and swearing itself into power all at the same

time.

“Yes. Oh, dammit! Yes.”

And then he had kissed her again, turning something relatively chaste

into something else, cupping her breast in his left hand and enjoying

her sharp intake of breath as he did so.

Then they had the short, obligatory exchange that those who cheat have

to make them feel less like those who cheat.

“I really shouldn’t ‘

“I’m not at all sure how this-‘

“Well, we need to meet at least to discuss what has ‘

“Indeed, what has happened, it must be discu ‘

“Because something has happened here, but ‘

“My wife . . . my children

“Let’s give it some time . . . two weeks Wednesday? 4.30?

Harlesden

Clock?”

He could at least, in this sordid mess, congratulate himself on his

timing: 4.15 by the time he got off the bus, which left five minutes to

nip into the McDonald’s toilets (that had black guards on the door,

black guards to keep out the blacks) and squeeze out of the restaurant

flares into a dark blue suit, with a wool V-neck and a grey shirt, the

pocket of which contained a comb to work his thick hair into some

obedient form. By which time it was 4.20, five minutes in which to

visit cousin Hakim and his wife Zinat who ran the local pounds + sop

shop (a type of shop that trades under the false premise that it sells

no items above this price but on closer inspection proves to be the

minimum price of the stock) and whom he meant inadvertently to provide

him with an alibi.

“Samad Miah, oh! So smart-looking today it cannot be without a

reason.”

Zinat Mahal: a mouth as large as the Blackwall Tunnel and Samad was

relying upon it.

“Thank you, Zinat,” said Samad, looking deliberately disingenuous. “As

for a reason ... I am not sure that I should say.”

“Samad! My mouth is like the grave! Whatever is told to me dies with me.”

Whatever was told to Zinat invariably lit up the telephone network, rebounded off aerials, radio waves and satellites along the way, picked up finally by advanced alien civilizations as it bounced through the atmosphere of planets far removed from this one.

“Well, the truth is ...”

“By Allah, get on with it!” cried Zinat, who was now almost on the

other side of the counter, such was her delight in gossip.

“Where are you off to?”

“Well... I am off to see a man in Park Royal about life insurance. I

want my Alsana well provided for after my death but!” he said,

wagging a finger at his sparkling, jewel-covered interrogator who wore

too much eyeshadow, “I don’t want her to know! Thoughts of death are

abhorrent to her, Zinat.”

“Do you hear that, Hakim? Some men worry about the future of their

wives! Go on get out of here, don’t let me keep you, cousin. And

don’t worry,” she called after him, simultaneously reaching for the

phone with her long curling fingernails, “I won’t say one word to

Alsi.”

Alibi done, three minutes were left for Samad to consider what an old

man brings a young girl; something an old brown man brings a young

white girl at the crossroads of four black streets; something suitable

.. .

“A coconut?”

Poppy Burt-Jones took the hairy object into her hands and looked up at

Samad with a perplexed smile.

“It is a mixed-up thing,” began Samad nervously. “With juice like a

fruit but hard like a nut. Brown and old on the outside, white and

fresh on the inside. But the mix is not, I think, bad. We use it sometimes,” he added, not knowing what else to say, ‘in curry.’”

Poppy smiled; a terrific smile which accentuated every natural beauty

of that face and had in it, Samad thought, something better than this,

something with no shame in it, something better and purer than what

they were doing.

“It’s lovely,” she said.

Out in the street and five minutes from the address on their school



sheets, Me still felt the irritable hot sting of shame and wanted a rematch.

“Tax that,” she said, pointing to a rather beat-up motorbike leaning by

Kensal Rise tube. “Tax that, and that,” indicating two BMXs beside

it.

Millat and Magid jumped into action. The practice of ‘taxing’ something, whereby one lays claims, like a newly arrived colonizer, to

items in a street that do not belong to you, was well known and beloved

to both of them.

“Cha, man! Believe, I don’t want to tax dat crap,” said Millat with

the Jamaican accent that all kids, whatever their nationality, used to

express scorn. “I tax dat,” he said, pointing out an admittedly impressive small, shiny, red MG about to turn the corner.

“And-dat’

he cried, getting there just before Magid as a BMW whizzed past. “Man,

you know I tax that,” he said to Magid, who offered no dispute.

“Blatantly.”

Me, a little dejected by this turn of events, turned her eyes from the

road to the floor, where she was suddenly struck by a flash of inspiration.

“I tax those!”

Magid and Millat stopped and looked in awe at the perfectly white Nikes

that were now in Me's possession (with one red tick, one blue; so

beautiful, as Millat later remarked, it made you want to kill yourself), though to the naked eye they appeared to be walking towards

Queens Park attached to a tall natty-dread black kid.

Millat nodded grudgingly. "Respect to that. I wish I'd seed dem."

"Tax!" said Magid suddenly, pushing his grubby finger up against some

shop glass in the direction of a four-foot-long chemistry set with an

ageing TV personality's face on the front.

He thumped the window. "Wow! I tax that!"

A brief silence ensued.

"You tax that? asked Millat, incredulous. "That? You tax a chemistry

set?"

Before poor Magid knew where he was, two palms had made a ferocious

slap on his forehead, and were doing much rubbing for good measure.

Magid gave We an et to Brute type of pleading look, in the full knowledge that it was useless. There is no honesty amongst almost-ten

year-olds.

"Shame! Shame! Know your name!"

"But Mr. J. P. Hamilton," moaned Magid from under the heat of shame.

“We’re here now. His house is just there. It’s a quiet street, you can’t make all this noise. He’s old.”

“But if he’s old, he’ll be deaf reasoned Millat. “And if you’re deaf

you can’t hear.”

“It doesn’t work like that. It’s hard for old people. You don’t understand.”

“He’s probably too old to take the stuff out of the bags,” said Me. “We

should take them out and carry them in our hands.”

This was agreed upon, and some time was taken arranging all the

foodstuffs in the hands and crevices of the body, so that they might

‘surprise’ Mr. J. P. Hamilton with the extent of their charity when he

answered the door. Mr. J. P. Hamilton, confronted on his doorstep by

three dark-skinned children clutching a myriad of projectiles, was duly

surprised. As old as they had imagined but far taller and cleaner, he

opened the door only slightly, keeping his hand, with its mountain

range of blue veins, upon the knob, while his head curled around the

frame. To Me he was reminiscent of some genteel elderly eagle: tufts

of feather-like hair protruded from ear drums, shirt cuffs and the

neck, with one white spray falling over his forehead, his fingers lay

in a permanent tight spasm like talons, and he was well  
dressed, as one  
might expect of an elderly English bird in Wonderland a suede  
waistcoat  
and a tweed jacket, and a watch on a gold chain.  
And twinkling like a magpie, from the blue scattering in his  
eyes  
undimmed by the white and red surround, to the gleam of  
a signet ring, four argent medals perched just above his heart,  
and the  
silver rim of a Senior Service packet peeping over the breast  
pocket.  
“Please,” came the voice from the bird-man, a voice that even the  
children sensed was from a different class, a different era. “I  
must  
ask that you remove yourselves from my doorstep. I have no  
money  
whatsoever; so be your intention robbing or selling I’m afraid  
you will  
be disappointed.”  
Magid stepped forward, trying to place himself in the old  
man’s eye  
line for the left eye, blue as Rayleigh scattering, had looked  
beyond  
them, while the right was so compacted beneath wrinkles it  
hardly  
opened. “Mr. Hamilton, don’t you remember, the school sent  
us, these  
are ‘  
He said, “Goodbye, now,” as if he were bidding farewell to an  
elderly

aunt embarking on a train journey, then once more “Goodbye”,  
and

through two panels of cheap stained-glass on the closed door  
the

children watched the lengthy figure of Mr. Hamilton, blurred  
as if by

heat, walking slowly away from them down a corridor until  
the brown

flecks of him merged with the brown flecks of the household  
furnishings

and the former all but disappeared.

Millat pulled his Tomytronic down around his neck, frowned,  
and

purposefully slammed his little fist into the doorbell, holding it  
down.

“Maybe,” suggested Irie, ‘he doesn’t want the stuff.”

Millat released the doorbell briefly. “He’s got to want it. He  
asked

for it,” he growled, pushing the bell back down with his full  
force.

“SGod’s harvest, in nit Mr. Hamilton! Mr. J. P. Hamilton!”

And then that slow process of disappearance began to rewind  
as he

reconstituted himself via the atoms of a staircase and a dresser  
until

he was large as life once more, curled around the door.

Millat, lacking patience, thrust his school information sheet  
into his

hand. “SGod’s harvest.”

But the old man shook his head like a bird in a bird-bath. “No,  
no, I

really won't be intimidated into purchases on my own  
doorstep. I don't

know what you are selling please God let it not be  
encyclopedias at my

age it is not more information one requires but less."

"But it's free!"

"Oh . . . yes, I see . . . why?"

"SGod's harvest," repeated Magid.

"Helping the local community. Mr. Hamilton, you must have  
spoken to

our teacher, because she sent us here. Maybe it slipped your  
mind,"

added Me in her grown-up voice.

Mr. Hamilton touched his temple sadly as if to retrieve the  
memory and

then ever so slowly opened his front door to full tilt and made  
a

pigeon-step forward into the autumn sunlight. "Well. . . you'd  
better

come in."

They followed Mr. Hamilton into the town house gloom of his  
hall.

Filled to the brim with battered and chipped Victoriana  
punctuated by

signs of more recent life children's broken bikes, a discarded

Speak-and-Spell, four pairs of muddy wellies in a family's  
variant

sizes.

"Now," he said cheerily, as they reached the living room with  
its

beautiful bay windows through which a sweeping garden  
could be seen,

‘what have we got here?’

The children released their load on to a moth-eaten chaise longue,

Magid reeling off the contents like items from a shopping list, while

Mr. Hamilton lit a cigarette and inspected the urban picnic with

doddering fingers.

“Apples . . . oh, dear me, no . . . chickpeas . . . no, no, no, potato-chips

It went on like this, each article being picked up in its turn and chastised, until the old man looked up at them with faint tears in his

eyes. “I can’t eat any of this, you see . . . too hard, too bloody hard. The most I could manage is probably the milk in that coconut.

Still . . . we will have tea, won’t we? You’ll stay for tea?”

The children looked at him blankly.

“Go on, my dears, do sit down

Me, Magid and Millat shuffled up nervously on the chaise longue. Then

there was a click-clack sound and when they looked up Mr. Hamilton’s

teeth were on his tongue, as if a second mouth had come out of the

first. And then in a flash they were back in.

“I simply cannot eat anything unless it has been pulverized beforehand,

you see. My own fault. Years and years of neglect. Clean teeth never

a priority in the army.” He signalled himself clumsily, an awkward jab

at his own chest with a shaking hand. “I was an army man, you see.

Now: how many times do you young people brush your teeth?”

Three times a day,” said Me, lying.

“LIAR!” chorused Millat and Magid. “PANTS ON FIRE!”

“Two and a half times.”

“Well, dear me, which is it?” said Mr. Hamilton, smoothing down his

trousers with one hand and lifting his tea with the other.

“Once a day,” said Me sheepishly, the concern in his voice compelling

her to tell the truth. “Most days.”

“I fear you will come to regret that. And you two?”

Magid was midway through formulating some elaborate fantasy of a

toothbrush machine that did it while you slept, but Millat came clean.

“Same. Once a day. More or less.”

Mr. Hamilton leant back contemplatively in his chair. “One sometimes

forgets the significance of one’s teeth. We’re not like the lower animals teeth replaced regularly and all that we’re of the mammals, you

see. And mammals only get two chances, with teeth. More sugar?”

The children, mindful of their two chances, declined.

“But like all things, the business has two sides. Clean white teeth



are not always wise, now are they? Par exemplum: when I was in the

Congo, the only way I could identify the nigger was by the whiteness of

his teeth, if you see what I mean. Horrid

ii

business. Dark as buggery, it was. And they died because of it, you

see? Poor bastards. Or rather I survived, to look at it in another way, do you see?"

The children sat silently. And then Irie began to cry, ever so quietly.

Mr. Hamilton continued, Those are the split decisions you make in war.

See a flash of white and bang! as it were . . . Dark as buggery.

Terrible times. All these beautiful boys lying dead there, right in

front of me, right at my feet. Stomachs open, you know, with their

guts on my shoes. Like the end of the bloody world. Beautiful men,

enlisted by the Krauts, black as the ace of spades; poor fools didn't

even know why they were there, what people they were fighting for, who

they were shooting at. The decision of the gun. So quick, children.

So brutal. Biscuit?"

"I want to go home," whispered Irie.

"My dad was in the war. He played for England," piped up Millat,

red-faced and furious.

“Well, boy, do you mean the football team or the army?”

“The British army. He drove a tank. A Mr. Churchill. With her dad,”

explained Magid.

“I’m afraid you must be mistaken,” said Mr. Hamilton, genteel as ever.

“There were certainly no wogs as I remember though you’re probably not

allowed to say that these days are you? But no ... no Pakistanis .. .

what would we have fed them? No, no,” he grumbled, assessing the

question as if he were being given the opportunity to rewrite history

here and now. “Quite out of the question. I could not possibly have

stomached that rich food. No Pakistanis. The Pakistanis would have

been in the Pakistani army, you see, whatever that was. As for the

poor Brits, they had enough on their hands with us old Queens

Mr. Hamilton laughed softly to himself, turned his head and silently

admired the roaming branches of a cherry tree that dominated one whole

corner of his garden. After a long pause he turned back and tears were

visible in his eyes again fast,

sharp tears as if he had been slapped in the face. “Now, you young men

shouldn’t tell fibs should you? Fibs will rot your teeth.”

“It’s not a lie, Mr. J. P. Hamilton, he really was,” said Magid, always the peace-maker, always the negotiator. “He was shot in the

hand. He has medals. He was a hero.”

“And when your teeth rot ‘

“It’s the truth!” shouted Millat, kicking over the tea-tray that sat

on the floor between them. “You stupid fucking old man.”

“And when your teeth rot,” continued Mr. Hamilton, smiling at the

ceiling, ‘aaah, there’s no return. They won’t look at you like they

used to. The pretty ones won’t give you a second glance, not for love

or money. But while you’re still young, the important matter is the

third molars. They are more commonly referred to as the wisdom teeth,

I believe. You simply must deal with the third molars before anything

else. That was my downfall. You won’t have them yet, but my great-grandchildren are just feeling them now. The problem with third

molars is one is never sure whether one’s mouth will be quite large

enough to accommodate them. They are the only part of the body that a

man must grow into. He must be a big enough man for these teeth, do

you see? Because if not oh dear me, they grow crooked or any which

way, or refuse to grow at all. They stay locked up there with  
the bone

an impaction, I believe, is the term and terrible, terrible  
infection

ensues. Have them out early, that's what I tell my  
granddaughter

Jocelyn in regard to her sons. You simply must. You can't fight  
against it. I wish I had. I wish I'd given up early and hedged  
my

bets, as it were. Because they're your father's teeth, you see,  
wisdom

teeth are passed down by the father, I'm certain of it. So you  
must be

big enough for them. God knows, I wasn't big enough for  
mine . . . Have

them out and brush three times a day, if my advice means  
anything."

By the time Mr. J. P. Hamilton looked down to see whether his  
advice

meant anything, his three dun-coloured visitors had

Samad 1984, U5J

already disappeared, taking with them the bag of apples  
(apples he had

been contemplating asking Jocelyn to put through the food  
processor);

tripping over themselves, running to get to a green space, to  
get to

one of the lungs of the city, some place where free breathing  
was

possible.

Now, the children knew the city. And they knew the city  
breeds the

Mad. They knew Mr. White-Face, an Indian who walks the streets of  
Willesden with his face painted white, his lips painted blue, wearing a  
pair of tights and some hiking boots; they knew Mr. Newspaper, a tall  
skinny man in an ankle-length raincoat who sits in Brent libraries  
removing the day's newspapers from his briefcase and methodically  
tearing them into strips; they knew Mad Mary, a black voodoo woman  
with  
a red face whose territory stretches from Kilburn to Oxford Street but  
who performs her spells from a bin in West Hampstead; they knew Mr.  
Toupee, who has no eyebrows and wears a toupee not on his head but on a  
string around his neck. But these people announced their madness they  
were better, less scary than Mr. J. P. Hamilton they flaunted their  
insanity, they weren't half mad and half not, curled around a door  
frame. They were properly mad in the Shakespearean sense, talking  
sense when you least expected it. In North London, where councillors  
once voted to change the name of the area to Nirvana, it is not unusual  
to walk the streets and be suddenly confronted by sage words from the

chalk-faced, blue-lipped or eye browless From across the  
street or  
from the other end of a tube carriage they will use their  
schizophrenic  
talent for seeing connections in the random (for discerning the  
whole  
world in a grain of sand, for deriving narrative from nothing)  
to  
riddle you, to rhyme you, to strip you down, to tell you who  
you are  
and where you're going (usually Baker Street the great  
majority of  
modern-day seers travel the Metropolitan Line) and why. But  
as a city  
we are not appreciative of these

V4

people. Our gut instinct is that they intend to embarrass us,  
that  
they're out to shame us somehow as they lurch down the train  
aisle,  
bulbous-eyed and with carbuncled nose, preparing to ask us,  
inevitably,  
what we are looking at. What the fuck are we looking at. As a  
kind of  
pre-emptive defence mechanism, Londoners have learnt not to  
look, never  
to look, to avoid eyes at all times so that the dreaded question  
“What  
you looking at?” and its pitiful, gutless, useless answer  
“Nothing”  
might be avoided. But as the prey evolves (and we are prey to  
the Mad

who are pursuing us, desperate to impart their own brand of truth to  
the hapless commuter) so does the hunter, and the true professionals  
begin to tire of that old catch phrase “What you looking at?”  
and move  
into more exotic territory. Take Mad Mary. Oh, the principle’s  
still  
the same, it’s still all about eye contact and the danger of  
making it,  
but now she’s making eye contact from a hundred, two  
hundred, even  
three hundred yards away, and if she catches you doing the  
same she  
roars down the street, dreads and feathers and cape afloat,  
Hoodoo  
stick in hand, until she gets to where you are, spits on you, and  
begins. Samad knew all of this they’d had dealings before, he  
and  
red-faced Mad Mary; he’d even suffered the misfortune of  
having her sit  
next to him on a bus. Any other day and Samad would have  
given her as  
good as he got. But today he was feeling guilty and vulnerable,  
today  
he was holding Poppy’s hand as the sun crept away; he could  
not face  
Mad Mary and her vicious truth-telling, her ugly madness  
which of  
course was precisely why she was stalking him, quite  
deliberately  
stalking him down Church Road.

“For your own safety, don’t look,” said Samad. “Just keep on walking

in a straight line. I had no idea she travelled this far into Harlesden.”

Poppy snatched the quickest glance at the multicoloured streaming flash

galloping down the high street on an imaginary horse.

She laughed. “Who is that?”

Samad quickened the pace. “She is Mad Mary. And she is not remotely

funny. She is dangerous.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. Just because she’s homeless and has mental

health . . . difficulties, doesn’t mean she wants to hurt anyone. Poor

woman, can you imagine what must have happened in her life to make her

like that?”

Samad sighed. “First of all, she is not homeless. She has stolen every wheelie bin in West Hampstead and has built quite a significant

structure out of them in Fortune Green. And secondly she is not a

“poor woman”. Everyone is terrified of her, from the council downwards, she receives free food from every corner shop in North

London ever since she cursed the Ramchandra place and business

collapsed within the month.” Samad’s portly figure was working up

quite a sweat now, as he shifted another gear in response to Mad Mary



doing the same on the other side of the street.

Breathless, he whispered, “And she doesn’t like white people.”

Poppy’s eyes widened. “Really?” she said, as if such an idea had

never occurred to her, and turned round to make the fatal mistake of

looking. In a second, Mad Mary was upon them.

A thick globule of spit hit Samad directly between his eyes, on the

bridge of his nose. He wiped it away, pulled Poppy to him and tried to

sidestep Mad Mary by ducking into the courtyard of St. Andrew’s

Church, but the Hoodoo stick slammed down in front of them both,

marking a line in the pebbles and dust that could not be crossed

over.

She spoke slowly, and with such a menacing scowl that the left side of

her face seemed paralysed. “You . . . lookin’ . . . at . . . some . . . ting?”

Poppy managed a squeak, “No!”

Mad Mary whacked Poppy’s calf with the Hoodoo stick and turned to

Samad. “You, sir! You . . . lookin’ . . . at . . . some . . . ting?”

Samad shook his head.

Suddenly she was screaming. “BLACK MAN! DEM BLOCK YOU EVERYWHERE YOU TURN!”

“Please,” stuttered Poppy, clearly terrified. “We don’t want any

trouble.”

“BLACK MAN!” (She liked to speak in rhyming couplets.)

“DE BITCH SHE WISH TO SEE YOU BURN!”

“We are minding our own business’ began Samad, but he was stopped by a

second projectile of phlegm, this time hitting him on the cheek.

“Tru hill and gully, dem follow you dem follow you, Tru hill and gully,

de devil swallow you ‘im swallow you.” This was delivered in a kind of

singing stage-whisper, accompanied by a dance from side to side, arms

outstretched and Hoodoo stick resting firmly underneath Poppy

Burt-Jones’s chin.

“What ‘as dem ever done for us body got kill us and enslave us? What

‘as dem done for our minds got hurt us an’ enrage us? What’s de

pollution?”

Mad Mary lifted Poppy’s chin with her stick and asked again,

“WHAT’S DE POLLUTION?”

Poppy was weeping. “Please ... I don’t know what you want me to ‘

Mad Mary sucked her teeth and turned her attention once more to

Samad.

“WHAT’S DE SOLUTION?”

“I don’t know.”

Mad Mary slapped him around the ankles with her stick.

“WHAT’S DE SOLUTION, BLACK MAN?”

Mad Mary was a beautiful, a striking woman: a noble forehead, a

prominent nose, ageless midnight skin and a long neck that Queens can

only dream about. But it was her alarming eyes, which shot out an

anger on the brink of total collapse, that Samad was concentrated on,

because he saw that they were speaking to him and him alone. Poppy had

nothing to do with this. Mad Mary was looking at him with recognition.

Mad Mary had spotted

a fellow traveller. She had spotted the madman in him (which is to

say, the prophet); he felt sure she had spotted the angry man, the

masturbating man, the man stranded in the desert far from his sons, the

foreign man in a foreign land caught between borders . . . the man who,

if you push him far enough, will suddenly see sense. Why else had she

picked him from a street full of people? Simply because she recognized

him. Simply because they were from the same place, he and Mad Mary,

which is to say: far away.

“Satyagraha,” said Samad, surprising himself with his own calmness.

Mad Mary, unused to having her interrogations answered, looked at him

in astonishment. “WHAT’S DE SOLUTION?”

“Satyagraha. It is Sanskrit for “truth and firmness”. Gandhi  
gee’s

word. You see, he did not like “passive resistance” or “civil  
disobedience”.”

Mad Mary was beginning to twitch and swear compulsively  
under her

breath, but Samad sensed that in some way this was Mad Mary  
listening,

this was Mad Mary’s mind trying to process words other than  
her own.

“Those words weren’t big enough for him. He wanted to show  
what we

call weakness to be a strength. He understood that sometimes  
not to

act is a man’s greatest triumph. He was a Hindu. I am a  
Muslim. My

friend here is’

“A Roman Catholic,” said Poppy shakily. “Lapsed.”

“And you are?” began Samad.

Mad Mary said cunt, bitch, rhasclaat several times and spat on  
the

floor, which Samad took as a sign of cooling hostilities.

“What I am trying to say

Samad looked at the small group of Methodists who, hearing  
the noise,

had begun to gather nervously at the door of St. Andrew’s. He  
grew

confident. There had always been a manque preacher in  
Samad. A

know-it-all, a walker-and-a-talker. With a small audience and a  
lot of

fresh air he had always been

able to convince himself that all the knowledge in the  
universe, all

the knowledge on walls, was his.

“I am trying to say that life is a broad church, is it not?” He  
pointed to the ugly red-brick building full of its quivering  
believers.

“With wide aisles He pointed to the smelly bustle of black,  
white,

brown and yellow shuffling up and down the high street. To  
the albino

woman who stood outside the Cash and Carry, selling daisies  
picked from

the churchyard. “Which my friend and I would like to continue  
walking

along if it is all right with you. Believe me, I understand your  
concerns,” said Samad, taking his inspiration now from that  
other great

North London street-preacher, Ken Livingstone, “I am having  
difficulties myself we are all having difficulties in this country,  
this country which is new to us and old to us all at the same  
time. We

are divided people, aren't we.”

And here Samad did what no one had done to Mad Mary for  
well over

fifteen years: he touched her. Very lightly, on the shoulder.

“We are split people. For myself, half of me wishes to sit  
quietly

with my legs crossed, letting the things that are beyond my  
control

wash over me. But the other half wants to fight the holy war.  
Jihad!

And certainly we could argue this out in the street, but I think,  
in

the end, your past is not my past and your truth is not my truth  
and

your solution it is not my solution. So I do not know what it is  
you

would like me to say. Truth and firmness is one suggestion,  
though

there are many other people you can ask if that answer does  
not

satisfy. Personally, my hope lies in the last days. The prophet  
Muhammad peace be upon Him! tells us that on the Day of  
Resurrection

everyone will be struck unconscious. Deaf and dumb. No chit-  
chat.

Tongueless. And what a bloody relief that will be. Now, if you  
will

excuse me.”

Samad took Poppy firmly by the hand and walked on, while  
Mad Mary

stood

dumbstruck only briefly before rushing to the church door and  
spraying

saliva upon the congregation.

Poppy wiped away a frightened tear and sighed.

She said, “Calm in a crisis. Impressive.”

Samad, increasingly given to visions, saw that great  
grandfather of

his, Mangal Pande, flailing with a musket; fighting against the  
new,

holding on to tradition.

“It runs in the family,” he said.

Later, Samad and Poppy walked up through Harlesden, around Dollis Hill,

and then, when it seemed they were hovering too near to Willesden,

Samad waited till the sun went down, bought a box of sticky Indian

sweets and turned into Roundwood Park; admired the last of the flowers.

He talked and talked, the kind of talking you do to stave off the

inevitable physical desire, the kind of talking that only increases it.

He told her about Delhi circa 1942, she told him about St. Albans

circa 1972. She complained about a long list of entirely unsuitable

boyfriends, and Samad, not able to criticize Alsana or even mention her

name, spoke of his children: fear of Millat's passion for obscenities

and a noisy TV show about an A-team; worries about whether Magid got

enough direct sunlight. What was the country doing to his sons, he

wanted to know, what was it doing?

"I like you," she said finally. "A lot. You're very funny. Do you

know that you're funny?"

Samad smiled and shook his head. "I have never thought of myself as a

great comic wit."

"No you are funny. That thing you said about camels She began to

laugh, and her laugh was infectious.

“What thing?”

“About camels when we were walking.”

“Oh, you mean, “Men are like camels: there is barely one in a hundred

that you would trust with your life.”

“Yes!”

“That’s not comedy, that is the Bukharl, part eight, page one hundred and thirty,” said Samad. “And it is good advice. I have

certainly found it to be true.”

“Well, it’s still funny.”

She sat closer to him on the bench and kissed his ear.

“Seriously, I

like you.”

“I’m old enough to be your father. I’m married. I am a Muslim.”

“O K, so Dateline wouldn’t have matched our forms. So what?”

“What kind of a phrase is this: “So what?” Is that English? That is

not English. Only the immigrants can speak the Queen’s English these

days.”

Poppy giggled. “I still say: So ‘

But Samad covered her mouth with his hand, and looked for a moment

almost as if he intended to hit her. “So everything. So everything.

There is nothing funny about this situation. There is nothing good



about it. I do not wish to discuss the rights or wrongs of this  
with

you. Let us stick to what we are obviously here for,” he spat  
out.

“The physical, not the metaphysical.”

Poppy moved to the other end of the bench and leant forward,  
her elbows

resting on her knees. “I know,” she began slowly, “that this is  
no

more than it is. But I won’t be spoken to like that.”

“I am sorry. It was wrong of me ‘

“Just because you feel guilty, I’ve nothing to feel ‘

“Yes, I’m sorry. I have no ‘

“Because you can go if you ‘

Half thoughts. Stick them all together and you have less than  
you

began with.

“I don’t want to go. I want you.” Poppy brightened a bit and  
smiled

her half-sad, half-goofy smile.

“I want to spend the night.. . with you.”

“Good,” she replied. “Because I bought this for you while you  
were

next door buying those sugary sweets.”

“What is it?”

Samad 1984, U57

She dived into her handbag, and in the attenuated minute in  
WK

which she scabbled through lipsticks and car-keys and spare  
“i change,

two things happened.

1.1 Samad closed his eyes and heard the words To the pure all things

are pure and then, almost immediately afterwards, Can't say fairer than

that.

1.2 Samad opened his eyes and saw quite clearly by the bandstand his

two sons, their white teeth biting into two waxy apples, waving,

smiling.

And then Poppy resurfaced, triumphant, with a piece of red plastic in

her hand.

“A toothbrush,” she said.

8 Mitosis

The stranger who wanders into O'Connell's Pool House at random, hoping

for the soft rise and fall of his grandfather's brogue, perhaps, or

seeking to rebound a red ball off the side cushion and into the corner

pocket, is immediately disappointed to find the place is neither Irish

nor a pool house. He will survey the carpeted walls, the reproductions

of George Stubbs's racehorse paintings, the framed fragments of some

foreign, Eastern script, with not a little confusion. He will look for

a snooker table and find instead a tall, brown man with terrible acne

standing behind a counter, frying up eggs and mushrooms. His eye will

land with suspicion upon an Irish flag and a map of the Arab Emirates

knotted together and hung from wall to wall, partitioning him from the

rest of the customers. Then he will become aware of several pairs of

eyes upon him, some condescending, some incredulous; the hapless

stranger will stumble out, warily, backwards, knocking over the

life-size cut-out of Viv Richards as he goes. The customers will

laugh. O'Connell's is no place for strangers.

O'Connell's is the kind of place family men come to for a different

kind of family. Unlike blood relations, it is necessary here to earn

one's position in the community; it takes years of devoted fucking

around, time-wasting, laying-about, shooting the breeze, watching paint

dry far more dedication than men invest in the careless moment of

procreation. You need to know the place. For example, there are

reasons why O'Connell's is an Irish pool house run by Arabs with no

pool tables. And there are reasons why the pustule-covered Mickey will

cook you chips, egg and beans, or egg, chips and beans, or beans,

chips, eggs and

mushrooms but not, under any circumstances, chips, beans, eggs and

bacon. But you need to hang around for that kind of information. Well

get into that later. For now, suffice to say this is Archie's and Samad's home from home; for ten years they have come here between six

(the time Archie finishes work) and eight (the time Samad starts) to

discuss everything from the meaning of Revelation to the prices of

plumbers. And women. Hypothetical women. If a woman walked past

the

yolk-stained window of O'Connell's (a woman had never been known to

venture inside) they would smile and speculate depending on Samad's

religious sensibilities that evening on matters as far reaching as

whether one would kick her out of bed in a hurry, to the relative

merits of stockings or tights, and then on, inevitably, to the great

debate: small breasts (that stand up) vs big breasts (that flop to the

sides). But there was never any question of real women, real flesh and

blood and wet and sticky women. Not until now. And so the unprecedented events of the past few months called for an earlier

O'Connell's summit than usual. Samad had finally phoned Archie and

confessed the whole terrible mess: he had cheated, he was cheating; he

had been seen by the children and now he was seeing the children, like

visions, day and night. Archie had been silent for a bit, and then

said, "Bloody hell. Four o'clock it is, then. Bloody hell." He was

like that, Archie. Calm in a crisis.

But come 4.15 and still no sign of him, a desperate Samad had chewed

every fingernail he possessed to the cuticle and collapsed on the

counter, nose squished up against the hot glass where the battered

burgers were kept, eye to eye with a postcard showing the eight

different local charms of County Antrim.

Mickey, chef, waiter and proprietor, who prided himself on knowing each

customer's name and knowing when each customer was out of sorts, prised

Samad's face off the hot glass with an egg slice.

"Oi."

"Hello, Mickey, how are you?"

"Same old, same old. But enough about me. What's the fucking matter

wiv you, mate. Eh? Eh? I've been watching you, Sammy, since the

minute you stepped in here. Face as long as shit. Tell your  
uncle

Mickey.”

Samad groaned.

“Oi. No. None of that. You know me. I’m the sympathetic side  
of the

service industry, I’m service with a fucking smile, I’d wear a  
little

red tie and a little red hat like them fuck wits in Mr. Burger if  
my

fuckin’ head weren’t so big.”

This was not a metaphor. Mickey had a very large head,  
almost as if

his acne had demanded more room and received planning  
permission.

“What’s the problem?”

Samad looked up at Mickey’s big red head.

“I am just waiting for Archibald, Mickey. Please, do not  
concern

yourself. I will be fine.”

“Shit early, in nit “Pardon?”

Mickey checked the clock behind him, the one with the  
palaeolithic

piece of encrusted egg on the dial. “I say “Shit early, in nit For  
you

and the Archie-boy. Six is when I expect you. One chips,  
beans, egg

and mushroom. And one omelette and mushrooms. With  
seasonal

variations, naturally.”

Samad sighed. “We have much to discuss.”

Mickey rolled his eyes. “You ain’t starting on that Mangy Pandy

whateverthefuckitis again, are you? Who shot who, and who hung who,

my

gran dad ruled the Pakis or whateverthefuckitwas, as if any poor fucker

gives a flying fuck. You’re driving the custom away. You’re creating’

Mickey flicked through his new bible, Food for Thought: A Guideline for

Employers and Employees Working in the Food Service Industry

Customer

Strategy and Consumer Relations. “You’re creating a repetitive

syndrome that puts all these buggers off their culinary experience.”

“No, no. My great-grandfather is not up for discussion today. We have

other business.”

“Well, thank fuck. Repetitive syndrome is what it is.” Mickey patted

his book, affectionately. “Sail in ‘ere, mate. Best four ninety-five

I ever spent. Talking of moolah, you ‘having a flutter today?’” asked

Mickey, signalling downstairs.

“I am a Muslim, Mickey, I don’t indulge any more

“Well, obviously, yeah, we’re all Brothers but a man’s gotta live, now.

Hasn’t he? I mean, hasn’t he?”

“I don’t know, Mickey, does he?”

Mickey slapped Samad firmly on the back. “Course he does! I was

saying to my brother Abdul ‘

“Which Abdul?”

It was a tradition, both in Mickey’s wider and nuclear family, to name

all sons Abdul to teach them the vanity of assuming higher status than

any other man, which was all very well and good but tended to cause

confusion in the formative years. However, children are creative, and

all the many Abduls added an English name as a kind of buffer to the

first.

“AbdulColin.”

“Right.”

“So, you know Abdul-Colin went a bit fundamental EGGS, BEANS,

CHIPS,

TOAST big racking beard, no pig, no drink, no pussy, the fuckin’ works,

mate there you are, guvnor.”

Abdul-Mickey pushed a plate of festering carbohydrate to a sunken old

man whose trousers were so high up his body they were gradually

swallowing him whole.

“Well, where do you think I slap eyes on Abdul-Colin last week? Only



in the Mickey Finn, down Harrow Road way, and I says, “Oi, Abdul-

Colin,

this is a fucking turn-up for the fucking books” and he says, all solemn, you know, all fully bearded, he says’

“Mickey, Mickey do you mind very much if we leave the story for later

... it is just that.. .”

“No, fine, fine. Wish I knew why the fuck I bother.”

“If you could possibly tell Archibald I am sitting in the booth behind

the pinball when he comes in. Oh, and my usual.”

“No problemo, mate.”

About ten minutes later the door went and Mickey looked up from Chapter

6, There’s a Fly in My Soup: Dealing with Frameworks of Hostility

Regarding Health Issues’, to see Archibald Jones, cheap suitcase in

hand, approaching the counter.

“All right, Arch. How’s the folding business?”

“Oh, you know. Comme si, comme sar. Samad about?”

“Is he about? Is he about”? He’s been hanging round like a bad fucking smell for half a fucking hour. Face as long as shit. Someone

wants to get a Poop-a-Scoop and clean him up.”

Archie put his suitcase on the counter and furrowed his brow.

“In a

bad way, is he? Between you and me, Mickey, I’m really worried about

him.”

“Go tell it to the fucking mountain,” said Mickey, who had been aggravated by Chapter 6’s assertion that you should rinse plates in piping hot water. “Or, alternatively, go to the booth behind the pinball.”

“Thanks, Mickey. Oh, omelette and ‘

‘I know. Mushrooms.”

Archie walked down the lino aisles of O’ConnellTs.

“Hello, Denzel, evening, Clarence.”

Denzel and Clarence were two uniquely rude, foul-mouthed octogenarian

Jamaicans. Denzel was impossibly fat, Clarence was horribly thin,

their families had both died, they both wore trilbies, and they sat in

the corner playing dominoes all the hours that were left to them.

“What dat bambaclaat say?”

“Im say evenin’.”

“Can’tim see me playin’ domino?”

“No man! “Im ‘ave a pussy for a face. How you expect’ ‘im to see any

little ting?”

Archie took it on the chin as it was meant and slipped into the booth,

opposite Samad. “I don’t understand,” said Archie, picking up immediately where their phone conversation had terminated.

“Are you

saying you’re seeing them there in your imagination or you’re seeing

them there in real life?”

“It is really very simple. The first time, the very first time, they were there. But since then Archie, these past few weeks, I see the

twins whenever I am with her like apparitions! Even when we are ... I

see them there. Smiling at me.”

“Are you sure you’re not just overworked.”

“Listen to me, Archie: I see them. It is a sign.”

“Sam, let’s try and deal with the facts. When they really saw you what

did you do?”

“What could I do? I said, “Hello, sons. Say hello to Miss Burt Jones

“And what did they say?”

“They said hello.”

“And what did you say?”

“Archibald, do you think I could simply tell you what occurred without

this constant inane interjection?”

“CHIPS, BEANS, EGG, TOMATO “AND MUSHROOM!”

“Sam, that’s yours.”

“I resent that accusation. It is not mine. I never order tomato. I do not want some poor peeled tomato boiled to death, then

fried to

death

“Well, it’s not mine. I asked for omelette.”

“Well, it is not mine. Now: may I continue?”

“With pleasure.”

“I looked at my boys, Archie ... I looked at my beautiful boys  
. and

my heart cracked no, more than this it shattered. It shattered  
into so

many pieces and each piece stabbed me like a mortal wound. I  
kept

thinking: how can I teach my boys anything,

how can I show them the straight road when I have lost my  
own

bearings?”

“I thought,” began Archie haltingly, ‘that the problem was the  
woman.

If you really don’t know what to do about her, well... we  
could flip

this coin, heads you stay, tails you go at least you’d have made  
a -‘

Samad slammed his good fist on the table. “I don’t want to flip  
a

bloody coin! Besides, it is too late for that. Can’t you see?  
What

is done is done. I am hell-bound, I see that now. So I must  
concentrate on saving my sons. I have a choice to make, a  
choice of

morality.” Samad lowered his voice, and even before he spoke  
Archie

knew to what he was about to refer. “You have made hard  
choices

yourself, Archie, many years ago. You hide it well, but I know  
you

have not forgotten what it is like. You have a bit of bullet in  
the

leg to prove it. You struggled with him. You won out. I have  
not

forgotten. I have always admired you because of it, Archibald.”

Archie looked at the floor. “I’d rather not ‘

“Believe me, I take no pleasure from dragging up that which is distasteful to you, my friend. But I am just trying to make you understand my situation. Then, as now, the question is always: What

kind of a world do I want my children to grow up in? You took action

on that matter once. And now it is my turn.”

Archie, making no more sense of Samad’s speeches than he had forty

years ago, played with a toothpick for a moment.

“Well.. . why don’t you just stop, well, seeing her.”

“I try ... I try.”

“That good is it?”

“No, well, that is not strictly .. . what I mean to say is, it is nice,

yes .. . but it is not debauched ... we kiss, we embrace.”

“But no ‘

“Not strictly speaking, no.”

“But some ‘

“Archibald, are you concerned about my sons or my sperm?”

“Sons,” said Archie. “Definitely sons.”

“Because there is rebellion in them, Archie. I can see it it is small

now but it is growing. I tell you, I don’t know what is happening to

our children in this country. Everywhere you look, it is the same.

Last week, Zinat's son was found smoking marijuana. Like a Jamaican!"

Archie raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, I meant no offence, Archibald."

"None taken, mate. But you shouldn't judge before you've tried it.

Being married to a Jamaican has done wonders for my arthritis. But

that's by the by. Carry on."

"Well, take Alsana's sisters all their children are nothing but trouble. They won't go to mosque, they don't pray, they speak strangely, they dress strangely, they eat all kinds of rubbish, they

have intercourse with God knows who. No respect for tradition. People

call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!"

Archie tried to look shocked and then tried disgusted, not knowing what

to say. He liked people to get on with things, Archie. He kind of

felt people should just live together, you know, in peace or harmony or

something.

"CHIPS, BEANS, EGG, MUSHROOM! OMELETTE AND MUSHROOMS!"

Samad raised his hand and turned to the counter.

"AbdulMickey!" he

yelled, his voice assuming a slight, comic, cockney twinge.

"Over

here, my guvnor, please."

Mickey looked at Samad, leant on the counter, and wiped his nose with his apron.

“Now you know better than that. It’s self-service around here, gentlemen. This ain’t the fucking Waldorf.”

“I’ll get it,” said Archie, sliding out of his seat.

“How is he?” asked Mickey under his breath, as he pushed the plate towards Archie.

Archie frowned. “Dunno. He’s on about tradition again. He’s worried about his sons, you see. Easy for children to go off the rails in this day and age, you know. I don’t really know what to say to him.”

“Don’t have to tell me, mate,” said Mickey, shaking his head.

“I wrote

the fucking book, didn’t I? Look at my littlest, Abdul Jimmy. Up in

juvenile court next week for swiping fucking VW medallions. I says to

‘im, you fucking stupid or som mink What the fuck is the point of

that? At least steal the fucking car, if that’s the way you feel about

it. I mean, why? “E says it’s som mink to do wiv some fucking Beetle

Boys or some such bollocks. Well, I says to him, that lot are dead as

shit if I get hold of ‘em, and I can tell you that for fucking nothing.

No sense of tradition, no fucking morality, is the problem.”

Archie nodded and picked up a wad of napkins with which to handle the hot dishes.

“If you want my advice and you do, ‘cos that’s part of the special

relationship between cafe owner and cafe customer you tell Samad he has

two options. He can either send them back to the old country, back to

India’

“Bangladesh,” corrected Archie, nicking a chip from Samad’s meal.

“Whereverthefuckitis. He can send ‘em back there and have ‘em brought

up proper, by their granddads and grand mums have ‘em learn about their

fucking culture, have ‘em grow up with some fucking principles. Or one

minute CHIPS,

BEANS, PAT TIE AND MUSHROOMS! FOR TWO!”

Denzel and Clarence ever so slowly sidled up to the hot plates.

“Dat pat tie look strange,” said Clarence.

“Im try to poison us,” said Denzel.

“Dem mushroom look peculiar,” said Clarence.

“Im try to infiltrate a good man with de devil’s food,” said Denzel.

Mickey slapped his egg slice down on Denzel’s fingers, “Oi.

Morecambe and fucking Wise. Get a new fucking routine, all right?”

“Or what?” persisted Archie.



“Im tryin’ to kill an ‘of man. An ‘of, weak man,” muttered Denzel, as

the two of them shuffled back to their seats.

“Fucking ‘ell, those two. They’re only alive ‘cos they’re too stingy

to pay for the fucking cremation.”

“Or what?”

“What?”

“What’s the second option?”

“Oh, yeah. Well, second option’s obvious, in nit

“Is it?”

“Accept it. He’ll have to accept it, won’t he. We’re all English now,

mate. Like it or lump it, as the rhubarb said to the custard. And that’ll be two fifty, Archibald, my good man. The golden age of

Luncheon Vouchers is over.”

The golden age of Luncheon Vouchers ended ten years ago. For ten years

Mickey had been saying, “The golden age of Luncheon Vouchers is over.”

And that’s what Archie loved about O’Connell’s. Everything was

remembered, nothing was lost. History was never revised or reinterpreted, adapted or whitewashed. It was as solid and as simple

as the encrusted egg on the clock.

When Archie returned to table eight, Samad was like Jeeves: if not

exactly disgruntled, then some way from being grunt led

“Archibald, did you take a wrong turn at the Ganges? Weren’t you

listening to my dilemma? I am corrupt, my sons are becoming corrupt,

we are all soon to burn in the fires of hell. These are problems of

some urgency, Archibald.”

Archie smiled serenely and stole another chip. “Problem solved, Samad,

mate.”

“Problem solved?”

“Problem solved. Now, the way I see it, you have two options ...”

Around the beginning of this century, the Queen of Thailand was aboard

a boat, floating along with her many courtiers, manservants, maids,

feet-bathers and food tasters, when suddenly the stern hit a wave and

the Queen was thrown overboard into the turquoise waters of the

Nippon-Kai where, despite her pleas for help, she drowned, for not one

person on that boat went to her aid. Mysterious to the outside world,

to the Thai the explanation was immediately clear: tradition demanded,

as it does to this day, that no man or woman may touch the Queen.

If religion is the opium of the people, tradition is an even more sinister analgesic, simply because it rarely appears sinister. If

religion is a tight band, a throbbing vein and a needle, tradition is a

far homelier concoction: poppy seeds ground into tea; a sweet cocoa

drink laced with cocaine; the kind of thing your grandmother might have

made. To Samad, as to the people of Thailand, tradition was culture,

and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted

principles. That didn't mean he could live by them, abide by them or

grow in the manner they demanded, but roots were roots and roots were

good. You would get nowhere telling him that weeds too have tubers, or

that the first sign of loose teeth is something rotten, something degenerate, deep within the gums. Roots were what saved, the ropes one

throws out to rescue drowning men, to Save Their Souls. And the

further Samad himself floated out to sea, pulled down to the depths by

a siren named Poppy Burt Jones the more determined he became to create

for his boys roots on shore, deep roots that no storm or gale could

displace. Easier said than done. He was in Poppy's poky little flat,

going through his own household accounts, when it became obvious to

him

that he had more sons than money. If he was to send them back, he would need two dowries for the grandparents, two amounts for the schooling, two amounts for the clothes. As it was he could barely cover both air fares. Poppy had said: "What about your wife? She's from a rich family isn't she?" But Samad Samad 1984, 1857 | had not yet revealed his plan to Alsana. He had only tested the water, mentioning it in a passing, hypothetical way to Clara while njj| she did her gardening. How would she react if someone, acting "in Trie's best interest, took the child away to a better life? Clara

\*

rose from her flower bed and stared at him in silent concern, and (tm) then laughed long and loud. The man who did that, she said finally, brandishing a large pair of garden shears inches from his crotch, chop, chop. Chop, chop, thought Samad; and it became clear to him what he was going to do.

"One of them?"

O'Connell's again. 6.25. One chips, beans, egg and mushroom. And one omelette and mushrooms with peas (seasonal variation).

“Just one of them?”

“Archibald, please keep your voice down.”

“But -just one of them?”

That is what I said. Chop, chop.” He divided the fried egg on his

plate down the middle. “There is no other way.”

“But-“

Archie was thinking again, as best he could. The same old stuff. You

know, why couldn't people just get on with things, just live together,

you know, in peace or harmony or something. But he didn't say any of

that. He just said, “But’ And then, “But-“

And then finally, “But which one?”

And that (if you're counting air fare, dowry, initial schooling fee)

was the three thousand, two hundred and forty-five quid question. Once

the money was sorted yes, he remortgaged the house, he risked his land,

the greatest mistake an immigrant can make it was simply a matter of

choosing the child. For the first week it was going to be Magid,

definitely Magid. Magid had the brains, Magid would settle down

quicker, learn the language quicker, and Archie had a vested interest

in keeping Millat in the

country because he was the best striker Willesden Athletic FC (under

fifteens) had seen in decades. So Samad began stealing Magid's clothes

away for surreptitious packing, arranged a separate passport (he would

be travelling with auntie Zinat on 4 November) and had a word in the

ear of the school (long holiday, could he be given some homework to

take with him, etc.).

But then the next week there was a change of heart and it was Millat,

because Magid was really Samad's favourite, and he wanted to watch him

grow older, and Millat was the one more in need of moral direction

anyway. So his clothes were pilfered, his passport arranged, his name

whispered into the right ears.

The following week it was Magid until Wednesday and then Millat

because

Archie's old pen pal Horst Ibelgaufts wrote the following letter, which

Archie, familiar now with the strangely prophetic nature of Horst's

correspondence, brought to Samad's attention:

ij September 1984 Dearest Archibald,

It is some time since my last letter, but I felt compelled to write to

you about a wonderful development in my garden which has brought me

no

little pleasure these past few months. To make a long story shorter  
and sweeter, I have finally gone for the chop and removed that old oak  
tree from the far corner and I cannot begin to describe to you the  
difference it has made! Now the weaker seeds are receiving so much  
more sun and are so healthy I am able even to make cuttings from them  
-for the first year in my memory each of my children has a vase of  
peonies on their windowsill. I had been suffering under the misapprehension all these years that I was simply an indifferent  
gardener when all the time it was that grand old tree, taking up half  
the garden with its roots and not allowing anything else to grow.  
The letter went on, but Samad stopped there. Irritably he said, “And I  
am meant to divine from this precisely . . . what?”  
Archie tapped the side of his nose knowingly. “Chop, chop. It’s got  
to be Millat. An omen, mate. You can trust Ibelgaufts.”  
And Samad, who usually had no time for omens or nose tapping, was  
nervous enough to take the advice. But then Poppy (who was acutely  
aware that she was fading from Samad’s mind in comparison with the  
question of the boys) suddenly took an interest, claiming to have just

sensed in a dream that it should be Magid and so it was Magid  
once

more. Samad, in his desperation, even allowed Archie to flip a  
coin,

but the decision was hard to stick by best out of three, best out  
of

five Samad couldn't trust it. And this, if you can believe it,  
was the

manner in which Archie and Samad went about playing lottery  
with two

boys, bouncing the issue off the walls of O'Connell's, flipping  
souls

to see which side came up.

In their defence, one thing should be made clear. At no point  
was the

word kidnap mentioned. In fact had this been offered as  
terminology

for what he was about to do, Samad would have been appalled  
and

astounded, would have dropped the whole thing like the  
sommambulist

who

wakes up to find himself in the master bedroom with a bread  
knife in

his hand. He understood that he had not yet informed Abana.  
He

understood that he had booked a 3 a.m. flight. But it was in no  
way

self-evident to him that these two facts were related or would  
combine

to spell out kidnap. So it was with surprise that Samad greeted  
the



vision of a violently weeping Alsana, at 2 a.m. on 31 October,  
hunched

over the kitchen table. He did not think, Ah, she has  
discovered what

I am to do with Magid (it was finally and for ever Magid),  
because he

was not a moustachioed villain in a Victorian crime novel and  
besides

which he was not conscious of plotting any crime. Rather his  
first

thought was, So she knows about Poppy, and in response to  
this

situation he did what every adulterous man does out of  
instinct: attack

first.

“So I must come home to this, must I?” slam down bag for  
effect “I

spend all night in that infernal restaurant and then I am having  
to

come back to your melodramatics?”

Alsana convulsed with tears. Samad noticed too that a gurgle  
sound was

emanating from her pleasant fat which vibrated in the gap  
between her

said; she waved her hands at him and then put them over her  
ears.

“Is this really necessary?” asked Samad, trying to disguise his  
fear

(he had expected anger, he didn’t know how to deal with  
tears).

“Please, Alsana: surely this is an overreaction.”

She waved her hand at him once more as if to dismiss him and  
then

lifted her body a little and Samad saw that the gurgling had not been

organic, that she had been hunched over something. A radio.

“What on earth’

Alsana pushed the radio from her body into the middle of the table and

motioned for Samad to turn it up. Four familiar beeps, the beeps that

follow the English into whatever land they conquer, rang round the

kitchen, and then in Received Pronunciation Samad heard the following:

This is the BBC World Service at 03.00 hours. Mrs. Indira Gandhi,

Prime Minister of India, was assassinated today, shot down by her Sikh

bodyguards in an act of open mutiny as she walked in the garden of her

New Delhi home. There is no doubt that her murder was an act of

revenge for “Operation Blue Star”, the storming of the Sikhs’ holiest

shrine at Amritsar last June. The Sikh community, who feel their

culture is being attacked by “Enough,” said Samad, switching it off.

“She was no bloody good anyway. None of them is any bloody good.

And

who cares what happens in that cesspit, India. Dear me ...”

And even

before he said it, he wondered why he had to, why he felt so malevolent

this evening. “You really are genuinely pathetic. I wonder: where

would those tears be if / died? Nowhere you care more about some

corrupt politician you never met. Do you know you are the perfect

example of the ignorance of the masses, Alsi? Do you know that?” he

said, talking as if to a child and holding her chin up. “Crying for

the rich and mighty who would disdain to piss upon you. Doubtless next

week you will be bawling because Princess Diana broke a fingernail.”

Alsana gathered all the spit her mouth could accommodate and launched

it at him.

“Bhainchute! I am not crying for her, you idiot, I am crying for my

friends. There will be blood on the streets back home because of this,

India and Bangladesh. There will be riots knives, guns. Public death,

I have seen it. It will be like Mahshar, Judgement Day people will die

in the streets, Samad. You know and I know. And Delhi will be the

worst of it, is always the worst of it. I have some family in Delhi, I

have friends, old lovers ‘

And here Samad slapped her, partly for the old lovers and partly

because it was many years since he had been referred to as a bhainchute

(translation: someone who, to put it simply, fucks their sisters).

Alsana held her face, and spoke quietly. "I am crying with misery for

those poor families and out of relief for my own children!

Their

father ignores them and bullies them, yes, but at least they will not

die on the streets like rats."

So this was going to be one of those rows: the same positions, the same

lines, same recriminations, same right hooks. Bare fists. The bell

rings. Samad comes out of his corner.

"No, they will suffer something worse, much worse: sitting in a morally

bankrupt country with a mother who is going mad. Utterly cuckoo. Many

raisins short of the fruitcake. Look at you, look at the state of you!

Look how fat you are!" He grabbed a piece of her, and then released it

as if it would infect him. "Look how you dress. Running shoes and a

said? And what is that?"

It was one of Clara's African head scarfs a long, beautiful piece

of orange Kenti cloth in which Alsana had taken to wrapping her

substantial mane. Samad pulled it off and threw it across the room,

leaving Alsana's hair to crash down her back.

"You do not even know what you are, where you come from.

We never

see

family any more I am ashamed to show you to them. Why did you go all

the way to Bengal for a wife, that's what they ask. Why didn't you

just go to Putney?"

Alsana smiled ruefully, shook her head, while Samad made a pretence of

calm, filling their metal kettle with water and slamming it down on the

stove.

"And that is a beautiful lungi you have on, Samad Miah," she said

bitterly, nodding in the direction of his blue-to welling jogging suit

topped off with Poppy's LA Raiders baseball cap.

Samad said, "The difference is what is in here," not looking at her,

thumping just below his left breast bone. "You say you are thankful we

are in England, that's because you have swallowed it whole. I can tell

you those boys would have a better life back home than they ever'

"Samad Miah! Don't even begin! It will be over my dead body that this

family moves back to a place where our lives are in danger!  
Clara

tells me about you, she tells me. How you have asked her  
strange

things. What are you plotting, Samad? I hear from Zinat all  
this

about life insurance . . . who is dying? What can I smell? I tell  
you,

it will be over my dead body ‘

“But if you are already dead, Alsi ‘

“Shut up! Shut up! I am not mad. You are trying to drive me  
mad! I

phoned Ardashir, Samad. He is telling me you have been  
leaving work at

eleven thirty. It is two in the morning. I am not mad!”

“No, it is worse. Your mind is diseased. You call yourself a  
Muslim’

Alsana whipped round to face Samad, who was trying to  
concentrate his

attention on the whistling steam emerging from the kettle.

“No, Samad. Oh no. Oh no. I don’t call myself anything. I  
‘just

don’t make claims. You call yourself a Muslim. You make  
them| deals

with Allah. You are the one he will be talking to, come am  
Mahshar.

You, Samad Miah. You, you, you.” \*1

Second round. Samad slapped Alsana. Alsana right hooked  
him in the

stomach and then followed up with a blow to the left  
cheekbone. She

then made a dash to the back door, but Samad caught her by the waist,

rugby-tackled her, dragged her down and elbowed her in the coccyx.

Alsana, being heavier than Samad, knelt up, lifting him; flipped him

over and dragged him out into the garden, where she kicked him twice as

he lay on the floor two short, fierce jabs to the forehead but the rubber-cushioned sole did little damage and in a moment he was on his

knees again. They made a grab for each other's hair, Samad determined

to pull until he saw blood. But this left Alsana's knee free and it

connected swiftly with Samad's crotch, forcing him to release the hair

and swing a blind flier meant for her mouth but catching her ear.

Around this time, the twins emerged half awake from their beds and

stood at the long glass kitchen window to watch the fight, while the

neighbours' security lights came on, illuminating the Iqbal garden like

a stadium.

"Abba," said Magid, after surveying the state of play for a moment.

"Definitely Abba."

"Cha, man. No way," said Millat, blinking in the light. "I bet you

two orange lollies Amma's going to kick the shit out of him."

“Ooooooo!” cried the twins in unison, as if it were a firework display, and then, “Aaaaaah!”

Alsana had just ended the fight with a little help from the garden

rake.

“Now maybe some of us, who have to work in the morning, can get a

decent night’s kip\ Bloody Pakis,” shouted a neighbour.

A few minutes later (because they always held each other after these

fights, a hug somewhere between affection and collapse)

Samad came in from the garden, still mildly concussed and said, “Go to

bed,” before brushing a hand through each son’s thick black hair.

As he reached the door, he stopped. “You’ll thank me,” he said,

turning to Magid, who smiled faintly, thinking maybe Abba was going to

get him that chemistry set after all. “You’ll thank me in the end.

This country’s no good. We tear each other apart in this country.”

Then he walked up the stairs and phoned Poppy BuitJones, waking her up

to tell her there would be no more kisses in the afternoon, no more

guilty walks, no more furtive taxis. End of affair.

Maybe all the Iqbals were prophets because Alsana’s nose for trouble

was more right than it had ever been. Public decapitations, families



cremated in their sleep, hanging bodies outside the Kashmir gate,

people stumbling around dazed missing pieces of themselves; body parts

taken from Muslim by Sikh, from Sikh by Hindu; legs, fingers, noses,

toes and teeth, teeth everywhere, scattered throughout the land,

mingling with the dust. A thousand people had died by 4

November when

Alsana emerged from under the bathwater to hear the crackling voice of

Our Man in Delhi telling her about it from the top of the medicine

cabinet.

Terrible business. But, as Samad saw it, some of us have the luxury of

sitting in the bath and listening to the foreign news while some of us

have a living to make, and an affair to forget, and a child to abduct.

He squeezed into the white flares, checked the air ticket, phoned

Archie to go over the plan, and left for work.

On the tube there was a youngish, prettyish girl, dark, Spanish looking, mono-browed, crying. Just sitting opposite him, in a pair of

big, pink leg-warmers, crying quite openly. Nobody said anything.

Nobody did anything. Everybody hoped she was getting off at Kilburn.

But she kept on like that, just sitting, crying;

West Hampstead, Finchley Road, Swiss Cottage, St. John's Wood. Then

at Bond Street she pulled a photo of an unpromising-looking young man

out of her rucksack, showed it to Samad and some of the other passengers.

"Why he leave? He break my heart.. . Neil, he say his name, Neil.

Neil, Neil."

At Charing Cross, end of the line, Samad watched her cross the platform

and get the train going straight back to Willesden Green.

Romantic, in

a way. The way she said "Neil" as if it were a word bursting at the

seams with past passion, with loss. That kind of flowing, feminine

misery. He had expected something similar of Poppy, somehow; he had

picked up the phone expecting gentle, rhythmic tears and later on

letters, maybe, scented and stained. And in her grief he would have

grown, as Neil was probably doing at this moment; her grief would have

been an epiphany bringing him one step closer to his own redemption.

But instead he had got only, "Fuck you, you fucking fuck."

"Told you," said Shiva, shaking his head and passing Samad a basket of

yellow napkins to be shaped like castles. "I told you not to fuck with

that business, didn't I? Too much history there, man. You see:  
it

ain't just you she's angry with, is it?"

Samad shrugged and began on the turrets.

"No, man, history, history. It's all brown man leaving English  
woman,

it's all Nehru saying See-Ya to Madam Britannia." Shiva, in an  
effort

to improve himself, had joined the Open University. "It's all  
complicated, complicated shit, it's all about pride. Ten quid  
says she

wanted you as a servant boy, as a wallah peeling the grapes."

"No," protested Samad. "It wasn't that way. This is not the  
dark

ages, Shiva, this is 1984."

"Show's how much you know. From what you've told me,  
she's a classic

case, mate, classic."

"Well, I have other concerns now," muttered Samad (privately  
calculating that his children would by now be safely tucked in  
at the

Joneses' sleepover, that it was two more hours before Archie  
would need

to wake Magid, leaving Millat to sleep on). "Family  
concerns."

"No time!" cried Ardashir, who had crept up from behind,  
imperceptibly

as ever, to examine the battlements of Samad's castles. "No  
time for

family concerns, cousin. Everyone's concerned, everybody's  
trying to

get their family out of that mess back home I myself am  
forking out one

thousand big ones for a ticket for my big-mouth sister but I  
still have

to come to work, I still have to get on with things. Busy night

tonight, cousin,” called Ardashir, as he exited the kitchen to  
pace

around the restaurant floor in a black tuxedo. “Don’t let me  
down.”

It was the busiest night in the week, Saturday, the night when  
the

crowds come in waves: pre-theatre, post-theatre, post-pub,  
post-club;

the first polite and conversational, the second humming show-  
tunes, the

third rowdy, the fourth wide-eyed and abusive. The theatre  
crowds were

naturally the favourite of the waiters; they were even tempered  
and

tipped big and inquired after the geography of the food its  
Eastern

origin, its history all of which would be happily fabricated by  
the

younger waiters (whose furthest expedition East was the one  
they made

daily, back home to Whitechapel, Smithfield’s, the Isle of  
Dogs) or

rendered faithfully and proudly by the elders in black biro on  
the back

of a pink napkin.

I’ll Bet She Is! was the show at the National these past few  
months, a

rediscovered mid fifties musical set in the thirties. It was about  
a

rich girl who runs away from her family and meets a poor boy  
on the

road, who is himself off to fight the Civil War in Spain. They  
fall in

love. Even Samad, who had no particular ear for a tune, picked up

enough discarded programmes and heard enough tables burst into song to

know most of the songs; he liked them, in fact they took his mind off

the drudgery (even better tonight they were sweet relief from worrying

whether

2,03

Archie would manage to get Magid outside the Palace at i a.m. on the

dot); he murmured them along with the rest of the kitchen in a kind of

working rhythm as they chopped and marinaded, sliced and crushed.

I've seen the Paris opra and the wonders of the East

"Samad Miah, I'm looking for the Rajah mustard seeds."

Spent my summers by the Nile and my winters on the pi ste

"Mustard seeds ... I think I saw Muhammed with them."

I've had diamonds, rubies, furs and velvet capes

"Accusations, accusations ... I have seen no mustard seeds."

I've had Howard Hughes peel me a grape

"I'm sorry, Shiva, if the old man doesn't have them, then I haven't

seen them."

But what does it mean without love?

"Then what are these?" Shiva walked over from his place next to chef

and picked up a packet of mustard seeds by Samad's right elbow. "Come

on, Sam get it together. Head in the clouds this evening.”

“I’m sorry ... I have a lot on my mind

“That lady friend of yours, eh?”

“Keep your voice down, Shiva.”

“They tell me I’m spoilt, a rich broad who means trouble,”  
sang Shiva

in the strangest of Hindified transatlantic accents. “Oioi, my  
chorus.

But whatever love I’m given I pay it back double.”

Shiva grabbed a small aquamarine vase and sang his big finale  
into its

upturned end. “But no amount of money, will make my honey  
mine .. .

You should take that advice, Samad Miah,” said Shiva, who  
was

convinced

Samad’s recent remortgage was funding his illicit affair, ‘it’s  
good

advice.”

A few hours later Ardashir appeared once more through the  
swing doors,

breaking up the singing to deliver his second-phase pep-talk.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen! That is more than enough of that.

Now, listen

up: it’s ten-thirty. They’ve seen the show.

They’re hungry. They got only one pitiful tub of ice-cream in  
the

interval and plenty of Bombay gin, which, as we all know,  
brings on the

need for curry and that, gentlemen, is where we come in. Two  
tables of

fifteen just came in and sat at the back. Now: when they ask for water

what do you do? What do you do, Ravind?"

Ravind was brand new, nephew of the chef, sixteen, nervy.

"You tell

them '

"No, Ravind, even before you speak, what do you do?"

Ravind bit his lip. "I don't know, Ardashir."

"You shake your head," said Ardashir, shaking his head.

"Simultaneous

with a look of concern and fear for their well-being." Ardashir

demonstrated the look. "And then you say?"

"Water does not help the heat, sir."

"But what helps the heat, Ravind? What will aid the gentleman with the

burning sensation he is presently feeling?"

"More rice, Ardashir/

"And? And?"

Ravind looked stumped and began to sweat. Samad, who had been

belittled by Ardashir too many times to enjoy watching someone else

play the victim, leant over to whisper the answer in Ravind's clammy

ear.

Ravind's face lit up in gratitude. "More naan bread, Ardashir!"

"Yes; because it soaks up the chilli and more importantly water is free

and naan bread is one pound twenty. Now cousin," said Ardashir,



turning to Samad and wagging a bony finger, ‘how will the boy learn?

Let the boy answer for himself next time. You have your own business:

a couple of ladies on table twelve requested the head waiter specifically, to be served only by him, so-‘

“Requested me? But I thought I might stay in the kitchen this evening.

Besides, I cannot be requested like some personal butler, there is too

much to do that is not policy, cousin

And at this moment Samad feels panicky. His thoughts are so taken up with the i a.m. abduction, with the prospect of splitting his

twins, that he does not trust himself with hot plates and steaming

bowls of dal, with the spitting fat of clay-oven chicken, with all the

dangers that accost a one-handed waiter. His head is full of his sons.

He is half in dream this evening. He has once again bitten every nail

beyond the cuticle and is fast approaching the translucent high-moons,

the bleeding hubs.

He is saying, he hears himself saying, “Ardashir, I have a million

things to do here in the kitchens. And why should ‘

And the answer comes, “Because the head waiter is the best waiter and

naturally they tipped me us for the privilege. No quibbling, please,

cousin. Table twelve, Samad Miah/

And perspiring lightly, throwing a white towel over his left  
arm, Samad

begins tunelessly to hum the show-stopper as he pushes  
through the

doors.

What won't a guy do for a girl? How sweet the scent, how  
huge the

pearl?

It is a long walk to table twelve. Not in distance, it is only  
twenty

metres in distance, but it is a long walk through the thick  
smells and

the loud voices and the demands; through the cries of  
Englishmen; past

table two, where the ashtray is full and must be cupped by  
another

ashtray, lifted silently and switched for the new ashtray with  
perfect

insouciance; stopping at table four, where there is an  
unidentifiable

dish that was not ordered; debating with table five, who wish  
to be

joined with table six, no matter the inconvenience; and table  
seven

wants egg fried rice whether or not it is a Chinese dish; and  
table

eight wobbles and more wine! More beer! It is a long walk if  
you are

to negotiate the jungle; attending to the endless needs and  
needless

ends, the desires, the demands of the pink faces that strike  
Samad now

as pith-helmet-wearing gentlemen, feet up on the table with  
guns across  
their laps; as tea-slurping ladies on verandas cooling  
themselves under  
the breeze of the brown boys who beat the ostrich feathers 206  
What lengths won't he travel, how many hits of the gavel  
By Allah, how thankful he is (yes, madam, one moment,  
madam), how  
gladdened by the thought that Magid, Magid at least, will, in a  
matter  
of four hours, be flying east from this place and its demands,  
its  
constant cravings, this place where there exists neither  
patience nor  
pity, where the people want what they want now, right now  
(We've been  
waiting twenty minutes for the vegetables), expecting their  
lovers,  
their children, their friends and even their gods to arrive at  
little  
cost and in little time, just as table ten expect their tandoori  
prawns  
...  
At the auction of her choosing, how many Rembrandts,  
Kiimts, De  
Koonings?  
These people who would exchange all faith for sex and all sex  
for  
power, who would exchange fear of God for self-pride,  
knowledge for  
irony, a covered, respectful head for a long, strident shock of  
orange

hair It is Poppy at table twelve. It is Poppy Burt-Jones. And just  
the name would be enough right now (for he is at his most volatile,  
Samad; he is about to split his own sons in two like that first nervous  
surgeon wielding his clumsy spit-wet knife over the clodded skin of the  
twins of Siam), just the name would be enough to explode his mind. The  
name alone is a torpedo heading for a tiny fishing boat, blowing his  
thoughts out of the water. But it is more than the name, the echo of a  
name spoken by some thoughtless fool or found at the bottom of an old  
letter, it is Poppy Burt-Jones herself in the freckled flesh. Sitting  
cold and determined with her sister, who seems, like all siblings of  
those we have desired, an uglier, mis-featured version.  
“Say something, then,” says Poppy abruptly, fiddling with a Marlboro  
packet. “No witty rejoinder? No crap about camels or coconuts?  
Nothing to say?”  
Samad doesn’t have anything to say. He merely stops humming his tune,  
inclines his head at exactly the correct deferential angle, and puts  
the nib of his pen preparedly to paper. It is like a dream.  
“All right, then,” Poppy is saying tartly, looking Samad up and down,

lighting up a fag. “Have it your way. Right. To start with we’ll have lamb samos as and the yoghurt whatdyamacallit/

“And for the main,” the shorter, plainer, or anger snub-nosed sister is

saying, “Two Lamb Dawn Sock and rice, with chips, please, waiter.”

At least Archie is right on time; right year, right date, right hour;

1984, 5 November, i a.m. Outside the restaurant, dressed in a long

trench-coat, standing in front of his Vauxhall, one hand tickling some

spanking new Pirelli tyres, the other pulling hard on a fag like Bogart

or a chauffeur or Bogart’s chauffeur. Samad arrives, clasps Archie’s

right hand in his own and feels the coldness of his friend’s fingers,

feels the great debt he owes him. Involuntarily, he blows a cloud of

frozen breath into his face. “I won’t forget this, Archibald,” he is

saying, “I won’t forget what you do for me tonight, my friend.”

Archie shuffles about awkwardly. “Sam, before you there’s something I

have to’

But Samad is already reaching for the door, and Archie’s explanation

must follow the sight of three shivering children in the back seat like

a limp punchline.

“They woke up, Sam. They were all sleeping in the same room  
- a

sleepover, like. Nothing I could do. I just put coats over their  
pyjamas I couldn't risk Clara hearing I had to bring them.”

Irie asleep; curled up with her head on the ashtray and her feet  
resting on the gearbox, but Millat and Magid reaching out for  
their

father gleefully, pulling at his flares, chucking him on the chin.

“Hey, Abba! Where we going, Abba? To a secret disco party?  
Are we  
really?”

Samad looks severely at Archie; Archie shrugs.

“We're going on a trip to an airport. To Heathrow.”

“Wow!”

“And then when we get there, Magid - Magid ‘ It is like a  
dream. Samad

feels the tears before he can stop them; he reaches out to his  
eldest-son-by-two-minutes and holds him so tight to his chest  
that he

snaps the arm of his glasses. “And then Magid is going on a  
trip with  
auntie Zinat.”

“Will he come back?” It is Millat. “It would be cool if he  
didn't  
come back!”

Magid prises himself from his father's headlock. “Is it far?  
Will I

be back in time for Monday only I've got to see how my  
photosynthesis

is for science I took two plants: put one in the cupboard and  
one in

the sunlight and I've got to see, Abba, I've got to see which one '

Years from now, even hours after that plane leaves, this will be history that Samad tries not to remember. That his memory makes no

effort to retain. A sudden stone submerged. False teeth floating silently to the bottom of a glass.

"Will I get back for school, Abba?"

"Come on," says Archie, solemnly from the front seat. "We've got to

get cracking if we're going to make it."

"You'll be in a school on Monday, Magid. I promise. Now sit back in

your seats, go on. For Abba, please."

Samad closes the car door and crouches to watch his twin sons blow

their hot breath on to the window. He puts his one hand up, applying a

false touch to their lips, raw pink against the glass, their saliva mingling in the grimy condensation.

To Alsana's mind the real difference between people was not colour. Nor

did it lie in gender, faith, their relative ability to dance to a syncopated rhythm or open their fists to reveal a handful of gold

coins. The real difference was far more fundamental. It was in the

earth. It was in the sky. You could divide the whole of humanity into

two distinct camps, as far as she was concerned, simply by asking them

to complete a very simple questionnaire, of the kind you find in

Woman's Own on a Tuesday:

(a) Are the skies you sleep under likely to open up for week  
son end?

(b) Is the ground you walk on likely to tremble and split? (c) Is  
there a chance (and please tick the box, no matter how small  
that

chance seems) that the ominous mountain casting a midday  
shadow over

your home might one day erupt with no rhyme or reason?

Because if the answer is yes to one or all of these questions,  
then the

life you lead is a midnight thing, always a hair's breadth from  
the

witching hour; it is volatile, it is threadbare; it is carefree in the  
true sense of that term; it is light, lo sable like a keyring or a  
hair

clip And it is lethargy: why not sit all morning, all day, all  
year,

under the same cypress tree drawing the figure of eight in the  
dust?

More than that, it is disaster, it is chaos: why not overthrow a  
government on a whim, why not blind the man you hated, why  
not go

mad,

go gibbering through the town like a loon, waving your hands,  
tearing

your hair? There's nothing to stop you or rather anything could  
stop

you, any hour, any minute. That feeling. That's the real  
difference



in a life. People

9 Mutiny]

who live on solid ground, underneath safe skies, know nothing of this;

they are like the English POWs in Dresden who continued to pour tea and

dress for dinner, even as the alarms went off, even as the city became

a towering ball of fire. Born of a green and pleasant land, a temperate land, the English have a basic inability to conceive of

disaster, even when it is manmade.

It is different for the people of Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan,

formerly India, formerly Bengal. They live under the invisible finger

of random disaster, of flood and cyclone, hurricane and mud-slide. Half

the time half their country lies under water; generations wiped out as

regularly as clockwork; individual life expectancy an optimistic

fifty-two, and they are coolly aware that when you talk about apocalypse, when you talk about random death en masse, well, they are

leading the way in that particular field, they will be the first to go,

the first to slip Atlantis-like down to the seabed when the pesky polar

ice-caps begin to shift and melt. It is the most ridiculous country in

the world, Bangladesh. It is God's idea of a really good  
wheeze, his

stab at black comedy. You don't need to give out  
questionnaires to

Bengalis. The facts of disaster are the facts of their lives.  
Between

Alsana's sweet sixteenth birthday (1971), for example, and the  
year she

stopped speaking directly to her husband (1985), more people  
died in

Bangladesh, more people perished in the winds and the rain,  
than in

Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Dresden put together. A million  
people lost

lives that they had learnt to hold lightly in the first place.

And this is what Alsana really held against Samad, if you want  
the

truth, more than the betrayal, more than the lies, more than the  
basic

facts of a kidnap: that Magid should learn to hold his life  
lightly.

Even though he was relatively safe up there in the Chittagong  
Hills,

the highest point of that low-lying, flatland country, still she  
hated

the thought that Magid should be as she had once been:  
holding on to a

life no heavier than a paisa coin, wading thoughtlessly through  
floods,

shuddering underneath the weight of black skies . . .

Samad 1984, 1S57

Naturally, she became hysterical. Naturally, she tried to get  
him

back. She spoke to the relevant authorities. The relevant authorities said things like, “To be honest, love, we’re more worried about them coming in or “To tell you the truth, if it was your husband who arranged the trip, there’s not a great deal that we-‘, so she put the phone down. After a few months she stopped ringing. She went to Wembley and Whitechapel in despair and sat in the houses of relatives for epic weekends of weeping and eating and commiserations, but her gut told her that though the curry was sound, the commiserations were not all they seemed. For there were those who were quietly pleased that Alsana Iqbal, with her big house and her blacky white friends and her husband who looked like Omar Sharif and her son who spoke like the Prince of Wales, was now living in doubt and uncertainty like the rest of them, learning to wear misery like old familiar silk. There was a certain satisfaction in it, even as Zinat (who never revealed her role in the deed) reached over the chair arm to take Alsana’s hand in her sympathetic claws. “Oh, Alsi, I just keep thinking what a shame it is that he had to take the good one! He was so very clever and so

beautifully behaved! You didn't have to worry about drugs and dirty

girls with that one. Only the price of spectacles with all that reading."

Oh, there was a certain pleasure. And don't ever underestimate people,

don't ever underestimate the pleasure they receive from viewing pain

that is not their own, from delivering bad news, watching bombs fall on

television, from listening to stifled sobs from the other end of a

telephone line. Pain by itself is just Pain. But Pain + Distance can

= entertainment, voyeurism, human interest, cinema verite, a good belly

chuckle, a sympathetic smile, a raised eyebrow, disguised contempt.

Alsana sensed all these and more at the other end of her telephone line

as the calls flooded in 28 May 1985 to inform her of, to offer commiserations for, the latest cyclone.

"Alsi, I simply had to call. They say there are so many bodies floating in the Bay of Bengal..."

"I just heard the latest on the radio ten thousand!"

"And the survivors are floating on rooftops while the sharks and

crocodiles snap at their heels."

"It must be terrible, Alsi, not knowing, not being sure ..."

For six days and six nights, Alsana did not know, was not sure. During

this period she read extensively from the Bengali poet  
Rabindranath

Tagore and tried hard to believe his assurances (Night's  
darkness is a

bag that bursts with the gold of the dawn), but she was, at  
heart, a

practical woman and found poetry no comfort. For those six  
days her

life was a midnight thing, a hair's breadth from the witching  
hour. But

on the seventh day came light: the news arrived that Magid  
was fine,

suffering only a broken nose delivered by a vase which had  
fallen from

its perilous station on a high shelf in a mosque, blown over in  
the

first breath of the first winds (and keep one eye on that vase,  
please,

it is the same vase that will lead Magid by the nose to his  
vocation).

It was only the servants, having two days earlier taken a secret  
supply

of gin and piled into the family's dilapidated transit van on a  
pleasure trip to Dhaka, who were now floating belly-up in the  
Jamuna

River as fish finned-silver stared up at them, pop-eyed and  
bemused.

Samad was triumphant. "You see? He'll come to no harm in  
Chittagong!

Even better news, he was in a mosque. Better he break his  
nose in a

mosque than in a Kilburn fight! It is exactly as I had hoped.  
He is

learning the old ways. Is he not learning the old ways?"

Alsana thought for a moment. Then she said: "Maybe, Samad Miah."

"What do you mean, "maybe"?" "Maybe, Samad Miah, maybe not."

Alsana had decided to stop speaking directly to her husband. Through

the next eight years she would determine never to say yes to him, never

to say no to him, but rather to force him to live

like she did never knowing, never being sure, holding Samad's sanity to

ransom, until she was paid in full with the return of her

number-one-son-eldest-by-two-minutes, until she could once more put a

chubby hand through his thick hair. That was her promise, that was her

curse upon Samad, and it was exquisite revenge. At times it very

nearly drove him to the brink, to the kitchen-knife stage, to the medicine cabinet. But Samad was the kind of person too stubborn to

kill himself if it meant giving someone else satisfaction. He hung on

in there. Alsana turning over in her sleep, muttering, "Just bring him

back, Mr. Idiot... if it's driving you nut so just bring my baby back."

But there was no money to bring Magid back even if Samad had been

inclined to wave the white dhoti. He learnt to live with it. It got

to the point where if somebody said ‘yes’ or no’ to Samad in the street

or in the restaurant, he hardly knew how to respond, he had come to

forget what those two elegant little signifiers meant. He never heard

them from Alsana’s lips. Whatever the question in the Iqbal house,

there would never again be a straight answer:

“Alsana, have you seen my slippers?”

“Possibly, Samad Miah.”

“What time is it’

“It could be three, Samad Miah, but Allah knows it could also be

four.”

“Alsana, where have you put the remote control?”

“It is as likely to be in the drawer, Samad Miah, as it is behind the

sofa.”

And so it went.

Sometime after the May cyclone, the Iqbals received a letter from their

elder-son-by-two-minutes, written in a careful hand on exercise paper

and folded around a recent photograph. It was not the first time he

had written, but Samad saw something different in this letter, something that excited him and validated the particular decision he had

made; some change of tone, some

SS o ^urity, of growing Eastern wisdom; and, having

^carefully in the garden first, he took great pleasure in sneaking into

the kitchen and reading it aloud to Clara and

Alcana who were drinking peppermint tea.

Listen- here he says, "Yesterday, grandfather hit Tamm (he is the

houseboy) with a belt until his bottom was redder than a from to He

said Tamim had stolen some candles (it's true. I saw Ct'it!), and this

was what he got for it. He says; sometrmes MUh pun she's and sometimes

men have to do it, and it >s a wise n who knows if it is Allah's turn

or his own. I hope one day I can be a wise man." Do you hear that? He

wants to be a Wise man How many kids in that school do you know who

want to

be wise men?"

Maybe none, Samad Miah. Maybe all."

Samad scowled at his wife and continued, "And here here where he talks

about his nose: "It seems to me that a vase should lot be in such a

silly place where it can fall and break a boy s nose It should be somebody's fault and somebody should be punished (but not a bottom

smack unless they were small and not grown-up. If they were younger

than twelve). When I grow up I Sink I should like to make sure vases



are not put in such places where they can be dangerous and I would comp

lam about oAer dangerous things too (by the way, my nose is fine

now!)

See?”

Clara frowned. “See what?”

Clara rrownea. occ wA-

“Clearly he disapproves of iconography in the mosque, he dislikes all

heathen, unnecessary, dangerous decoration! A boy like that is destined for greatness, isn’t he?” “Maybe, Samad Miah, maybe not.”

Maybe he’ll go into government, maybe the law, suggested

^Rubbish’ My son is for God, not men. He is not fearful of his duty.

He is no” fearful to be a real Bengali, a proper MusUm.

2.15

Here he tells me the goat in the photograph is dead. “I helped to kill

the goat, Abba,” he says. “It kept on moving some time after we had

split it in two.” Is that a boy who is fearful?”

It clearly being incumbent upon someone to say no, Clara said it with

little enthusiasm and reached for the photograph Samad was passing her.

There was Magid, dressed in his customary grey, standing next to the

doomed goat with the old house behind him.

“Oh! Look at his nose! Look at the break. He’s got a Roman nose,  
now. He looks like a little aristocrat, like a little Englishman. Look, Millat.” Clara put the photo under Millat’s smaller, flatter nose. “You two don’t look so much like twins any more.”  
“He looks,” said Millat after a cursory glance, ‘like a chief.’”  
Samad, never au fait with the language of the Willesden streets, nodded soberly and patted his son’s hair. “It is good that you see the difference between you two boys, Millat, now rather than later.” Samad glared at Alsana as she spun an index finger in a circle by her temple, as she tapped the side of her head: crazee, nut so “Others may scoff, but you and I know that your brother will lead others out of the wilderness. He will be a leader of tribes. He is a natural chief.”  
Millat laughed so loud at this, so hard, so uncontrollably, that he lost his footing, slipped on a wash cloth and broke his nose against the sink.  
Two sons. One invisible and perfect, frozen at the pleasant age of nine, static in a picture frame while the television underneath him spewed out all the shit of the eighties Irish bombs, English riots, transatlantic stalemates above which mess the child rose untouchable

and unstained, elevated to the status of ever smiling Buddha,  
imbued  
with serene Eastern contemplation; capable of anything, a  
natural  
leader, a natural Muslim, a natural chief- in short, nothing but  
an  
apparition. A ghostly daguerreotype formed  
from the quicksilver of the father's imagination, preserved by  
the salt  
solution of maternal tears. This son stood silent, distant and  
was  
'presumed well', like one of Her Majesty's colonial island  
outposts,  
stuck in an eternal state of original naivety, perpetual  
pre-pubescence. This son Samad could not see. And Samad  
had long  
learnt to worship what he could not see.  
As for the son he could see, the one who was under his feet  
and in his  
hair, well, it is best not to get Samad started up on that subject,  
the  
subject of The Trouble with Millat, but here goes: he is the  
second  
son, late like a bus, late like cheap postage, the slow coach the  
catch-up-kid, losing that first race down the birth canal, and  
now  
simply a follower by genetic predisposition, by the intricate  
design of  
Allah, the loser of two vital minutes that he would never make  
up, not  
in those all-seeing parabolic mirrors, not in those glassy globes  
of

the godhead, not in his father's eyes. Now, a more melancholy child

than Millat, a more deep thinking child, might have spent the rest of

his life hunting these two minutes and making himself miserable,

chasing the elusive quarry, laying it finally at his father's feet. But

what his father said about him did not concern Millat all that much: he

knew himself to be no follower, no chief, no wanker, no sell-out, no

fuck wit no matter what his father said. In the language of the street

Millat was a rude boy a badman, at the forefront, changing image as

often as shoes; sweet-as, safe, wicked, leading kids up hills to play

football, downhill to rifle fruit machines, out of schools, into video

shops. In Rocky Video, Millat's favourite haunt, run by an unscrupulous coke-dealer, you got porn when you were fifteen, i8s when

you were eleven, and snuff movies under the counter for five quid.

Here was where Millat really learnt about fathers. Godfathers, blood-brothers, pacinodeniros, men in black who looked good, who talked

fast, who never waited a (mutherfuckin') table, who had two, fully

functioning, gun-toting hands. He learnt that you don't need to live

under

flood, under cyclone, to get a little danger, to be a wise man.  
You go  
looking for it. Aged twelve, Millat went out looking for it, and  
though Willesden Green is no Bronx, no South Central, he  
found a  
little, he found enough. He was arsey and mouthy, he had his  
fierce  
good looks squashed tightly inside him like a jack-in-a-box set  
to  
spring aged thirteen, at which point he graduated from leader  
of  
zit-faced boys to leader of women. The Pied Piper of  
Willesden Green,  
smitten girls trailing behind him, tongues out, breasts pert,  
falling  
into pools of heartbreak.. . and all because he was the  
BIGGEST and  
the BADDEST, living his young life in CAPITALS: he  
smoked first, he  
drank first, he even lost it IT! aged thirteen and a half. OK, so  
he  
didn't FEEL much or TOUCH much, it was MOIST  
and CONFUSING, he  
lost IT  
without even knowing where IT went, but he still lost IT  
because there  
was no doubt, NONE, that he was the best of the rest, on any  
scale of  
juvenile delinquency he was the shining light of the teenage  
community,  
the DON, the BUSINESS, the DOG'S GENITALIA, a street  
boy, a leader  
of

tribes. In fact, the only trouble with Millat was that he loved trouble. And he was good, at it. Wipe that. He was great. Still, there was much discussion at home, at school, in the various kitchens of the widespread Iqbal/Begum clan about The Trouble with Millat, mutinous Millat aged thirteen, who farted in mosque, chased blondes and smelt of tobacco, and not just Millat but all the children: Mujib (fourteen, criminal record for joyriding), Khandakar (sixteen, white girlfriend, wore mascara in the evenings), Dipesh (fifteen, marijuana), Kurshed (eighteen, marijuana and very baggy trousers), Khaleda (seventeen, sex before marriage with Chinese boy), Bimal (nineteen, doing a diploma in Drama); what was wrong with all the children, what had gone wrong with these first descendants of the great ocean crossing experiment? Didn't they have everything they could want? Was there not a substantial garden area, regular meals, clean clothes from Marks 'n' Sparks, A-class top-notch education? Hadn't the elders done their best? Hadn't they all come to this island for a reason? To be safe. Weren't they safe"!  
"Too safe," Samad explained, patiently consoling one or other weeping,

angry ma or baba, perplexed and elderly dadu or dida, ‘they are too safe in this country, accha? They live in big plastic bubbles of our own creation, their lives all mapped out for them. Personally, you know I would spit on Saint Paul, but the wisdom is correct, the wisdom is really Allah’s: put away childish things. How can our boys become men when they are never challenged like men? Hmm? No doubt about it, on reflection, sending Magid back was the best thing. I would recommend it.’”

At which point, the assembled weepers and moaners all look mournfully at the treasured picture of Magid and goat. They sit mesmerized, like Hindus waiting for a stone cow to cry, until a visible aura seems to emanate from the photo: goodness and bravery through adversity, through hell and high water; the true Muslim boy; the child they never had.

Pathetic as it was, Alsana found it faintly amusing, the tables having turned, no one weeping for her, everyone weeping for themselves and their children, for what the terrible eighties were doing to them both. These gatherings were like last-ditch political summits, they were like

desperate meetings of government and church behind closed doors while

the mutinous mob roamed wild on the streets, smashed windows. A

distance was establishing itself, not simply between father sons old

young bomtherebornhere, but between those who stayed indoors and those

who ran riot outside.

“Too safe, too easy,” repeated Samad, as great-aunt Bibi wiped Magid

lovingly with some Mr. Sheen. “A month back home would sort each and

every one of them out.”

But the fact was Millat didn't need to go back home: he stood schizophrenic, one foot in Bengal and one in Willesden. In his mind he

was as much there as he was here. He did not require a passport to

live in two places at once, he needed no visa to live his brother's

life and his own (he was a twin after all). Alsana was

the first to spot it. She confided to Clara: By God, they're tied together like a cat's cradle, connected like a see-saw, push one end,

other goes up, whatever Millat sees, Magid saw and vice versa! And

Alsana only knew the incidentals: similar illnesses, simultaneous

accidents, pets dying continents apart. She did not know that while



Magid watched the 1985 cyclone shake things from high places, Millat was pushing his luck along the towering wall of the cemetery in Fortune Green; that on 10 February 1988, as Magid worked his way through the violent crowds of Dhaka, ducking the random blows of those busy settling an election with knives and fists, Millat held his own against three sotted, furious, quick footed Irishmen outside Bidy Mulligan's notorious Kilburn public house. Ah, but you are not convinced by coincidence? You want fact fact fact? You want brushes with the Big Man with black hood and scythe? OK: on the 28th of April, 1989, a tornado whisked the Chittagong kitchen up into the sky, taking everything with it except Magid, left miraculously curled up in a ball on the floor. Now, segue to Millat, five thousand miles away, lowering himself down upon legendary sixth-former Natalia Cavendish (whose body is keeping a dark secret from her); the condoms are unopened in a box in his back pocket; but somehow he will not catch it; even though he is moving rhythmically now, up and in, deeper and sideways, dancing with death.

Three days:

i; October 1987

Even when the lights went out and the wind was beating the  
shit out of

the double glazing, Alsana, a great believer in the oracle that is  
the

BBC, sat in a nightie on the sofa, refusing to budge.

“If that Mr. Fish says it’s OK, it’s damn well OK. He’s BBC,  
for

God’s sake!”

Samad gave up (it was almost impossible to change Alsana’s  
mind about

the inherent reliability of her favoured English institutions,  
amongst

them: Princess Anne, Blu-Tack, Children’s Royal Variety  
Performance,

Eric Morecambe, Woman’s Hour). He got the torch from the  
kitchen

drawer and went upstairs, looking for Millat.

“Millat? Answer me, Millat! Are you there?”

“Maybe, Abba, maybe not.”

Samad followed the voice to the bathroom and found Millat  
chin-high in

dirty pink soap suds, reading Viz.

“Ah, Dad, wicked. Torch. Shine it over here so I can read.”

“Never mind that.” Samad tore the comic from his son’s  
hands. There’s

a bloody hurricane blowing and your crazy mother intends to  
sit here

until the roof falls in. Get out of the bath. I need you to go to  
the

shed and find some wood and nails so that we can-‘

“But Abba, I’m butt-naked!”

“Don’t split the hairs with me this is an emergency. I want you to ‘

An almighty ripping noise, like something being severed at the roots

and flung against a wall, came from outside.

Two minutes later and the family Iqbal were standing regimental in

varying states of undress, looking out through the long kitchen window

on to a patch in the lawn where the shed used to be. Millat clicked

his heels three times and hammed it up with corner shop accent, “O me O

my. There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home.”

“All right, woman. Are you coming now?”

“Maybe, Samad Miah, maybe.”

“Dammit! I’m not in the mood for a referendum. We’re going to

Archibald’s. Maybe they still have light. And there is safety in numbers. Both of you get dressed, grab the essentials, the life or

death things, and get in the car!”

Holding the car boot open against a wind determined to bring it down, Samad was first amused and then depressed by the items his

wife and son determined essential, life or death things:

Millat Abana

Born to Run (album) Sewing machine

Springsteen Three pots of tiger balm

Poster of De Niro in "You talk a little leg of lamb (frozen)

kin' to me' scene from Taxi Foot bath

Driver Linda Goodman's Starsigns Betamax copy of Purple Rain (book)

(rock movie) Huge box of beedi cigarettes

Shrink-to-fit Levis 501 (red tab) Divargiit Singh in Moonshine  
Pair of

black converse baseball over Kerala (musical video)

shoes A Clockwork Orange (book)

Samad slammed the boot down.

"No pen knife, no edibles, no light sources. Bloody great. No prizes

for guessing which one of the Iqbals is the war veteran.

Nobody even

thinks to pick up the Qur'an. Key item in emergency situation:

spiritual support. I am going back in there. Sit in the car and don't

move a muscle."

Once in the kitchen Samad flashed his torch around: kettle, oven hob,

teacup, curtain and then a surreal glimpse of the shed sitting happy

like a treehouse in next door's horse chestnut He picked up the Swiss

army knife he remembered leaving under the sink, collected his

gold-plated, velvet-fringed Qur'an from the living room and was about

to leave when the temptation to feel the gale, to see a little of the

formidable destruction, came over him. He waited for a lull in the

wind and opened the kitchen door, moving tentatively into the garden,

where a sheet of lightning lit up a scene of suburban apocalypse: oaks,

cedars, sycamores, elms felled in garden after garden, fences down,

garden furniture demolished. It was only his own garden, often ridiculed for its corrugated-iron surround, treeless interior and bed

after bed of sickly smelling herbs, that had remained relatively intact.

He was just in the process of happily formulating some allegory

regarding the bending Eastern reed versus the stubborn Western oak,

when the wind reasserted itself, knocking him sideways and continuing

along its path to the double glazing, which it cracked and exploded

effortlessly, blowing glass inside, regurgitating everything from the

kitchen out into the open air. Samad, a recently airborne colander

resting on his ear, held his book tight to his chest and hurried to the

car.

“What are you doing in the driving seat?”

Alsana held on to the wheel firmly and talked to Millat via the rear-view mirror. “Will someone please tell my husband that I am going

to drive. I grew up by the Bay of Bengal. I watched my mother drive

through winds like these while my husband was poncing about  
in Delhi

with a load of fairy college boys. I suggest my husband gets in  
the

passenger seat and doesn't fart unless I tell him to

Alsana drove at three miles an hour through the deserted,  
blacked-out

high road while winds of no mph. relentlessly battered the tops  
of the

highest buildings.

"England, this is meant to be! I moved to England so I  
wouldn't have

to do this. Never again will I trust that Mr. Crab."

"Amma, it's Mr. Fish."

"From now on, he's Mr. Crab to me," snapped Alsana with a  
dark look.

"BBC or no BBC."

The lights had gone out at Archie's, but the Jones household  
was

prepared for every disastrous eventuality from tidal wave to  
nuclear

fallout; by the time the Iqbals got there the place was lit with  
dozens

of gas lamps, garden candles and night lights, the front door  
and

windows had been speedily reinforced with hardboard, and the  
garden

trees had their branches roped together.

"It's all about preparation," announced Archie, opening the  
door to the

desperate Iqbals and their armfuls of belongings, like a DIY  
king

welcoming the dispossessed. “I mean, you’ve got to protect your family, haven’t you? Not that you’ve failed in that de par you know what I mean ‘sjust the way I see it: it’s me against the wind. If I’ve told you once, Ick-Ball, I’ve told you a million times: check the supporting walls. If they’re not in tiptop condition, you’re bugged, mate. You really are. And you’ve got to keep a pneumatic spanner in the house. Essential.”

“That’s fascinating, Archibald. May we come in?”

Archie stepped aside. “Course. Tell the truth, I was expecting you.

You never did know a drill bit from a screw handle, Ick-Ball. Good

with the theory, but never got the hang of the practicalities. Go on,

up the stairs, mind the night lights good idea that, eh? Hello, Alsi,

you look lovely as ever; hello, Millboid, yer scoundrel. So Sam, out

with it: what have you lost?”

Samad sheepishly recounted the damage so far.

“Ah, now you see, that’s not your glazing that’s fine, / put that in

it’s the frames. Just ripped out of that crumbling wall, I’ll bet.”

Samad grudgingly acknowledged this to be the case.

“There’ll be worst to come, mark mine. Well, what’s done is done.

Clara and Me are in the kitchen. We've got a Bunsen burner going, and

grub's up in a minute. But what a bloody storm, eh? Phone's out.

"Electricity's out. Never seen the likes of it."

In the kitchen, a kind of artificial calm reigned. Clara was stirring

some beans, quietly humming the tune to Buffalo Soldier. Me was

hunched over a notepad, writing her diary obsessively in the manner of

thirteen-year-olds:

8.30 p.m. Millat just walked in. He's sooo gorgeous but ultimately

irritating! Tight jeans as usual. Doesn't look at me (as usual, except in a FRIENDLY way). I'm in love with a fool (stupid me)! If

only he had

his brother's brains ... oh well, blah blah. I've got puppy love and

puppy fat aaaagh! Storm still crazy. Got to go. Will write later.

"All right," said Millat.

"All right," said Me.

"Crazy this, eh?"

"Yeah, mental."

"Dad's having a fit. House is torn to shit."

"Ditto. It's been madness around here too."

"I'd like to know where you'd be without me, young lady," said Archie,

banging another nail into some hardboard. "Best protected house in



Willesden, this is. Can't hardly tell there's a storm going on from here."

"Yeah," said Millat, sneaking a final thrilling peek through the window

at the apoplectic trees before Archie blocked out the sky entirely with

wood and nails. "That's the problem."

Samad clipped Millat round the ear. "Don't you start in on the cheekiness. We know what we're doing. You forget, Archibald and I

have coped with extreme situations. Once you have fixed a five-man

tank in the middle of a battlefield, your life at risk at every turn,

bullets whizzing inches from your arse, while simultaneously capturing

the enemy in the harshest possible conditions, let me be telling you,

hurricane is little tiny small fry. You could do a lot worse than yes,

yes, very amusing I'm sure," muttered Samad, as the two children and

the two wives feigned narcolepsy. "Who wants some of these beans? I'm

dishing out."

"Someone tell a story," said Alsana. "It's going to get oh so boring

if we have to listen to old warhorse big mouths all night."

"Go on, Sam," said Archie with a wink. "Give us the one about Mangal

Pande. That's always good for a laugh."

A clamour of Nooo's, mimed slitting of throats and self asphyxiation

went round the assembled company.

"The story of Mangal Pande," Samad protested, "is no laughing matter.

He is the tickle in the sneeze, he is why we are the way we are, the founder of modern India, the big historical cheese."

Alsana snorted. "Big fat nonsense. Every fool knows Gandhi gee is the

big cheese. Or Nehru. Or maybe Akbar, but he was crook-backed, and

huge-nosed, I never liked him."

"Dammit! Don't talk nonsense, woman. What do you know about it?

Fact

is: it is simply a matter of market economy, publicity, movie rights.

The question is: are the pretty men with the big white teeth willing to

play you, et cetera. Gandhi had Mr. Kingsley bully for him but who

will do Pande, eh? Pande's not pretty enough, is he? Too

Indian-looking, big nose, big eyebrows. That's why I am always having

to tell you ingrates a thing or two about Mangal Pande.

Bottom line:

if I don't, nobody will."

"Look," said Millat, "I'll do the short version.

Greatgrandfather "

"Your great-great-grandfather, stupid," corrected Alsana.

"Whatever. Decides to fuck the English'

“To rebel against the English, all on his Jack-Jones, spliffed up  
to

the eyeballs, tries to shoot his captain, misses, tries to shoot  
himself, misses, gets hung ‘

“Hanged,” said Clara absentmindedly.

“Hanged or hung? I’ll get the dictionary,” said Archie, laying  
down

his hammer and climbing off the kitchen counter.

“Whatever. End of story. Boring.”

And now a mammoth tree the kind endemic to North London,  
the ones that

sprout three smaller trees along the trunk before finally  
erupting into

glorious greenery, city-living for whole diaspora of magpie a  
tree of

this kind tore itself from the dog shit and the concrete, took  
one

tottering step forward, swooned and collapsed; through the  
guttering,

through the double glazing, through the hardboard, knocked  
over a gas

lamp, and then landed in an absence that was Archie-shaped,  
for he had

just left it.

Archie was the first to leap into action, throwing a towel on  
the small

fire progressing along the cork kitchen tiles, while everyone  
else

trembled and wept and checked each other for injury. Then  
Archie,

visibly shaken by this blow to his DIY supremacy, reclaimed  
control

over the elements, tying some of the branches with kitchen rags and ordering Millat and Irie to go around the house, putting out the gas lamps.

“We don’t want to burn ourselves to death, now do we? I better find some black plastic and gaffer tape. Do something about this.” Samad was incredulous. “Do something about it, Archibald? I fail to see how some gaffer tape will change the fact there is a half a tree in the kitchen.”

“Man, I’m terrified,” stuttered Clara, after a few minutes’ silence, as the storm lulled. “The quiet is always a bad sign. My grandmother God rest her she always said that. The quiet is just God pausing to take a breath before he shouts all over again. I think we should go into the other room.”

“That was the only tree on this side. Best stay in here. Worst’s done here. Besides,” said Archie, touching his wife’s arm affectionately, ‘you Bowdens have seen worse than this! Your mother was born in a bloody earthquake, for Christ’s sake. 1907, Kingston’s falling apart and Hortense pops into the world. You wouldn’t see a little storm like

this worrying her. Tough as nails, that one.”

“Not toughness,” said Clara quietly, standing up to look through the

broken window at the chaos outside, ‘luck. Luck and faith.”

“I suggest we pray,” said Samad, picking up his novelty Qur’an. “I

suggest we acknowledge the might of the Creator as he does his worst

this evening.”

Samad began nicking through and, finding what he wanted, brought it

patrician-like under his wife’s nose, but she slammed it shut and

glared at him. Ungodly Alsana, who was yet a nifty hand with the word

of God (good schooling, proper parents, oh

yes), lacking nothing but the faith, prepared to do what she did only

in emergency: recite: “I do not serve what you worship, nor do you

serve what I worship. I shall never serve what you worship, nor will

you ever serve what I worship. You have your own religion, and I have

mine. Sura 109, translation N. J. Dawood.” Now, will someone,” said

Alsana, looking to Clara, ‘please remind my husband that he is not Mr.

Manilow and he does not have the songs that make the whole world sing.

He will whistle his tune and I will whistle mine.”

Samad turned contemptuously from his wife and placed both hands rigidly

on his book. “Who will pray with me?”

“Sorry, Sam,” came a muffled voice (Archie had his head in the cupboard

and was searching for the bin bags). “Not really my cup of tea, either. Never been a church man. No offence.”

Five more minutes passed without the wind. Then the quiet burst and

God shouted just as Ambrosia Bowden had told her granddaughter he

would. Thunder went over the house like a dying man’s bile, lightning

followed like his final malediction, and Samad closed his eyes.

“The Millat!” called Clara, then Alsana. No answer. Standing bolt

upright in the cupboard, smashing his head against the spice shelf,

Archie said, “It’s been ten minutes. Oh blimey. Where are the kids?”

One kid was in Chittagong, being dared by a friend to take off his

lungi and march through a renowned crocodile swamp; the other two had

sneaked out of the house to feel the eye of the storm, and were walking

against the wind as if thigh-high in water. They waded into Willesden

recreation ground, where the following conversation took place.

“This is incredible.”

“Yeah, mental!”

“You’re mental.”

“What do you mean? I’m fine!”

“No, you’re not. You’re always looking at me. And what were you

writing? You’re such a nerd. You’re always writing

“Nothing. Stuff. You know, diary stuff.”

“You’ve got the blatant hots for me.”

“I can’t hear you! Louder!”

“THE HOTS! BLATANTLY! YOU CAN HEAR ME.”

“I have not! You’re an egomaniac.”

“You want my arse.”

“Don’t be a wanker!”

“Well, it’s no good, anyway. You’re getting a bit big. I don’t like

big. You can’t have me.”

“I wouldn’t want to, Mr. Egomaniac.”

“Plus: imagine what our kids would look like.”

“I think they’d look nice.”

“Brown-black. Blacky-brown. Afro, flat nose, rabbit teeth and

freckles. They’d be freaks!”

“You can talk. I’ve seen that picture of your gran dad —’

“GREAT-GREATGRANDAD.”

“Massive nose, horrible eyebrows’

“That’s an artist’s impression, you chief.”

“And they’d be crazy he was crazy your whole family’s crazy. It’s

genetic.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.”

“And for your information, I don’t fancy you, anyway. You’ve got a

bent nose. And you’re trouble. Who wants trouble?”

“Well, watch out,” said Millat, leaning forward, colliding with some

buck teeth, slipping a tongue in momentarily, and then pulling back.

“Cos that’s all the trouble you’re getting.”

Samoa 1984, 1857

14 January 1989

Millat spread his legs like Elvis and slapped his wallet down on the

counter. “One for Bradford, yeah?”

The ticket-man put his tired face close up to the glass. “Are you

asking me, young man, or telling me?”

“I just say, yeah? One for Bradford, yeah? You got some problem,

yeah? Speaka da English? This is King’s Cross, yeah? One for Bradford, in nit

Millat’s Crew (Rajik, Ranil, Dipesh and Hifan) sniggered and shuffled

behind him, joining in on the ye ahs like some kind of backing group.

“Please?”

“Please what, yeah? One for Bradford, yeah? You get me? One for

Bradford. Chief.”

“And would that be a return? For a child?”

“Yeah, man. I’m fifteen, yeah? “Course I want a return, I’ve got a



bar ii to get back to like everybody else.”

“That’ll be seventy-five pounds, then, please.”

This was met with displeasure by Millat and Millat’s Crew.

“You what? Takin’ liberties! Seventy chaaaa, man. That’s moody. I

ain’t payin’ no seventy-five pounds!”

“Well, I’m afraid that’s the price. Maybe next time you mug some poor

old lady,” said the ticket-man, looking pointedly at the chunky gold

that fell from Millat’s ears, wrists, fingers and from around his neck,

‘you could stop in here first before you get to the jewellery store.’”

“Liberties!” squealed Hifan.

“He’s cussin’ you, yeah?” confirmed Ranil.

“You better tell ‘im,” warned Rajik.

Millat waited a minute. Timing was everything. Then he turned around,

stuck his arse in the air, and farted long and loud in the ticket-man’s

direction.

The Crew, on cue: “Somokdmi!”

“What did you call me? You what did you say? You little bastards.

Can’t tell me in English? Have to talk your Paki language?”

Millat slammed his fist so hard on the glass that it reverberated down

the booths to the ticket-man down the other end selling tickets to

Milton Keynes.

“First: I’m not a Paki, you ignorant fuck. And second: you don’t need

translator, yeah? I’ll give it to you straight. You’re a fucking faggot, yeah? Queer boy, poofter, batty-rider, shit-dick.”

There was nothing Millat’s Crew prided themselves on more than the

number of euphemisms they could offer for homosexuality.

“Arse-bandit, fairy-fucker, toilet-trader.”

“You want to thank God for the glass between us, boy.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I thank Allah, yeah? I hope he fucks you up wicked, yeah? We’re going to Bradford to sort out the likes of you,

yeah? Chief!”

Halfway up platform 12” about to board a train they had no tickets for,

a King’s Cross security guy stopped Millat’s Crew to ask them a

question. “You boys not looking for any trouble, are you?”

The question was fair. Millat’s Crew looked like trouble. And, at the

time, a crew that looked like trouble in this particular way had a

name, they were of a breed: Raggastani.

It was a new breed, just recently joining the ranks of the other street

crews: Becks, B-boys, Indic kids, wide-boys, ravers, rude-boys,

Acidheads, Sharons, Tracies, Kevs, Nation Brothers, Raggas and Pakis;

manifesting itself as a kind of cultural mongrel of the last three

categories. Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called that, was equally a hybrid thing: A&ahfeatured, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck geezer who would fight in their corner if necessary; Kung Fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; added to this was a smattering of Black Power

2,31

(as embodied by the album Fear of a Black Planet, Public Enemy); but mainly their mission was to put the Invincible back in Indian, the Bad-aaa ass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani. People had fucked with Rajik back in the days when he was into chess and wore V-necks. People had fucked with Ranil, when he sat at the back of the class and carefully copied all teacher's comments into his book. People had fucked with Dipesh and Hifan when they wore traditional dress in the playground. People had even fucked with Millat, with his tight jeans and his white rock. But no one fucked with any of them any more

because they looked like trouble. They looked like trouble in stereo.

Naturally, there was a uniform. They each dripped gold and wore

bandanas, either wrapped around their foreheads or tied at the joint of

an arm or leg. The trousers were enormous, swamping things, the left

leg always inexplicably rolled up to the knee; the trainers were equally spectacular, with tongues so tall they obscured the entire

ankle; baseball caps were compulsory, low slung and irremovable, and

everything, everything, everything was Nike(tm); wherever the five of

them went the impression they left behind was of one gigantic swoosh,

one huge mark of corporate approval. And they walked in a very

particular way, the left side of their bodies assuming a kind of loose

paralysis that needed carrying along by the right side; a kind of glorified, funky limp like the slow, padding movement that Yeats

imagined for his rough millennial beast. Ten years early, while the

happy acid heads danced through the Summer of Love, Millat's Crew were

slouching towards Bradford.

"No trouble, yeah?" said Millat to the security guy.

"Just going" began Hifan.

"To Bradford," said Rajik.

“For business, yeah?” explained Dipesh.

“See-ya! Bidayo!” called Hifan, as they slipped into the train, gave

him the finger, and shoved their arses up against the closing doors.

“Tax the window seat, yeah? Nice. I’ve blatantly got to have a fag in

here, yeah? I’m fuckin’ wired, yeah? This whole business, man. This

fuckin’ geezer, man. He’s a fuckin’ coconut I’d like to fuck him up,

yeah?”

“Is he actually gonna be there?”

All serious questions were always addressed to Millat, and Millat

always answered the group as a whole. “No way. He ain’t going to be

there. Just brothers going to be there. It’s a fucking protest, you

chief, why’s he going to go to a protest against himself?”

“I’m just saying,” said Ranil, wounded, “I’d fuck him up, yeah? If he

was there, you know. Dirty fucking book.”

“It’s a fucking insult!” said Millat, spitting some gum against the

window. “We’ve taken it too long in this country. And now we’re

getting it from our own, man. Rhas clut! He’s a fucking bad or white

man’s puppet.”

“My uncle says he can’t even spell,” said a furious Hifan, the most

honestly religious of the lot. “And he dares to talk about Allah!”

“Allah’ll fuck him up, yeah?” cried Rajik, the least intelligent, who

thought of God as some kind of cross between Monkey Magic and Bruce

Willis. “He’ll kick him in the balls. Dirty book.”

“You read it?” asked Ranil, as they whizzed past Finsbury Park.

There was a general pause.

Millat said, “I haven’t exactly read it exactly but I know all about

that shit, yeah?”

To be more precise, Millat hadn’t read it. Millat knew nothing about

the writer, nothing about the book; could not identify the book if it

lay in a pile of other books; could not pick out the writer in a

line-up of other writers (irresistible, this line-up of offending

writers: Socrates, Protagoras, Ovid and Juvenal, Rad clyffe Hall, Boris

Pasternak, D. H. Lawrence, Solzhenitsyn, Nabokov, all holding up their

numbers for the mug shot, squinting in the flashbulb). But he knew

other things. He knew that

he, Millat, was a Paid no matter where he came from; that he smelt of

curry; had no sexual identity; took other people’s jobs; or had no job

and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that

he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a foot baller or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country, until the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands.

“So . . . you ain’t read it?” asked Ranil nervously.

“Look: you best believe I ain’t buying that shit, man. No way, star.”

The neither,” said Hifan.

“True star,” said Rajik.

“Fucking nastiness,” said Ranil.

“Twelve ninety-five, you know!” said Dipesh.

“Besides,” said Millat, with a tone of finality despite his high rising

terminals, ‘you don’t have to read shit to know that it’s blasphemous,

you get me?”

Back in Willesden, Samad Iqbal was expressing the very same sentiment

loudly over the evening news.

“I don’t need to read it. The relevant passages have been photocopied for me.”

“Will someone remind my husband,” said Alsana, speaking to the news

reader ‘that he does not even know what the bloody book is about

because the last thing he read was the bloody AZ.”

“I’m going to ask you one more time to shut up so I can watch the news.”

“I can hear screaming but it does not appear to be my voice.”

“Can’t you understand, woman? This is the most important thing to

happen to us in this country, ever. It’s crisis point. It’s the tickle in the sneeze. It’s big time.” Samad hit the volume button a

few times with his thumb. “This woman Moira whateverhernameis she

mumbles. Why is she reading news if she can’t speak properly?”

Moira, turned up suddenly in mid-sentence, said, ‘. . . the writer

denies blasphemy, and argues that the book concerns the struggle

between secular and religious views of life.”

Samad snorted. “What struggle! I don’t see any struggle. I get on

perfectly OK. All grey cells in good condition. No emotional



difficulties.”

Alsana laughed bitterly. “My husband fights the Third World War every

single bloody day in his head, so does everybody ‘

“No, no, no. No struggle. What’s he on about, eh? He can’t wangle

out of it by being rational. Rationality! Most overrated Western

virtue! Oh no. Fact is, he is simply offensive he has offended ‘

“Look,” Alsana cut in. “When my little group get together, if we

disagree about something, we can sort it out. Example: Mohona Hossain

hates Divargiit Singh. Hates all his movies. Hates him with a passion. She likes that other fool with the eyelashes like a lady! But

we compromise. Never once have I burned a single video of hers.”

“Hardly the same thing, Mrs. Iqbal, hardly the same kettle with fish

in it.”

“Oh, passions are running high at the Women’s Committee shows how

much

Samad Iqbal knows. But I am not like Samad Iqbal. I restrain myself.

I live. I let live.”

“It is not a matter of letting others live. It is a matter of protecting one’s culture, shielding one’s religion from abuse. Not

2.35

Samad. 1984, 18J7

that you'd know anything about that, naturally. Always too busy with

this Hindi brain popcorn to pay any attention to your own culture!"

"My own culture? And what is that please?"

"You're a Bengali. Act like one."

"And what is a Bengali, husband, please?"

"Get out of the way of the television and look it up."

Alsana took out baltic-brain, number three of their 24set

Reader's Digest Encyclopedia, and read from the relevant section:

The vast majority of Bangladesh's inhabitants are Bengalis, who are

largely descended from Indo-Aryans who began to migrate into the

country from the west thousands of years ago and who mixed within

Bengal with indigenous groups of various racial stocks. Ethnic minorities include the Chakma and Mogh, Mongoloid peoples who live in

the Chittagong Hill Tracts District; the Santal, mainly descended from

migrants from present-day India; and the Biharis, non-Bengali Muslims

who migrated from India after the partition.

"Oi, mister! Indo-Aryans... it looks like I am Western after all!

Maybe I should listen to Tina Turner, wear the itsy-bitsy leather

skirts. Pah. It just goes to show," said Alsana, revealing her

English tongue, 'you go back and back and back and it's still easier to

find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure

faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English?

It's a fairy-tale!"

"You don't know what you're talking about. You're out of your depth."

Alsana held up the encyclopedia. "Oh, Samad. Miah. You want to burn

this too?"

"Look: I've no time to play right now. I am trying to listen to a very

important news story. Serious goings on in Bradford. So, if you don't

mind '

"Oh dear God!" screamed Alsana, the smile leaving her face, falling to her knees in front of the television, tracing her finger past the burning book to the face she recognized, smiling up at her

through light tubes, her pixilated second-son beneath her

picture-framed first. "What is he doing? Is he crazy? Who does he

think he is? What on earth is he doing there? He's meant to be in

school! Has the day come when the babies are burning the books, has

it? I don't believe it!"

"Nothing to do with me. Tickle in the sneeze, Mrs. Iqbal," said Samad

coolly, sitting back in his armchair. "Tickle in the sneeze."  
When Millat came home that evening, a great bonfire was  
raging in the  
back garden. All his secular stuff four years' worth of cool,  
pre- and  
post-Raggastani, every album, every poster, special-edition t-  
shirts,  
club fliers collected and preserved over two years, beautiful  
Air Max  
trainers, copies 20-75 of 2000 AD Magazine, signed photo of  
Chuck D."  
impossibly rare copy of Slick Rick's Hey Young World,  
Catcher in the  
Rye, his guitar, Godfather I and II, Mean Streets, Rumblefish,  
Dog Day  
Afternoon and Shaft in Africa- all had been placed on the  
funeral pyre,  
now a smouldering mound of ashes that was giving off fumes  
of plastic  
and paper, stinging the boy's eyes that were already filled with  
tears.  
"Everyone has to be taught a lesson," Alsana had said, lighting  
the  
match with heavy heart some hours earlier. "Either everything  
is  
sacred or nothing is. And if he starts burning other people's  
things,  
then he loses something sacred also. Everyone gets what's  
coming,  
sooner or later."

10 November 1989

A wall was coming down. It was something to do with history.  
It was

an Historic occasion. No one really knew quite who had put it  
up or

who was tearing it down or whether this was good, bad or  
something

else; no one knew how tall it was, how long it was,

2,37

or why people had died trying to cross it or whether they  
would stop

dying in future, but it was educational all the same; as good an  
excuse

for a get-together as any. It was a Thursday night, Alsana and  
Clara

had cooked, and everybody was watching history on TV.

“Who’s for more rice?”

Millat and Me held out their plates, jostling for prime position.

“What’s happening now?” asked Clara, rushing back to her  
seat with a

bowl of Jamaican fried dumplings, from which Irie snatched  
three.

“Same, man,” Millat grumbled. “Same. Same. Same. Dancing  
on the

wall, smashing it with a hammer. Whatever. I wanna see what  
else is

on, yeah?”

Alsana snatched the remote control and squeezed in between  
Clara and

Archie. “Don’t you dare, mister.”

“It’s educational,” said Clara deliberately, her pad and paper  
on the

arm rest, waiting to leap into action at the suggestion of anything edifying. “It’s the kind of thing we all should be watching.” Alsana nodded and waited for two awkward-shaped bhajis to go down the gullet. “That’s what I try and tell the boy. Big business. Tip-top historic occasion. When your own little Iqbals tug at your trousers and ask you where you were when’ Till say I was bored shitless watching it on TV.” Millat got a thwack round the head for ‘shitless’ and another one for the impertinence of the sentiment. Irie, looking strangely like the crowd on top of the wall in her everyday garb of CND badges, graffiti-covered trousers and beaded hair, shook her head in saddened disbelief. She was that age. Whatever she said burst like genius into centuries of silence. Whatever she touched was the first stroke of its kind. Whatever she believed was not formed by faith but carved from certainty. Whatever she thought was the first time such a thought had ever been think.

That’s totally your problem, Mill. No interest in the outside world. I think this is amazing. They’re all free! After all this time, don’t you think that’s amazing? That after years under the dark

cloud of Eastern communism they're coming into the light of  
Western

democracy, united," she said, quoting Newsnight faithfully. "I  
just

think democracy is man's greatest invention."

Alsana, who felt personally that Clara's child was becoming  
impossibly

pompous these days, held up the head of a Jamaican fried fish  
in

protest. "No, dearie. Don't make that mistake. Potato peeler is  
man's greatest invention. That or Poop-a-Scoop."

"What they want," said Millat, 'is to stop pissing around wid  
dis

hammer business and jus' get some Sementex and blow de djam  
ting up, if

they don't like it, you get me? Be quicker, in nit

"Why do you talk like that?" snapped Irie, devouring a  
dumpling.

That's not your voice. You sound ridiculous!"

"And you want to watch dem dumplings," said Millat, patting  
his belly.

"Big ain't beautiful."

"Oh, get lost."

"You know," murmured Archie, munching on a chicken wing,  
"I'm not so

sure that it's such a good thing. I mean, you've got to  
remember, me

and Samad, we were there. And believe me, there's a good  
reason to

have it split in two. Divide and conquer, young lady."

"Jesus Christ, Dad. What are you on?"

“He’s not on anything,” said Samad severely. “You younger people

forget why certain things were done, you forget their significance. We

were there. Not all of us think fondly upon a united Germany. They

were different times, young lady.”

“What’s wrong with a load of people making some noise about their

freedom? Look at them. Look at how happy they are.”

Samad looked at the happy people dancing on the wall and felt contempt

and something more irritating underneath it that could have been

jealousy.

“It is not that I disagree with rebellious acts per se. It is simply that if you are to throw over an old order, you must be sure that

you can offer something of substance to replace it; that is what Germany needs to understand. As an example, take my great grandfather

Mangal Pande ‘

Me sighed the most eloquent sigh that had ever been sighed.

“I’d

rather not, if it’s all the same.”

TheI’ said Clara, because she felt she should.

Me huffed. And puffed.

“Well! He goes on like he knows everything. Everything’s always about

him and I’m trying to talk about now, today, Germany. I bet you,” she



said, turning to Samad, "I know more about it than you do. Go on. Try

me. I've been studying it all term. Oh, and by the way: you weren't

there. You and Dad left in 1945. They didn't do the wall until 1961."

"Cold War," said Samad sourly, ignoring her. "They don't talk about

hot war any more. The kind where men get killed. That's where I

learnt about Europe. It cannot be found in books."

"Oi-oi," said Archie, trying to diffuse a row. "You do know Last of

the Summer Wine's on in ten minutes? BBC Two."

"Go on," persisted Me, kneeling up and turning around to face Samad.

"Try me."

"The gulf between books and experience," intoned Samad solemnly, 'is a

lonely ocean."

"Right. You two talk such a load of sh ' "

But Clara was too quick with a slap round the ear. TheI'

Me sat back down, not so much defeated as exasperated and turned up the

TV volume.

The 28-mile-long scar the ugliest symbol of a divided world, East and

West has no meaning any more. Few people, including this reporter,

thought to see it happen in their lifetimes, but last night, at the

stroke of midnight, thousands lingering both sides of the wall  
gave a  
great roar and began to pour through checkpoints and to climb  
up and  
over it.

“Foolishness. Massive immigration problem to follow,” said  
Samad to

the television, dipping a dumpling into some ketchup. “You  
just can’t

let a million people into a rich country. Recipe for disaster.”

“And who does he think he is? Mr. Churchill-gee?” laughed  
Alsana

scornfully. “Original whitecliffsdover piesmash jelly eels  
royal

variety british bulldog hell?”

“Scar,” said Clara, noting it down. “That’s the right word, isn’t  
it?”

“Jesus Christ. Can’t any of you understand the enormity of  
what’s

going on here? These are the last days of a regime. Political  
apocalypse, meltdown. It’s an historic occasion.”

“So everyone keeps saying,” said Archie, scouring the TV  
Times. “But

what about The Krypton Factor, I TV? That’s always good,  
eh? “Son

now.”

“And stop sayin’ “an historic”,” said Millat, irritated at all the  
poncey political talk. “Why can’t you just say “a”, like  
everybody

else, man? Why d’you always have to be so la di da?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” (She loved him, but he was impossible.)

“What

possible fucking difference can it make?”

Samad rose out of his seat. TheI This is my house and you are still a

guest. I won’t have that language in it!”

“Fine! I’ll take it to the streets with the rest of the proletariat.”

“That girl,” tutted Alsana as her front door slammed.

“Swallowed an

encyclopedia and a gutter at the same time.”

Millat sucked his teeth at his mother. “Don’t you start, man.

What’s

wrong with “a” encyclopedia? Why’s everyone in this house always

puttin’ on fuckin’ airs?”

Samad pointed to the door. “OK, mister. You don’t speak to your

mother like that. You out too.”

“I don’t think,” said Clara quietly, after Millat had stormed up to his

room, ‘that we should discourage the kids from having an opinion. It’s

good that they’re freethinkers.”

Samad sneered, “And you would know . . . what? You do a

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great deal of free-thinking? In the house all day, watching the television?”

“Excuse me?”

“With respect: the world is complex, Clara. If there’s one thing these

children need to understand it is that one needs rules to survive it,

not fancy.”

“He’s right, you know,” said Archie earnestly, ashing a fag in an empty

curry bowl. “Emotional matters then yes, that’s your department ‘

“Oh women’s work!” squealed Alsana, through a mouth full of curry.

Thank you so much, Archibald.”

Archie struggled to continue. “But you can’t beat experience, can you?

I mean, you two, you’re young women still, in a way. Whereas we, I

mean, we are, like, wells of experience the children can use, you know,

when they feel the need. We’re like encyclopedias. You just can’t

offer them what we can. In all fairness.”

Alsana put her palm on Archie’s forehead and stroked it lightly. “You

fool. Don’t you know you’re left behind like carriage and horses, like

candle wax Don’t you know to them you’re old and smelly like

yesterday’s fishnchip paper? I’ll be agreeing with your daughter on

one matter of importance.” Alsana stood up, following Clara, who had

left at this final insult and marched tearfully into the kitchen.

“You

two gentlemen talk a great deal of the youknowwhat.”

Left alone, Archie and Samad acknowledged the desertion of both

families by a mutual rolling of eyes, wry smiles. They sat quietly for

a moment while Archie's thumb flicked adeptly through An Historic

Occasion, A Costume Drama Set in Jersey, Two Men Trying to Build a

Raft

in Thirty Seconds, A Studio Debate on Abortion, and back once more to

An Historic Occasion.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

“Home? Pub? O’Connell’s?”

Archie was about to reach into his pocket for a shiny ten pence when he

realized there was no need. “O’Connell’s?” said Archie.

“O’Connell’s’ said Samad.

io The Root Canals ofMangal Pande

Finally, O’ConnellTs. Inevitably, O’Connell’s. Simply because you

could be without family in O’Connell’s, without possessions or status,

without past glory or future hope you could walk through that door with

nothing and be exactly the same as everybody else in there. It could

be 1989 outside, or 1999, or 2009, and you could still be sitting at

the counter in the V-neck you wore to your wedding in 1975,1945,1935.

Nothing changes here, things are only retold, remembered. That's why

old men love it. It's all about time. Not just its stillness but the pure, brazen amount of it. Quantity rather than Quality. This is hard

to explain. If only there was some equation . . . something like:

TIME SPENT HERE

Reason why I

ENJOYMENT x MASOCHISM =

TIME THAT I COULD HAVE

USEFULLY SPENT ELSEWHERE

am a regular

Something to rationalize, to explain, why one would keep returning,

like Freud's grandson with his fort-da game, to the same miserable

scenario. But time is what it comes down to. After you've spent a

certain amount, invested so much of it in one place, your credit rating

booms and you feel like breaking the chronological bank. You feel like

staying in the place until it pays you back all the time you gave it

even if it never will.

And with the time spent, comes the knowledge, comes the history. It

was at O'Connell's that Samad had suggested Archie's remarriage, 1974.

Underneath table six in a pool of his own vomit, Archie celebrated the

birth of Irie, 1975. There is a stain on the

The Root Canals of Mangal Pande

corner of the pinball machine where Samad first spilt civilian blood,

with a hefty right hook to a racist drunk, 1980. Archie was downstairs

the night he watched his fiftieth birthday float up through fathoms of

whisky to meet him like an old shipwreck, 1977. And this is where they

both came, New Year's Eve, 1989 (neither the Iqbal nor Jones families

having expressed a desire to enter the 905 in their company), happy to

take advantage of Mickey's special New Year fry-up: 2 pounds 85 pence

for three eggs, beans, two rounds of toast, mushrooms and a generous

slice of seasonal turkey.

The seasonal turkey was a bonus. For Archie and Samad, it was really

all about being the witness, being the expert. They came here because

they knew this place. They knew it inside and out. And if you can't

explain to your kid why glass will shatter at certain impacts but not

others, if you can't understand how a balance can be struck between

democratic secularism and religious belief within the same state, or

you can't recall the circumstances in which Germany was divided, then

it feels good no, it feels great to know at least one particular place,

one particular period, from first-hand experience, eyewitness reports;

to be the authority, to have time on your side, for once, for once. No

better historians, no better experts in the world than Archie and Samad

when it came to The Post-War Reconstruction and Growth of O'Connell's

Pool Hoitse.

1952, All (Mickey's father), and his three brothers arrive at Dover

with thirty old pounds and their father's gold pocket-watch. All

suffer from disfiguring skin condition.

1954-1963 Marriages; odd-jobs of all varieties; births of AbdulMickey,

the five other Abduls and their cousins.

1968 After working for three years as delivery boys in a Yugoslavian

dry-cleaning outfit, All and his brothers have a small lump sum with

which they set up a cab service called Ali's Cab Service.

1971 Cab venture a great success. But All is dissatisfied. He decides

what he really wants to do is 'serve food, make people happy, have some



face to face conversations once in a while'. He buys the disused Irish

pool house next to the defunct railway station on the Finchley Road and

sets about renovating it.

1972 In the Finchley Road only Irish establishments do any real

business. So despite his Middle Eastern background and the fact that

he is opening a cafe and not a pool house, All decides to keep the

original Irish name. He paints all the fittings orange and green, hangs pictures of racehorses and registers his business name as "Andrew

O'Connell Yusuf. Out of respect, his brothers encourage him to hang

fragments of the Qur'an on the wall, so that the hybrid business will

be 'kindly looked upon'.

13 May 1973 O'ConnellTs opens for business.

2 November 1974 Samad and Archie stumble upon O'ConnellTs on their

way

home and pop in for a fry-up.

1975 All decides to carpet the walls to limit food stains.

May 1977 Samad wins fifteen bob on fruit machine.

1979 All has a fatal heart attack due to cholesterol buildup around the

heart. Ali's remaining family decide his death is a result of the unholy consumption of pork products. Pig is banned from the menu.

1980 Momentous year. Abdul-Mickey takes over O'Connell's.  
Institutes

underground gambling room to make up for the money lost on  
sausages.

Two large pool tables are used: the "Death" table and the  
"Life" table.

All those who want to play for money play on the "Death"  
table. All

those who object for religious reasons or because out of pocket  
play on

the friendly "Life" table. Scheme a great success. Samad and  
Archie

play on the "Death\* table.

December 1980 Archie gets highest ever recorded score on  
pinball:

51,998 points.

1981 Archie finds unwanted cut-out of Viv Richards on Self  
ridges shop

floor and brings it to O'Connell's. Samad asks to have his  
great-grandfather Mangal Pande's picture on the wall. Mickey  
refuses,

claiming his 'eyes are too close together'.

1982 Samad stops playing on the "Death" table for religious  
reasons.

Samad continues to petition for the picture's installation. 31  
October

1984 Archie wins 268 pounds 72 pence on the "Death" table.  
Buys

beautiful new set of Pirelli tyres for clapped-out car. New  
Year's Eve

1989, 10.30 p.m. Samad finally persuades

Mickey to hang portrait. Mickey still thinks it ‘puts people off their food’.

“I still think it puts people off their food. And on New Year’s Eve.

I’m sorry, mate. No offence meant. “Course my opinion’s not the fucking word of God, as it were, but it’s still my opinion.”

Mickey attached a wire round the back of the cheap frame, gave the dusty glass a quick wipe-down with his apron, and reluctantly placed the portrait on its hook above the oven.

“I mean, he’s so bloody nasty-looking. That moustache. He looks like

a right nasty piece of work. And what’s that earring about? He’s not a queer, is he?”

“No, no, no. It wasn’t unusual, then, for men to wear jewellery.”

Mickey was dubious, giving Samad the look he gave to people who

claimed

to have got no game of pinball for their 50p and came seeking a refund.

He got out from behind the counter and took a look at the picture from

this new angle. “What d’you think, Arch?”

“Good,” said Archie solidly. “I think: good.”

“Please. I would consider it a great personal favour if you would

allow it to stay.”

Mickey tilted his head to one side and then the other. "As I said, I

don't mean no offence or nothing, I just think he looks a bit bloody shady. Haven't you got another picture of him or som mink

"That is the only one that survives. I would consider it a great personal favour, very great."

"Well.. ." ruminated Mickey, flipping an egg over, 'you being a

regular, as it were, and you going on about it so bloody much, I

suppose we'll have to keep it. How about a public survey? What d'you

think Denzel? Clarence?"

Denzel and Clarence were sitting in the corner as ever, their only

concession to New Year's Eve a few pieces of mangy tinsel hanging off

Denzel's trilby and a feathered kazoo sharing mouth space with

Clarence's cigar.

"Was dat?"

"I said, what d'you think of this bloke Samad wants up? It's his

grandfather."

"Gmt-grandfather," corrected Samad.

"You kyan see me playing dominoes? You tryin' to deprive an ol' man of

his pleasure? What picture?" Denzel grudgingly turned to look at it.

"Dat? Hmph! I don' like it. He look like one of Satan's crew!"

“He a relative of you?” squeaked Clarence to Samad in his woman’s voice. “Dat explain much, my friend, much! He got some face like a donkey’s pumpum.”

Denzel and Clarence exploded into their dirty laughter. “Nuff to put my belly off its digesting, true sur!”

“There you are!” exclaimed Mickey, victorious, turning back to Samad.

“Puts the clientele off their food that’s what I said right off.”

“Assure me you are not going to listen to those two.”

“I don’t know . . .” Mickey twisted and turned in front of his cooking;

hard thought always enlisted the involuntary help of his body.

“I respect you and that, and you was mates with my dad, but no disrespect or nuffin’ you’re getting a bit fucking long-in-the tooth, Samad mate, some of the younger customers might not ‘

“What younger customers?” demanded Samad, gesturing to Clarence and Denzel.

“Yeah, point taken . . . but the customer is always right, if you set my drift.”

o J

Samad was genuinely hurt. 7 am a customer. I am a customer. I have been coming to your establishment for fifteen years, Mickey. A very

long time in any man's estimation."

"Yeah, but it's the majority wot counts, in nit On most other tings I

defer, as it were, to your opinion. The lads call you "The Professor"

and, fair dues, it's not without cause. I am a respecer of your judgement, six days out of every seven. But bottom line is: if you're

one captain and the rest of the crew wants a bloody mutiny, well.. .

you're fucked, aren't you?"

Mickey sympathetically demonstrated the wisdom of this in his frying

pan, showing how twelve mushrooms could force one mushroom over the

edge and on to the floor.

With the cackles of Denzel and Clarence still echoing in his ears, a

current of anger worked its way through Samad and rose to his throat

before he was able to stop it.

"Give it to me!" He reached over the counter to where Mangal Pande was

hanging at a melancholy angle above the stove. "I should never have

asked ... it would be a dishonour, it would cast into ignominy the

memory of Mangal Pande to have him placed here in this this irreligious

house of shame!"

"You what?"

"Give it to me!"

“Now look . . . wait a minute’

Mickey and Archie reached out to stop him, but Samad, distressed and

full of the humiliations of the decade, kept struggling to overcome

Mickey’s strong blocking presence. They tussled for a bit, but then

Samad’s body went limp and, covered in a light film of sweat, he

surrendered. “Look, Samad,” and here Mickey touched Samad’s shoulders

with such affection that Samad thought he might weep. “I didn’t

realize it was such a bloody big deal for you. Let’s start again.

We’ll leave the picture up for a week and see how it goes, right?”

“Thank you, my friend.” Samad pulled out a handkerchief and drew it

over his forehead. “It is appreciated. It is appreciated.”

Mickey gave him a conciliatory pat between the shoulder blades. “Fuck

knows, I’ve heard enough about him over the years. We might as well

‘ave him up on the bloody wall. It’s all the same to me, I suppose.

Comme-See-Comme-Sar, as the Frogs say. I mean, bloody hell.

Blood-ee-hell. And that extra turkey requires hard cash, Archibald, my

good man. The golden days of Luncheon Vouchers is over.

Dear oh dear,

what a palaver over nuffin’ . . .”

Samad looked deep into his great-grandfather's eyes. They had been

through this battle many times, Samad and Pande, the battle for the

latter's reputation. Both knew all too well that modern opinion on

Mangal Pande weighed in on either side of two camps:

An unrecognized hero A palaver over nuffin'

Samad Iqbal Mickey

A. S. Misra Magid and Millat

Alsana

Me

Clarence and Denzel

British scholarship from 1857 to the present day

Again and again he had argued the toss with Archie over this issue.

Over the years they had sat in O'Connell's and returned to the same

debate, sometimes with new information gleaned from Samad's continual

research into the matter but ever since Archie found out the 'truth'

about Pande, circa 1953, there was no changing his mind.

Pande's only

claim to fame, as Archie was

at pains to point out, was his etymological gift to the English

language by way of the word "Pandy", under which title in the OED the

curious reader will find the following definition:

Pandy /'pandi/n. 2 colloq. (now Hist.) Also -dee. Mip [Perh. f. the



surname of the first mutineer amongst the high-caste sepoys in the

Bengal army.] i Any sepoy who revolted in the Indian Mutiny of 1857-9 2

Any mutineer or traitor 3 Any fool or coward in a military situation.

“Plain as the pie on your face, my friend.” And here Archie would

close the book with an exultant slam. “And I don’t need a dictionary

to tell me that but then neither do you. It’s common parlance. When

you and me were in the army: same. You tried to put one over on me

once, but the truth will out, mate. “Pandy” only ever meant one thing.

If I were you, I’d start playing down the family connection, rather

than bending everybody’s ear twenty-four hours a bloody day.”

“Archibald, just because the word exists, it does not follow that it is

a correct representation of the character of Mangal Pande. The first

definition we agree on: my great-grandfather was a mutineer and I am

proud to say this. I concede matters did not go quite according to

plan. But traitor? Coward? The dictionary you show me is old these

definitions are now out of currency. Pande was no traitor and no

coward.”

“Ahhh, now, you see, we’ve been through this, and my thought is this:

there’s no smoke without fire,” Archie would say, looking impressed by

the wisdom of his own conclusion. “Know what I mean?” This was one

of

Archie’s preferred analytic tools when confronted with news stories,

historical events and the tricky day-to-day process of separating fact

from fiction. There’s no smoke without fire. There was something so

vulnerable in the way he relied on this conviction, that Samad had

never had the heart to disabuse him of it. Why tell an old man that

there can be smoke

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without fire as surely as there are deep wounds that draw no blood?

“Of course, I see your point of view, Archie, I do. But my point is,

and has always been, from the very first time we discussed the subject;

my point is that this is not theA uH story. And, yes, I realize that

we have several times thoroughly investigated the matter, but the fact

remains: full stories are as rare as honesty, precious as diamonds. If

you are lucky enough to uncover one, a full story will sit on your

brain like lead. They are difficult. They are long-winded. They are

epic. They are like the stories God tells: full of impossibly particular information. You don't find them in the dictionary."

"All right, all right, Professor. Let's hear your version."

Often you see old men in the corner of dark pubs, discussing and

gesticulating, using beer mugs and salt-cellars to represent long-dead

people and far-off places. At that moment they display a vitality

missing in every other area of their lives. They light up.

Unpacking

a full story on to the table here is Churchill-fork, over there is

Czechoslovakia-serviette, here we find the accumulation of German

troops represented by a collection of cold peas they are reborn.

But

when Archie and Samad had these tabletop debates during the eighties,

knives and forks were not enough. The whole of the steamy Indian

summer of 1857, the whole of that year of mutiny and massacre would be

hauled into O'ConnellTs and brought to semi-consciousness by these two

makeshift historians. The area stretching from the jukebox to the

fruit machine became Delhi; Viv Richards silently complied as Pande's

English superior, Captain Hearsay; Clarence and Denzel continued to

play dominoes while simultaneously being cast as the restless sepoy

hordes of the British army. Each man brought the pieces of his argument, laid them out and assembled them for the other to see. Scenes

were set. Paths of bullets traced. Disagreement reigned.

The Root Canals of Mongol Pande

According to the legend, during the spring of 1857 in a factory in

Dum-Dum, a new kind of British bullet went into production. Designed

to be used in English guns by Indian soldiers, like most bullets at the

time they had a casing that must be bitten in order to fit the barrel.

There seemed nothing exceptional about them, until it was discovered by

some canny factory worker that they were covered in a grease a grease

made from the fat of pigs, monstrous to Muslims, and the fat of cows,

sacred to Hindus. It was an innocent mistake as far as anything is

innocent on stolen land an infamous British blunder. But what a

feverish turmoil must have engulfed the people on first hearing the

news! Under the specious pretext of new weaponry, the English were

intending to destroy their caste, their honour, their standing in the

eyes of Gods and men everything, in short, that made life worth living.

A rumour like this could not be kept secret; it spread like wildfire through the dry lands of India that summer, down the production line, out on to the streets, through town houses and country shacks, through barrack after barrack, until the whole country was ablaze with the desire for a mutiny. The rumour reached the large unsightly ears of Mangal Pande, an unknown sepoy in the small town of Barrackpore, who swaggered into his parade ground 29 March 1857 stepping forward from the throng to make a certain kind of history. "Make a fool of himself, more like," Archie will say (for these days he does not swallow Pandy-ology as gullibly as he once did). "You totally misunderstand his sacrifice," Samad will reply. "What sacrifice? He couldn't even kill himself properly! The problem with you, Sam, is you won't listen to the evidence. I've read up on it all. The truth is the truth, no matter how nasty it may taste." "Really. Well, please, my friend, since you are apparently an expert in the doings of my family, please, enlighten me. Let us hear your version."

Now, the average school student nowadays is aware of the complex forces, movements and deep currents that motivate wars and spark revolutions. But when Archie was in school the world seemed far more open to its own fictionalization. History was a different business then: taught with one eye on narrative, the other on drama, no matter how unlikely or chronologically inaccurate. According to this schema, the Russian Revolution began because everyone hated Rasputin. The Roman Empire declined and fell because Antony was having it off with Cleopatra. Henry V triumphed at Agincourt because the French were too busy admiring their own outfits. And the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857 began when a drunken fool called Mangal Pande shot a bullet. Despite Samad's opposition, each time Archie read the following he found himself more convinced:

The scene is Barrackpore, the date 29 March 1857. It is Sunday afternoon; but on the dusty floor of the parade ground a drama is being enacted which is suggestive of anything but Sabbath peace. There chatters and sways and eddies a confused mass of Sepoys, in all stages

of dress and undress; some armed, some unarmed; but Tall  
fermenting  
with excitement. Some thirty yards in front of the line of the  
34th  
swaggers to and fro a Sepoy named Mangal Pande. He is half  
drunk with  
bhang, and wholly drunk with religious fanaticism. Chin in air,  
loaded  
musket in hand, he struts backwards and forwards, at a sort of  
half  
dance, shouting in shrill and nasal monotone, "Come out, you  
blackguards! Turn out, all of you! The English are upon us.  
Through  
biting these cartridges we shall all be made infidels!"  
The man, in fact, is in that condition of mingled bhang and  
'nerves'  
which makes a Malay run amok; and every shout from his lips  
runs like a  
sudden flame through the brains and along the nerves of the  
listening  
crowd of fellow Sepoys, as the crowd gets bigger, the  
excitement more  
intense. A human powder magazine, in a word, is about to  
explode.  
And explode it did. Pande shot at his lieutenant and missed  
him. Then  
he took out a large sword, a tulwar, and cowardly lunged while  
his  
lieutenant's back was turned, catching him on the shoulder. A  
sepoy  
tried to restrain him, but Pande battled on. Then came  
reinforcements:

one Captain Hearsay rushed forward, his son at his side, both armed and honourable and prepared to die for their country. (“Hear-say is precisely what it is! Rubbish. Fabrication!”) At which point Pande saw the game was up, pointed his enormous gun at his own head and dramatically pulled the trigger with his left foot. He missed. A few days later, Pande stood trial and was found guilty. From the other side of the country, on a chaise longue in Delhi, his execution was ordered by one General Henry Havelock (a man honoured, much to Samad’s fury, by a statue just outside the Palace Restaurant, Trafalgar Square, to the right of Nelson), who added in a postscript to his written instruction that he did hope that this would put an end to all the rash talk of mutiny one kept hearing recently. But it was too late. As Pande swung in the sultry breeze, hanging from a makeshift gallows, his disbanded comrades from the 34th were heading for Delhi, determined to join the rebel forces of what was to become one of the bloodiest failed mutinies of this or any century. This version of events by a contemporary historian named Fitchett was



enough to send Samad into spasms of fury. When a man has nothing but his blood to commend him, each drop of it matters, matters terribly; it must be jealously defended. It must be protected against assailants and detractors. It must be fought for. But like a Chinese whisper, Fitchett's intoxicated, incompetent Pande had passed down a line of subsequent historians, the truth mutating, bending, receding as the whisper continued. It didn't matter that bhang, a hemp drink taken in small doses for medicinal purposes, was extremely unlikely to cause intoxication of this kind or that Pande, a strict Hindu, was extremely unlikely to drink it. It didn't matter that Samad could find not Samad 1984, U57 one piece of corroborating evidence that Pande had taken bhang that morning. The story still clung, like a gigantic misquote, to the Iqbal reputation, as solid and seemingly irremovable as the misconception that Hamlet ever said he knew Yorick 'well'.

"Enough! It makes no difference how many times you read these things to me, Archibald." (Archie usually came armed with a plastic bag full of Brent Library books, anti-Pande propaganda, misquotes galore.) "It

is like a gang of children caught with their hands in an enormous honey

jar: they are all going to tell me the same lie. I am not interested

in this kind of slander. I am not interested in puppet theatre or tragic farce. Action interests me, friend.” And here Samad would mime

the final zipping up of his lips, the throwing away of a key. “True

action. Not words. I tell you, Archibald, Mangal Pande sacrificed his

life in the name of justice for India, not because he was intoxicated

or insane. Pass me the ketchup.”

It was the 1989 New Year’s Eve shift in O’Connell’s, and the debate was

in full swing.

“True, he was not a hero in the way you in the West like your heroes he

did not succeed except in the manner of his honourable death. But

imagine it: there he sat.” Samad pointed to Denzel, about to play his

winning domino. “At the trial, knowing death was upon him, refusing

ever to reveal the names of his fellow conspirators ‘

“Now, that,” said Archie, patting his pile of sceptics, Michael

Edwardes, P. J. O. Taylor, Syed Moinul Haq and the rest,

‘depends what

you read.”

“No, Archie. That is a common mistake. The truth does not depend on

what you read. Please let us not get into the nature of truth.

Then

you do not have to draw with my cheese and I can avoid eating your

chalk.”

“All right, then: Pande. What did he achieve? Nothing! All he did

was start a mutiny too early, mind, before the agreed date and excuse

my French, but that’s a fucking disaster in military

The Root Cause of Mangal Pande

terms. You plan, you don’t act on instinct. He caused unnecessary

casualties. English and Indian/

“With respect, I don’t believe that to be the case.”

“Well, you’re wrong.”

“With respect, I believe I am right.”

“It’s like this, Sam: imagine here’ he gathered a pile of dirty plates

that Mickey was about to put in the dishwasher ‘are all the people who

have written about your Pande in the last hundred-and-whatever years.

Now: here’s the ones that agree with me.” He placed ten plates on his

side of the table and pushed one over to Samad. “And that’s the madman

on your side.”

“A. S. Misra. Respected Indian civil servant. Not a madman.”

“Right. Well, it would take you at least another hundred-and-whatever

years to get as many plates as I have, even if you were going to make them all yourself, and the likelihood is, once you had them, no bugger would want to eat off them anyway. Metaphorically speaking. Know what I mean?"

Which left only A. S. Misra. One of Samad's nephews, Rajnu, had written to him in the spring of '81 from his Cambridge college, mentioning casually that he had found a book which might be of some interest to his uncle. In it, he said, could be found an eloquent defence of their shared ancestor, one Mangal Pande. The only surviving copy was in his college library, it was by a man named Misra. Had he heard of it already? If not, might it not serve (Rajnu added in a cautious P. S.) as a pleasant excuse to see his uncle again? Samad arrived on the train the very next day and stood on the platform, warmly greeting his soft-spoken nephew in the pouring rain, shaking his hand several times and talking as if it were going out of fashion. "A great day," he repeated over and over, until both men were soaked to the skin. "A great day for our family, Rajnu, a great day for the truth."

Wet men not being allowed in college libraries, they spent the morning

drying off in a stuffy upstairs cafe, full of the right type of ladies

having the right type of tea. Rajnu, ever the good listener, sat patiently as his uncle babbled wildly Oh, the importance of the discovery, Oh, how long he had waited for this moment nodding in all

the right places and smiling sweetly as Samad brushed tears from the

corners of his eyes. “It is a great book, isn’t it, Rajnu?” asked

Samad pleadingly, as his nephew left a generous tip for the sour-faced

waitresses who did not appreciate overexcited Indians spending three

hours over one cream tea and leaving wet prints all over the furniture.

“It is recognized, isn’t it?”

Rajnu knew in his heart that the book was an inferior, insignificant,

forgotten piece of scholarship, but he loved his uncle, so he smiled,

nodded and smiled firmly again.

Once in the library, Samad was asked to fill in the visitors’ book:

Name: Samad Miah Iqbal

College: Educated elsewhere (Delhi)

Research project: Truth

Rajnu, tickled by this last entry, picked up the pen, adding ‘and

Tragedy’.

“Truth and Tragedy,” said a deadpan librarian, turning the book back

round. “Any particular kind?”

“Don’t worry,” said Samad genially. “We’ll find it.”

It took a stepladder to reach it but it was well worth the stretch.

When Rajnu passed the book to his uncle, Samad felt his fingers tingle

and, looking at its cover, shape and colour, saw that it was all he had

dreamt of. It was heavy, many paged, bound in a tan leather and

covered in the light dust that denotes something incredibly precious,

something rarely touched.

“I left a marker in it. There is much to read but there is something I thought you’d like to see first,” said Rajnu, laying it

down on a desk. The heavy thud of one side of the book hit the table,

and Samad looked at the appointed page. It was more than he could have

hoped for.

“It’s only an artist’s impression, but the similarity between’

“Don’t

Speak,” said Samad, tracing his fingers across the picture.

“This is

our blood, Rajnu. I never thought I would see . . . What eyebrows! What

a nose! I have his nose!”

“You have his face, Uncle. More dashing, naturally.” “And what what

does it say underneath. Damn! Where are my reading glasses ..  
. read

it for me, Rajnu, it is too small.”

The caption? Mangal Pande fired the first bullet of the 1857  
movement.

His self-sacrifice gave the siren to the nation to take up arms  
against

an alien ruler, culminating in a mass-uprising with no parallel  
in

world history. Though the effort failed in its immediate  
consequences,

it succeeded in laying the foundations of the Independence to  
be won in

1947. For his patriotism he paid with his life. But until his last  
breath he refused to disclose the names of those who were  
preparing

for, and instigating, the great uprising.”

Samad sat down on the bottom rung of the stepladder and  
wept.

“So. Let me get this straight. Now you’re telling me that  
without

Pande there’d be no Gandhi. That without your mad gran dad  
there’d be

no bloody Independence’

“Great-gran dad

“No, let me finish, Sam. Is that what you’re seriously asking  
us’

Archie clapped an uninterested Clarence and Denzel on the  
back ‘to

believe? Do you believe it?” he asked Clarence.

The kyan believe dat!” said Clarence, having no idea of the  
topic.

Denzel blew his nose into a napkin. “Troof be tol, me nah like to believe any ting. Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. Dat my motto.”

“He was the tickle in the sneeze, Archibald. It is as simple as that.

I do believe that.”

There was quiet for a minute. Archibald watched three sugar cubes

dissolve in his teacup. Then, rather tentatively, he said, “I’ve got

my own theory, you know. Separate from the books, I mean.”

Samad bowed. “Please enlighten us.”

“Don’t get angry, now . . . But just think for a minute. Why is a strict religious man like Pande drinking bhang? Seriously, I know I

tease you about it. But why is he?”

“You know my opinion on that. He isn’t. He didn’t. It was English propaganda.”

“And he was a good shot...”

“No doubt about it. A. S. Misra produces a copy of a record stating

that Pande trained in a special guard for one year, specially trained

in the use of muskets.”

“OK. So: why does he miss? Why?”

“It is my belief that the only possible explanation is that the gun was

faulty.”



“Yes . . . there is that. But, maybe, maybe something else.  
Maybe he  
was being bullied into going out there and making a row, you  
know,  
goaded, by the other guys. And he didn’t want to kill anyone  
in the  
first place, you know. So he pretended to be drunk, so the boys  
in the  
barracks room would believe he missed the shot.”

“That is quite the stupidest theory I have ever heard,” sighed  
Samad,  
as the second hand of Mickey’s egg-stained clock started the  
thirty-second countdown to midnight. “The kind only you  
could come up  
with. It’s absurd.”

“Why?”

“Why? Archibald, these Englishmen, these Captain Hearsays,  
Havelocks  
and the rest, were every Indian’s mortal enemy. Why should  
he spare  
lives he despised?”

“Maybe he just couldn’t do it. Maybe he wasn’t the type.”

“Do you really believe there is a type of man who kills and a  
type of  
man who doesn’t?”

“Maybe Sam, maybe not.”

“You sound like my wife,” groaned Samad, mopping up a final  
piece of  
egg, ‘let me tell you something, Archibald. A man is a man is  
a man.

His family threatened, his beliefs attacked, his way of life  
destroyed,

his whole world coming to an end he will kill. Make no mistake. He

won't let the new order roll over him without a struggle. There will

be people he will kill.”

“And there will be people he will save,” said Archie Jones, with a

cryptic look his friend would have thought an impossible feat for those

sagging, chubby features. “Trust me.”

“Five! Four! Tree! Two! One! Jamaica Me!” said Denzel and Clarence, raising hot Irish coffees to each other in a toast, then immediately resuming round nine of the dominoes.

“HAPPY FUCKING NEW YEAR!” bellowed Mickey from behind the

counter.

Irie

1990, 1907

In this wrought-iron world of crisscross cause and effect, could it be

that the hidden throb I stole from them did not affect their future?

Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov ii The Miseducation of Irie Jones

There was a lamp-post, equidistant from the Jones house and Glenard Oak

Comprehensive, that had begun to appear in Irie's dreams. Not the

lamp-post exactly, but a small, handmade advert which was sellotaped

round its girth at eye level. It said:

LOSE WEIGHT TO EARN MONEY

081 555 6752

Now, Irie Jones, aged fifteen, was big. The European proportions of

Clara's figure had skipped a generation, and she was landed instead

with Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples,

mangoes and guavas; the girl had weight; big tits, big butt, big hips,

big thighs, big teeth. She was thirteen stone and had thirteen pounds

in her savings account. She knew she was the target audience (if ever

there was one), she knew full well, as she trudged school wards mouth

full of doughnut, hugging her spare tyres, that the advert was speaking

to her. It was speaking to her. lose weight (it was saying) to earn

money. You, you, you, Miss Jones, with your strategically placed arms

and cardigan, tied around the arse (the endless mystery: how to diminish that swollen enormity, the Jamaican posterior?), with your

belly-reducing knickers and breast-reducing bra, with your meticulous

lycra corseting the much lauded nineties answer to whalebone with your

elasticated waists. She knew the advert

Me 1990, 1907

was talking to her. But she didn't know quite what it was saying.

What were we talking about here? Sponsored slim? The  
earning capacity  
of thin people? Or something altogether more Jacobean, the  
brain-child  
of some sordid Willesden Shylock, a pound of flesh for a  
pound of gold:  
meat for money’?  
Rapid. Eye. Movement. Sometimes she’d be walking through  
school in a  
bikini with the lamp-post enigma written in chalk over her  
brown  
bulges, over her various ledges (shelf space for books, cups of  
tea,  
baskets or, more to the point, children, bags of fruit, buckets of  
water), ledges genetically designed with another country in  
mind,  
another climate. Other times, the sponsored slim dream:  
knocking on  
door after door, butt-naked with a clipboard, drenched in  
sunlight,  
trying to encourage old men to pinch-an-inch and pledge-a-  
pound. Worst  
times? Tearing off loose, white-flecked flesh and packing it  
into  
those old curvaceous Coke bottles; she is carrying them to the  
corner  
shop passing them over a counter; and Millat is the bindi-  
wearing,  
V-necked corner shopkeeper he is adding them up, grudgingly  
opening the  
till with blood-stained paws, handing over the cash. A little  
Caribbean flesh for a little English change.^

Me Jones was obsessed. Occasionally her worried mother  
cornered her in

the hallway before she slunk out of the door, picked at her  
elaborate

corsetry, asked, “What’s up with you? What in the Lord’s  
name are you

wearing? How can you breathe? Me, my love, you’re fine  
you’re just

built like an honest-to-God Bowden don’t you know you’re  
fine?”

But Me didn’t know she was fine. There was England, a  
gigantic mirror,

and there was Me, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger  
land.

Nightmares and daydreams, on the bus, in the bath, in class.  
Before.

After. Before. After. Before. After. The mantra of the make-  
over

junkie, sucking it in, letting it out; unwilling to settle for  
genetic

fate; waiting instead for her transformation from Jamaican  
hourglass

heavy with the sands that gather round Dunn

The Miseducation of Irie Jones

River Falls, to English Rose oh, you know her she’s a slender,  
delicate

thing not made for the hot suns, a surfboard rippled by

i-Vlf\X73VP\*

the wave:

Before: After:

Mrs. Olive Roody, English teacher and expert doodle-spotter  
at

distances of up to twenty yards, reached over her desk to Irie's exercise book and tore out the piece of paper in question.

Looked

dubiously at it. Then inquired with melodious Scottish emphasis,

"Before and after what?"

"Er . . . what?"

"Before and after what?"

"Oh. Nothing, Miss."

"Nothing? Oh, come now, Ms Jones. No need for modesty. It is

obviously more interesting than Sonnet 12.7."

"Nothing. It's nothing."

"Absolutely certain? You don't wish to delay the class any more?"

Because . . . some of the class need to listen to nae, are even a wee

bit interested in what I have to say. So if you could spare some time

from your dooodling '

No one but no one said 'doodling' like Olive Roody.

'and join the rest of us, we'll continue. Well?"

"Well what?"

"Can you? Spare the time?"

"Yes, Mrs. Roody."

"Oh, good. That's cheered me up. Sonnet 127, please."

"In the old age black was not counted fair," continued Francis Stone in

the catatonic drone with which students read Elizabethan verse. "Or if

it were, it bore not beauty's name."

Me put her right hand on her stomach, sucked in and tried to catch

Millat's eye. But Millat was busy showing pretty Nikki Tyler how he

could manipulate his tongue into a narrow roll, a flute. Nikki Tyler

was showing him how the lobes of her ears were attached to the side of

her head rather than loose. Flirtatious remnants of this morning's

science lesson: Inherited characteristics. Part One (a). Loose.

Attached. Rolled. Flat. Blue eye. Brown eye. Before. After.

"Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black, her brows so suited, and

they mourners seem . . . My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips' red; If snow be white, why then

her breasts are dun

Puberty, real full-blown puberty (not the slight mound of a breast, or

the shadowy emergence of fuzz), had separated these old friends, Me

Jones and Millat Iqbal. Different sides of the school fence. Me

believed she had been dealt the dodgy cards: mountainous curves, buck

teeth and thick metal retainer, impossible Afro hair, and to top it off

mole-ish eyesight which in turn required bottle-top spectacles in a

light shade of pink. (Even those blue eyes the eyes Archie had been so

excited about lasted two weeks only. She had been born with them, yes,

but one day Clara looked again and there were brown eyes staring up at

her, like the transition between a closed bud and an open flower, the

exact moment of which the naked, waiting eye can never detect.) And

this belief in her ugliness, in her wrongness, had subdued her; she

kept her smart-ass comments to herself these days, she kept her right

hand on her stomach. She was all wrong.

Whereas Millat was like youth remembered in the nostalgic eyeglass of old age, beauty parodying itself: broken Roman nose, tall,

thin; lightly veined, smoothly muscled; chocolate eyes with a reflective green sheen like moonlight bouncing off a dark sea; irresistible smile, big white teeth. In Glenard Oak Comprehensive,

black, Pakistani, Greek, Irish these were races. But those with sex

appeal lapped the other runners. They were a species all of their

own.

“If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head

She loved him, of course. But he used to say to her: “Thing is, people

rely on me. They need me to be Millat. Good old Millat.

Wicked



Millat. Safe, sweet-as, Millat. They need me to be cool. It's practically a responsibility."

And it practically was. Ringo Starr once said of the Beatles that they

were never bigger than they were in Liverpool, late 1962. They just

got more countries. And that's how it was for Millat. He was so big

in Cricklewood, in Willesden, in West Hampstead, the summer of 1990,

that nothing he did later in his life could top it. From his first

Raggastani crowd, he had expanded and developed tribes throughout the

school, throughout North London. He was simply too big to remain

merely the object of Irie's affection, leader of the Raggastanis, or

the son of Samad and Alsana Iqbal. He had to please all of the people

all of the time. To the cockney wide-boys in the white jeans and the

coloured shirts, he was the joker, the risk-taker, respected lady

killer. To the black kids he was fellow weed-smoker and valued

customer. To the Asian kids, hero and spokesman. Social chameleon.

And underneath it all, there remained an ever present anger and hurt,

the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong

everywhere. It was this soft underbelly that made him most beloved,

most adored by Irie and the nice oboe-playing, long-skirted middle-class girls, most treasured by these hair-flicking and fugue-singing females; he was their dark prince, occasional lover or

impossible crush, the subject of sweaty fantasy and ardent dreams ..

.

Me 1990, 1907

And he was also their project: what was to be done about Millat? He

simply must stop smoking weed. We have to try and stop him walking out

of class. They worried about his 'attitude' at sleep overs, discussed

his education hypothetically with their parents (Just say there was

this Indian boy, yeah, who was always getting into .. .), even wrote

poems on the subject. Girls either wanted him or wanted to improve

him, but most often a combination of the two. They wanted to improve

him until he justified the amount they wanted him.

Everybody's bit of

rough, Millat Iqbal.

"But you're different," Millat Iqbal would say to the martyr Irie

Jones, 'you're different. We go way back. We've got history. You're

a real friend. They don't really mean anything to me."

Irie liked to believe that. That they had history, that she was different in a good way.

“Thy black is fairest in my judgement’s place

Mrs. Roody silenced Francis with a raised finger. “Now, what is he

saying there? Annalese?”

Annalese Hersh, who had spent the lesson so far plaiting red and yellow

thread into her hair, looked up in blank confusion.

“Anything, Annalese, dear. Any little idea. No matter how small. No

matter how paltry.”

Annalese bit her lip. Looked at the book. Looked at Mrs. Roody.

Looked at the book.

“Black?... Is?... Good?”

“Yes . . . well, I suppose we can add that to last week’s contribution:

Hamlet?... Is?... Mad? Anybody else? What about this? For since each

hand hath put on nature’s power, Fairing the foul with art’s false

borrow’d face. What might that mean I wonder?”

Joshua Chalfen, the only kid in class who volunteered opinions, put his

hand up.

“Yes, Joshua?”

“Makeup.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Roody, looking close to orgasm. “Yes, Joshua, that’s

it. What about it?”

“She’s got a dark complexion which she’s trying to lighten by means of

make-up, artifice. The Elizabethans were very keen on a pale skin.”

They would’ve loved you, then,” sneered Millat, for Joshua was pasty,

practically anaemic, curly-haired and chubby, ‘you would have been Tom

bloody Cruise.”

Laughter. Not because it was funny, but because it was Millat putting

a nerd where a nerd should be. In his place.

“One more word from you Mr. Ick-Ball and you are out!”

“Shakespeare. Sweaty. Bollocks. That’s three. Don’t worry, I’ll let

myself out.”

This was the kind of thing Millat did so expertly. The door slammed.

The nice girls looked at each other in that way. (He’s just so out of

control, so crazy ... he really needs some help, some close one-to-one

personal help from a good friend .. .) The boys belly-laughed. The

teacher wondered if this was the beginning of a mutiny. Irie covered

her stomach with her right hand.

“Marvellous. Very adult. I suppose Millat Iqbal is some kind of

hero.” Mrs. Roody, looking round the gormless faces of 5F, saw for

the first time and with dismal clarity that this was exactly what he

was.

“Does anyone else have anything to say about these sonnets?  
Ms Jones!

Will you stop looking mournfully at the door! He’s gone, all  
right?

Unless you’d like to join him?”

“No, Mrs. Roody.”

“All right, then. Have you anything to say about the sonnets?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Is she black?”

“Is who black?”

“The dark lady.”

“No, dear, she’s dark. She’s not black in the modern sense.  
There

weren’t any . . . well, Afro-Carri-bee-yans in England at that  
time,

dear. That’s more a modern phenomenon, as I’m sure

you know. But this was the 1600s. I mean I can’t be sure, but it  
does

seem terribly unlikely, unless she was a slave of some kind,  
and he’s

unlikely to have written a series of sonnets to a lord and then a  
slave, is he?”

Irie reddened. She had thought, just then, that she had seen  
something

like a reflection, but it was receding; so she said, “Don’t know,  
Miss.”

“Besides, he says very clearly, In nothing art thou black, save  
in thy

deeds . . . No, dear, she just has a dark complexion, you see, as  
dark

as mine, probably.”

Irie looked at Mrs. Roody. She was the colour of strawberry mousse.

“You see, Joshua is quite right: the preference was for women to be

excessively pale in those days. The sonnet is about the debate between

her natural colouring and the make-up that was the fashion of the

time.”

“I just thought . . . like when he says, here: Then will I swear, beauty

herself is black , .. And the curly hair thing, black wires’

Irie gave up in the face of giggling and shrugged.

“No, dear, you’re reading it with a modern ear. Never read what is old

with a modern ear. In fact, that will serve as today’s principle can

you all write that down please.”

5F wrote that down. And the reflection that Irie had glimpsed slunk

back into the familiar darkness. On the way out of class, Irie was

passed a note by Annalese Hersh, who shrugged to signify that she was

not the author but merely one of many handlers. It said: “By William

Shakespeare: ODE TO LETITIA

AND ALL MY KINKY-HAIRED BIG-ASS BIT CHEZ

The cryptically named P. K.’s Afro Hair: Design and Management sat

between Fairweather Funeral Parlour and Raakshan Dentists,  
the  
convenient proximity meaning it was not at all uncommon for  
a cadaver  
of African origin to pass through all three establishments on  
his or  
her final journey to an open casket. So when you phoned for a  
hair  
appointment, and Andrea or Denise or Jackie told you three  
thirty  
Jamaican time, naturally it meant come late, but there was also  
a  
chance it meant that some stone-cold church-going lady was  
determined  
to go to her grave with long fake nails and a weave-on.  
Strange as it  
sounds, there are plenty of people who refuse to meet the Lord  
with an  
Afro.  
Irie, ignorant of all this, turned up for her appointment three  
thirty  
on the dot, intent upon transformation, intent upon fighting her  
genes,  
a headscarf disguising the bird's nest of her hair, her right hand  
carefully placed upon her stomach.  
“You wan’ some ting, pickney?”  
Straight hair. Straight straight long black sleek flick able toss  
able  
shakeable touchable finger-through-able wind-blow able hair.  
With a  
fringe.

Three thirty,” was all Irie managed to convey of this, ‘with Andrea.’”

“Andrea’s next door,” replied the woman, pulling at a piece of elongated gum and nodding in the direction of Fairweather’s, ‘having

fun with the dearly departed. You better come sit down and wait and

don’ bodder me. Don’ know how long she’ll be.”

Irie looked lost, standing in the middle of the shop, clutching her

chub. The woman took pity, swallowed her gum and looked Irie up and

down; she felt more sympathetic as she noted Irie’s cocoa complexion,

the light eyes.

“Jackie.”

“Irie.”



“Pale, sir! Freckles an’ every ting. You Mexican?”

“No.”

“Arab?”

“Half Jamaican. Half English.”

“Half-caste,” Jackie explained patiently. “Your mum white?”

“Dad.”

Jackie wrinkled her nose. “Usually de udder way roun’.

How

Me 1990, 1907

curly is it? Lemme se what’s under dere - ‘ She made a grab for Irie’s

headscarf. Me, horrified at the possibility of being laid bare in a

room full of people, got there before her and held on tight.

Jackie sucked her teeth. “What d’you ‘spec us to do wid it if we ky

ant see it?”

Me shrugged. Jackie shook her head, amused.

“You ain’t been in before?”

“No, never.”

“What is it you want?”

“Straight,” said Me firmly, thinking of Nikki Tyler. “Straight and

dark red.”

“Is dat a fact! You wash your hair recent?”

“Yesterday,” said Me, offended. Jackie slapped her up-side her head.

“Don’ wash it! If you wan’ it straight, don’ wash it! You ever have

ammonia on your head? It's like the devil's having a party on your

scalp. You crazy? Don' wash it for two weeks an' den come back."

But Me didn't have two weeks. She had it all planned; she was going to

go round to Millat's this very evening with her new mane, all tied up

in a bun, and she was going to take off her glasses and shake down her

hair and he was going to say why Miss Jones, I never would have

supposed . . . why Miss Jones, you're "I have to do it today. My

sister's getting married."

"Well, when Andrea get back she going to burn seven shades of shit out

of your hair an' you'll be lucky if you don' walk out of here with a

balled. But den it your funeral. Ear," she said thrusting a pile full

of magazines into Irie's hands. "Dere," she said, pointing to a chair.

P. K. "s was split into two halves, male and female. In the male section, as relentless Ragga came unevenly over a battered stereo,

young boys had logos cut into the back of their heads at the hands of

slightly older boys, skilful wielders of the electric trimmers.

ADIDAS. BADMUTHA. MARTIN. The male section was

all laughter, all talk, all play; there was an easiness that sprang

from no male haircut ever costing over six pounds or taking more than fifteen minutes. It was a simple enough exchange and there was joy in it: the buzz of the revolving blade by your ear, a rough brush-down with a warm hand, mirrors front and back to admire the transformation. You came in with a picky head, uneven and coarse, disguised underneath a baseball cap, and you left swiftly afterwards a new man, smelling sweetly of coconut oil and with a cut as sharp and clean as a swear word.

In comparison, the female section of P. K.'s was a deathly thing. Here, the impossible desire for straightness and 'movement' fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle; here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damndest to beat each curly hair into submission.

"Is it straight?" was the only question you heard as the towels came off and the heads emerged from the drier pulsating with pain. "Is it straight, Denise? Tell me is it straight, Jackie?"

To which Jackie or Denise, having none of the obligations of white

hairdressers, no need to make tea or kiss arse, flatter or make conversation (for these were not customers they were dealing with but

desperate wretched patients), would give a sceptical snort and whip off

the puke-green gown. "It as straight as it ever going to be!"

Four women sat in front of Irie now, biting their lips, staring intently into a long, dirty mirror, waiting for their straighter selves

to materialize. While Irie flicked nervously through American black

hair magazines, the four women sat grimacing in pain.

Occasionally one

said to another, "How long?" To which the proud reply came, "Fifteen

minutes. How long for you?" "Twenty two. This shit's been on my head

twenty-two minutes. It better be straight."

It was a competition in agony. Like rich women in posh restaurants

ordering ever smaller salads.

2/5

Me 1990, 1907

Finally there would come a scream, or a "That's it! Shit, I can't take

it!" and the head in question was rushed to the sink, where the washing could never be quick enough (you cannot get ammonia out of

your

hair quick enough) and the quiet weeping began. It was at this point

that animosity arose; some people's hair was 'kinkier' than others',  
some Afros fought harder, some survived. And the animosity spread from  
fellow customer to hairdresser, to inflicter of this pain, for it was  
natural enough to suspect Jackie or Denise of something like sadism:  
their fingers were too slow as they worked the stuff out, the water  
seemed to trickle instead of gush, and meanwhile the devil had a high  
old time burning the crap out of your hairline.  
"Is it straight? Jackie, is it straight?"  
The boys arched their heads round the partition wall, Me looked up from  
her magazine. There was little to say. They all came out straight or  
straight enough. But they also came out dead. Dry. Splintered. Stiff. All the spring gone. Like the hair of a cadaver as the moisture seeps away.  
Jackie or Denise, knowing full well that the curved African follicle  
will, in the end, follow its genetic instructions, put a philosophic  
slant on the bad news. "It as straight as it ever going to be. Tree  
weeks if you lucky."  
Despite the obvious failure of the project, each woman along the line  
felt that it would be different for her, that when their own unveiling

came, straight straight flick able wind-blow able locks would be

theirs. Me, as full of confidence as the rest, returned to her magazine.

Malika, vibrant young star of the smash hit sitcom Malika's Life,

explains how she achieves her loose and flowing look: "I hot wrap it

each evening, ensuring that the ends are lightly waxed in African Queen

Afro Sheen(tm), then, in the morning, I put a comb on the stove for

approximately '

The return of Andrea. The magazine was snatched from her hands, her

headscarf unceremoniously removed before she could stop it, and five

long and eloquent fingernails began to work their way through her

scalp.

"Ooooh," murmured Andrea.

This sign of approval was a rare-enough occurrence for the rest of the

shop to come round the partition to have a look.

"Ooooooh," said Denise, adding her fingers to Andrea's. "So loose."

An older lady, wincing with pain underneath a drier, nodded admiringly.

"Such a loose curl," cooed Jackie, ignoring her own scalded patient to

reach into Trie's wool.

“That’s half-caste hair for you. I wish mine were like that.  
That’ll

relax beautiful.”

Irie screwed up her face. “I hate it.”

“She hates it!” said Denise to the crowd. “It’s light brown in  
places!”

“I been dealing with a corpse all morning. Be nice to get my  
hands

into somefing sof”,” said Andrea, emerging from her reverie.  
“You

gonna relax it, darling’?”

“Yes. Straight. Straight and red.”

Andrea tied a green gown round Irie’s neck and lowered her  
into a

swivelling chair. “Don’t know about red, baby. Can’t dye and  
relax on

the same day. Kill the hair dead. But I can do the relax for you,  
no

problem. Should come out beautiful, darling’.”

The communication between hairdressers in P. K. “s being  
poor, no one

told Andrea that Irie had washed her hair. Two minutes after  
having

the thick white ammonia gloop spread on to her head, she felt  
the

initial cold sensation change to a terrific fire. There was no dirt  
there to protect the scalp, and Irie started screaming.

“I jus’ put it on! You want it straight, don’ you? Stop making  
that

noise!”

Me 1990, 1907

“But it hurts!”

“Life hurts said Andrea scornfully, ‘beauty hurts.’”

Me bit her tongue for another thirty seconds until blood appeared above

her right ear. Then the poor girl blacked out.

She came to with her head over the sink, watching her hair, which was

coming out in clumps, shimmy down the plug hole

“You should have told me,” Andrea was grumbling. “You should have

told

me that you washed it. It’s got to be dirty first. Now look.”

Now look. Hair that had once come down to her mid vertebrae was only a

few inches from her head.

“See what you’ve done,” continued Andrea, as Me wept openly. “I’d like

to know what Mr. Paul King is going to say about this. I better phone

him and see if we can fix this up for you for free.”

Mr. Paul King, the P. K. in question, owned the place. He was a big

white guy, in his mid fifties, who had been an entrepreneur in the

building trade until Black Wednesday and his wife’s credit card

excesses took away everything but some bricks and mortar. Looking for

a new idea, he read in the lifestyle section of his breakfast paper

that black women spend five times as much as white women on beauty



products and nine times as much on their hair. Taking his wife Sheila

as an archetypal white woman, Paul King began to salivate. A little

more research in his local library uncovered a multi-million pound

industry. Paul King then bought a disused butcher's on Willesden High

Road, head hunted Andrea from a Harlesden salon, and gave black

hairdressing a shot. It was an instant success. He was amazed to

discover that women on low income were indeed prepared to spend

hundreds of pounds per month on their hair and yet more on nails and

accessories. He was vaguely amused when Andrea first explained to him

that physical pain was also part of the process. And the best part of

it was there was no question of suing they expected the burns. Perfect

business.

"Go on, Andrea, love, give her a freebie," said Paul King, shouting on

a brick-shaped mobile over the construction noise of his new salon,

opening in Wembley. "But don't make a habit of it."

Andrea returned to Irie with the good tidings. "Sail right, darling'.

This one's on us."

"But what? Irie stared at her Hiroshima reflection. "What can you '

“Put your scarf back on, turn left out of here and go down the high

road until you get to a shop called Roshi’s Haircare. Take this card

and tell them P. K.’s sent you. Get eight packets of no. 5 type black

hair with a red glow and come back here quick style.”

“Hair?” repeated Irie through snot and tears. “Fake hair?”

“Stupid girl. It’s not fake. It’s real. And when it’s on your head it’ll be your real hair. Go!”

Blubbing like a baby, Irie shuffled out of P. K.’s and down the high

road, trying to avoid her reflection in the shop windows.

Reaching

Roshi’s, she did her best to pull herself together, put her right hand

over her stomach and pushed through the doors.

It was dark in Roshi’s and smelt strongly of the same scent as P. K.’s:

ammonia and coconut oil, pain mixed with pleasure. From the dim glow

given off by a flickering strip light, Irie could see there were no

shelves to speak of but instead hair products piled like mountains from

the floor up, while accessories (combs, bands, nail varnish) were

stapled to the walls with the price written in felt-tip alongside.

The

only display of any recognizable kind was placed just below the ceiling

in a loop around the room, taking pride of place like a collection of

sacrificial scalps or hunting trophies. Hair. Long tresses stapled a

few inches apart. Underneath each a large cardboard sign explaining

its pedigree:

2 Metres. Natural Thai. Straight. Chestnut.

1 Metre. Natural Pakistani. Straight with a wave. Black. 5 Metres.

Natural Chinese. Straight. Black.

3 Metres. Synthetic hair. Corkscrew curl. Pink.

Me 1990, 3907

Me approached the counter. A hugely fat woman in a said was waddling

to the cash till and back again to hand over twenty-five pounds to an

Indian girl whose hair had been shorn haphazardly close to the scalp.

“And please don’t be looking at me in that manner. Twenty-five is very

reasonable price. I tell you I can’t do any more with all these split

ends.”

The girl objected in another language, picked up the bag of hair in

question from the counter and made as if to leave with it, but the

elder woman snatched it away.

“Please, don’t embarrass yourself further. We both have seen the ends.

Twenty-five is all I can give you for it. You won't get more  
some

other place. Please now," she said, looking over the girl's  
shoulder

to Me, "other customers I have."

Me saw hot tears, not unlike her own, spring to the girl's eyes.  
She

seemed to freeze for a moment, vibrating ever so slightly with  
anger;

then she slammed her hand down on the counter, swept up her  
twenty-five

pounds and headed for the door.

The fat lady shook her chins in contempt after the  
disappearing girl.

"Ungrateful, she is."

Then she unpeeled a sticky label from its brown paper backing  
and

slapped it on the bag of hair. It said: "6 Metres. Indian.  
Straight.

Black/red."

"Yes, dear. What is it I can do?"

Me repeated Andrea's instruction and handed over the card.

"Eight packets? That is about six metres, no?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, yes, it is. You want it straight or with a wave?"

"Straight. Dead straight."

The fat lady did a silent calculation and then picked up the bag  
of

hair that the girl had just left. "This is what you're looking for.

I

haven't been able to package it, you understand. But it is absolutely

clean. You want?"

Me looked dubious.

"Don't worry about what I said. No split ends. Just silly girl trying

to get more than she deserves. Some people got no understanding of

simple economics ... It hurts her to cut off her hair so a million

pounds she expects or something crazy. Beautiful hair, she has. When

I was young, oh, mine was beautiful too, eh?" The fat lady erupted

into high-pitched laughter, her busy upper lip making her moustache

quiver. The laugh subsided.

"Tell Andrea that will be thirty-seven fifty. We Indian women have the

beautiful hair, hey? Everybody wants it!"

A black woman with children in a twin buggy was waiting behind Irie

with a packet of hairpins. She sucked her teeth. "You people think

you're all Mr. Bigstuff," she muttered, half to herself. "Some of us

are happy with our African hair, thank you very much. I don't want to

buy some poor Indian girl's hair. And I wish to God I could buy black

hair products from black people for once. How we going to make it in

this country if we don't make our own business?"

The skin around the fat lady's mouth became very tight. She began

talking twelve to the dozen, putting Irie's hair in a bag and writing

her out a receipt, addressing all her comments to the woman via Irie,

while doing the best to ignore the other woman's interjections:

"You

don't like shopping here, then please don't be shopping here is forcing

you anybody? No, is anybody? It's amazing: people, the rudeness, I am

not a racist, but I can't understand it, I'm just providing a service,

a service. I don't need abuse, just leave your money on the counter,

if I am getting abuse, I'm not serving."

"No one's givin' you abuse. Jesus Christ!"

"Is it my fault if they want the hair that is straight and paler skin

sometimes, like Michael Jackson, my fault he is too? They tell me not

to sell the Dr. Peacock Whitener local paper, my God, what a fuss! and

then they buy it take that receipt to Andrea, will you, my dear, please? I'm just trying to make a living

in this country like the rest of everybody. There you are, dear, there's your hair."

The woman reached around Irie and delivered the right change to the

counter with an angry smash. "For fuck's sake!"

“I can’t help it if that’s what they want supply, demand. And bad

language, I won’t tolerate! Simple economics mind your step on the way

out, dear and you, no, don’t come back, please, I will call the police,

I won’t be threatened, the police, I will call them.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Irie held the door open for the double buggy, and took one side to help

carry it over the front step. Outside the woman put her hairpins in

her pocket. She looked exhausted.

“I hate that place,” she said. “But I need hairpins.”

“I need hair,” said Irie.

The woman shook her head. “You’ve got hair,” she said.

Five and a half hours later, thanks to an arduous operation that involved plaiting somebody else’s hair in small sections to Irie’s own

two inches and sealing it with glue, Irie Jones had a full head of

long, straight, reddish-black hair.

“Is it straight?” she asked, disbelieving the evidence of her own

eyes.

“Straight as hell,” said Andrea, admiring her handiwork. “But honey,

you’re going to have to plait it properly if you want it to stay in.

Why won’t you let me plait it? It won’t stay in if it’s loose like that.”

“It will,” said Irie, bewitched by her own reflection. “It’s got to.”

He Millat need only see it once, after all, just once. To ensure she

reached him in pristine state, she walked all the way to the Iqbal

house with her hands on her hair, terrified that the wind would displace it.

Alsana answered the door. “Oh, hello. No, he’s not here. Out.

2,82

Don’t ask me where, he doesn’t tell me a thing. I know where Magid is

more of the time.”

Irie walked into the hallway and caught a sneaky glance of herself in

the mirror. Still there and all in the right place.

“Can I wait in here?”

“Of course. You look different, dearie. Lost weight?”

Irie glowed. “New haircut.”

“Oh yes . . . you look like a news reader Very nice. Now in the living

room, please. Niece-of-Shame and her nasty friend are in there, but

try not to let that bother you. I’m working in the kitchen and Samad

is weeding, so keep the noise down.”

Irie walked into the lounge. “Bloody hell!” screeched Neena at the

approaching vision. “What the fuck do you look like!”

She looked beautiful. She looked straight, un-kinky. Beautiful.



“You look like a freak! Fuck me! Maxine, man, check this out.  
Jesus

Christ, Irie. What exactly were you aiming for?”

Wasn’t it obvious? Straight. Straightness. Flickability.

“I mean, what was the grand plan? The Negro Meryl Streep?”  
Neena

folded over like a duvet and laughed herself silly.

“Niece-of-Shame!” came Alsana’s voice from the kitchen.

“Sewing

requires concentration. Shut it up, Miss Big-Mouth, please!”

Neena’s ‘nasty friend’, otherwise known as Neena’s girlfriend,  
a sexy

and slender girl called Maxine with a beautiful porcelain face,  
dark

eyes and a lot of curly brown hair, gave a pull to Irie’s peculiar  
bangs. “What have you done? You had beautiful hair, man. All  
curly

and wild. It was gorgeous.”

Irie couldn’t say anything for a moment. She had not  
considered the

possibility that she looked anything less than terrific.

“I just had a haircut. What’s the big deal?”

“But that’s not your hair, for fuck’s sake, that’s some poor  
oppressed

Pakistani woman who needs the cash for her kids,” said  
Neena, giving it

a tug and being rewarded with a handful of it. “OH SHIT!”

Neena and Maxine had a hysteria relapse.

Me 1990, 1907

“Just get off it, OK?” Irie retreated to an armchair and tucked  
her

knees up under her chin. Trying to sound offhand, she asked,  
“So . . .

umm . . . where’s Millat?”

“Is that what all this is in aid of?” asked Neena, astonished.

“My

shit-for-brains cousin-gee?”

“No. Fuck off

“Well, he’s not here. He’s got some new bird. Eastern-bloc  
gymnast

with a stomach like a washboard. Not unattractive, spectacular  
tits,

but tight-assed as hell. Name . . . name?”

“Stasia,” said Maxine, looking up briefly from Top of the  
Pops. “Or

some such bollocks.”

Irie sank deeper into the ruined springs of Samad’s favourite  
chair.

The, will you take some advice? Ever since I’ve known you,  
you’ve been

following that boy around like a lost dog. And in that time he’s  
snogged everyone, everyone apart from you. He’s even  
snogged me, and

I’m his first cousin, for fuck’s sake.”

“And me,” said Maxine, ‘and I’m not that way inclined.”

“Haven’t you ever wondered why he hasn’t snogged you?”

“Because I’m ugly. And fat. With an Afro.”

“No, fuck face because you’re all he’s got. He needs you. You  
two

have history. You really know him. Look how confused he is.  
One day

he’s Allah this, Allah that. Next minute it’s big busty blondes,

Russian gymnasts and a smoke of the sinsemilla. He doesn't know his

arse from his elbow. Just like his father. He doesn't know who he is.

But you know him, at least a little, you've known all the sides of him.

And he needs that. You're different."

Irie rolled her eyes. Sometimes you want to be different. And sometimes you'd give the hair on your head to be the same as everybody

else.

"Look: you're a smart cookie, Irie. But you've been taught all kinds

of shit. You've got to re-educate yourself. Realize your

value, stop the slavish devotion, and get a life, Me. Get a girl, get

a guy, but get a life."

"You're a very sexy girl, Me," said Maxine sweetly.

"Yeah. Right."

"Trust her, she's a raving dyke," said Neena, ruffling Maxine's hair

affectionately and giving her a kiss. "But the truth is the Barbra

Streisand cut you've got there ain't doing shit for you. The Afro was

cool, man. It was wicked. It was yours."

Suddenly Alsana appeared at the doorway with an enormous plate of

biscuits and a look of intense suspicion. Maxine blew her a kiss.

"Biscuits, Irie? Come and have some biscuits. With me. In the

kitchen.”

Neena groaned. “Don’t panic, Auntie. We’re not enlisting her into the

cult of Sappho.”

“I don’t care what you’re doing. I don’t know what you’re doing. I

don’t want to know such things.”

“We’re watching television.”

It was Madonna on the TV screen, working her hands around two

conically

shaped breasts.

“Very nice, I’m sure,” sniped Alsana, glaring at Maxine.

“Biscuits,

Me?”

“I’d like some biscuits murmured Maxine with a flutter of her extravagant eyelashes.

“I am certain,” said Alsana slowly and pointedly, translating code, “I

don’t have the kind you like.”

Neena and Maxine fell about all over again.

The?” said Alsana, indicating the kitchen with a grimace. Irie followed her out.

“I’m as liberal as the next person,” complained Alsana, once they were

alone. “But why do they always have to be laughing and making a

song-and-dance about everything? I cannot believe homosexuality is

that much fun. Heterosexuality certainly is not.”

“I don’t think I want to hear that word in this house again,”

Me 1990, 1907

said Samad deadpan, stepping in from the garden and laying his weeding

gloves on the table.

“Which one?”

“Either. I am trying my level best to run a godly house.”

Samad spotted a figure at his kitchen table, frowned, decided it was

indeed Me Jones and began on the little routine the two of them had

going. “Hello, Miss Jones. And how is your father?”

Me shrugged on cue. “You see him more than we do. How’s God?”

“Perfectly fine, thank you. Have you seen my good-for-nothing son

recently?”

“Not recently.”

“What about my good son?”

“Not for years.”

“Will you tell the good-for-nothing he’s a good-for-nothing when you

find him?”

Till do my best, Mr. Iqbal.”

“God bless you.”

“Gesundheit.”

“Now, if you will excuse me.” Samad reached for his prayer mat from

the top of the fridge and left the room.

“What’s the matter with him?” asked Me, noticing that Samad had

delivered his lines with less than enthusiasm. “He seems, I don’t

know, sad.”

Alsana sighed. “He is sad. He feels like he has screwed everything

up. Of course, he has screwed everything up, but then again, who will

cast the first stone, et cetera. He prays and prays. But he will not

look straight at the facts: Millat hanging around with God knows what

kind of people, always with the white girls, and Magid . . .”

Me remembered her first sweetheart encircled by a fuzzy halo of

perfection, an illusion born of the disappointments Millat had afforded

her over the years.

“Why, what’s wrong with Magid?”

Alsana frowned and reached up to the top kitchen shelf, where she

collected a thin airmail envelope and passed it to Irie. Irie removed

the letter and the photograph inside.

The photo was of Magid, now a tall, distinguished-looking young man.

His hair was the deep black of his brother’s but it was not brushed

forward on his face. It was parted on the left side, slicked down and

drawn behind the right ear. He was dressed in a tweed suit and what

looked though one couldn't be sure, the photo was not good like a

cravat. He held a large sun hat in one hand. In the other he clasped

the hand of the eminent Indian writer Sir R. V. Saraswati. Saraswati

was dressed all in white, with his broad-rimmed hat on his head and an

ostentatious cane in his free hand. The two of them were posed in a

somewhat self-congratulatory manner, smiling broadly and looking for

all the world as if they were about to pat each other roundly on the

back or had just done so. The midday sun was out and bouncing off

Dhaka University's front steps, where the whole scene had been

captured.

Alsana inched a smear off the photo with her index finger.

"You know

Saraswati?"

Irie nodded. Compulsory GCSE text: A Stitch in Time by R. V.

Saraswati. A bitter-sweet tale of the last days of Empire.

"Samad hates Saraswati, you understand. Calls him colonial throwback,

English licker-of-behinds."

Irie picked a paragraph at random from the letter and read aloud.

As you can see, I was lucky enough to meet India's very finest writer

one bright day in March. After winning an essay competition (my title:

"Bangladesh To Whom May She Turn?"), I travelled to Dhaka to collect

my

prize (a certificate and a small cash reward) from the great man

himself in a ceremony at the university. I am honoured to say he took

a liking to me and we spent a most pleasant afternoon together; a long,

intimate tea followed by a stroll through Dhaka's more

appealing prospects. During our lengthy conversations Sir Saraswati

commended my mind, and even went so far as to say (and I quote) that I

was 'a first-rate young man' - a comment I shall treasure! He suggested my future might lie in the law, the university, or even his

own profession of the creative pen! I told him the first-mentioned

vocation was closest to my heart and that it had long been my intention

to make the Asian countries sensible places, where order prevailed."

disaster-was prepared for, and a young boy was in no danger from a

falling vase (I) New laws, new stipulations, are required (I told him)

to deal with our unlucky fate, the natural disaster. But then he



corrected me: "Not fate," he said. "Too often we Indians, we Bengalis, we Pakistanis, throw up our hands and cry "Fate!" in the face of history. But many of us are uneducated, many of us do not understand the world. We must be more like the English. The English fight fate to the death. They do not listen to history unless it is telling them what they wish to hear. We say "It had to be!" It does not have to be. Nothing does." In one afternoon I learnt more from this great man than "He learns nothing!"

Samad marched back into the kitchen in a fury and threw the kettle on the stove. "He learns nothing from a man who knows nothing! Where is his beard? Where is his khamise? Where is his humility? If Allah says there will be storm, there will be storm. If he says earthquake, it will be earthquake. Of course it has to be! That is the very reason I sent the child there to understand that essentially we are weak, that we are not in control. What does Islam mean? What does the word, the very word, mean? I surrender. I surrender to God. I surrender to him. This is not my life, this is his life. This life I call mine is his to do with what he will. Indeed, I shall be tossed

and turned on the wave, and there shall be nothing to be done.  
Nothing! Nature itself is Muslim, because it obeys the laws the  
creator has ingrained in it.”

“Don’t you preach in this house, Samad Miah! There are  
places for that

sort of thing. Go to mosque, but don’t do it in the kitchen,  
people

have to be eating in here ‘

“But we, we do not automatically obey. We are tricky, we are  
the

tricky bastards, we humans. We have the evil inside us, the  
free will.

We must learn to obey. That is what I sent the child Magid  
Mahfooz

Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal to discover. Tell me, did I send him  
to have

his mind poisoned by a Rule-Britannia worshipping Hindu old  
Queen?”

“Maybe, Samad Miah, maybe not.”

“Don’t, Alsi, I warn you ‘

“Oh, go on, you old pot-boiler!” Alsana gathered her spare  
tyres

around her like a sumo wrestler. “You say we have no control,  
yet you

always try to control everything! Let go, Samad Miah. Let the  
boy go.

He is second generation he was born here naturally he will do  
things

differently. You can’t plan everything. After all, what is so  
awful

so he’s not training to be an alim, but he’s educated, he’s  
clean!”

“And is that all you ask of your son? That he be clean?”

“Maybe, Samad Miah, maybe ‘

“And don’t speak to me of second generation! One generation!

Indivisible! Eternal!”

Somewhere in the midst of this argument, Me slipped out of the kitchen

and headed for the front door. She caught an unfortunate glimpse of

herself in the scratch and stain of the hall mirror. She looked like

the love child of Diana Ross and Engelbert Humperdinck.

“You have to let them make their own mistakes .. .” came Alsana’s

voice from the heat of battle, travelling through the cheap wood of the

kitchen door and into the hallway, where Me stood, facing her own

reflection, busy tearing out somebody else’s hair with her bare hands.

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Like any school, Glenard Oak had a complex geography. Not that it was

particularly labyrinthine in design. It had been built in two simple

stages, first in 1886 as a workhouse (result: large red monstrosity,

Victorian asylum) and then added to in 1963 when it became a school

(result: grey monolith, Brave New Council Estate). The two monstrosities were then linked in 1974 by an enormous perspex tubular

footbridge. But a bridge was not enough to make the two places one, or to slow down the student body's determination to splinter and factionalize. The school had learnt to its cost that you cannot unite a thousand children under one Latin tag (school code: Laborare est Orare, To Labour is to Pray); kids are like pissing cats or burrowing moles, marking off land within land, each section with its own rules, beliefs, laws of engagement. Despite every attempt to suppress it, the school contained and sustained patches, hang-outs, disputed territories, satellite states, states of emergency, ghettos, enclaves, islands. There were no maps, but common sense told you, for example, not to fuck with the area between the refuse bins and the craft department. There had been casualties there (notably some poor sod called Keith who had his head placed in a vice), and the scrawny, sinewy kids who patrolled this area were not to be messed with they were the thin sons of the fat men with vicious tabloids primed in their back pockets like handguns, the fat men who believe in rough justice a life for a life, hanging's too good for them. Across from there: the Benches, three of them in a line. These were

for the surreptitious dealing of tiny tiny amounts of drugs.

Things

like 2 pounds 50 pence of marijuana resin, so small it was likely to be

lost in your pencil case and confused with a shredded piece of eraser.

Or a quarter of an E, the greatest use of which was soothing particularly persistent period pains. The gullible could also purchase

a variety of household goods -jasmine tea, garden grass, aspirin,

liquorice, flour all masquerading as Class A intoxicants to be smoked

or swallowed round the back, in the

hollow behind the drama department. This concave section of wall,

depending where you stood, provided low teacher-visibility for smokers

too young to smoke in the smoker's garden (a concrete garden for those

who had reached sixteen and were allowed to smoke themselves silly are

there any schools like this any more?). The drama hollow was to be

avoided. These were hard little bastards, twelve, thirteen-year-old

chain-smokers; they didn't give a shit. They really didn't give a shit

your health, their health, teachers, parents, police whatever.

Smoking

was their answer to the universe, their 42, their raison d'etre.

They

were passionate about fags. Not connoisseurs, not fussy about brand,

just fags, any fags. They pulled at them like babies at teats, and

when they were finally finished they ground them into the mud with wet

eyes. They fucking loved it. Fags, fags, fags. Their only interest

outside fags was politics, or more precisely, this fucker, the chancellor, who kept on putting up the price of fags. Because there

was never enough money and there were never enough fags. You had to

become an expert in bumming, cadging, begging, stealing fags. A

popular ploy was to blow a week's pocket money on twenty, give them out

to all and sundry, and spend the next month reminding those with fags

about that time when you gave them a fag. But this was a high-risk

policy. Better to have an utterly forgettable face, better to be able

to cadge a fag and come back five minutes after for another without

being remembered. Better to cultivate a cipher-like persona, be a

little featureless squib called Mart, Jules, Ian. Otherwise you had to

rely on charity and fag sharing. One fag could be split in a myriad of

ways. It worked like this: someone (whoever had actually bought a pack

of fags) lights up. Someone shouts 'halves'. At the halfway point the

fag is passed over. As soon as it reaches the second person we hear

'thirds', then 'saves' (which is half a third) then 'butt!' then, if the day is cold and the need for a fag overwhelming, 'last toke!' But

last toke is only for the desperate; it is beyond the perforation, beyond the brand name of the

Me 1990, 1907

cigarette, beyond what could reasonably be described as the butt. Last

toke is the yellowing fabric of the roach, containing the stuff that is

less than tobacco, the stuff that collects in the lungs like a time-bomb, destroys the immune system and brings permanent, sniffing,

nasal flu. The stuff that turns white teeth yellow.

Everyone at Glenard Oak was at work; they were Babelians of every

conceivable class and colour speaking in tongues, each in their own

industrious corner, their busy censor mouths sending the votive

offering of tobacco smoke to the many gods above them (Brent Schools

Report 1990: 67 different faiths, 123 different languages).

Laborare est Orare:

Nerds by the pond, checking out frog sex,

Posh girls in the music department singing French rounds, speaking pig

Latin, going on grape diets, suppressing lesbian instincts,  
Fat boys in the P E corridor, wan king  
High-strung girls outside the language block, reading murder  
casebooks,  
Indian kids playing cricket with tennis rackets on the football  
ground,  
Irie Jones looking for Millat Iqbal,  
Scott Breeze and Lisa Rainbow in the toilets, fucking,  
Joshua Chalfen, a goblin, an elder and a dwarf, behind the  
science  
block playing Goblins and Gorgons,  
And everybody, everybody smoking fags, fags, fags, working  
hard at the  
begging of them, the lighting of them and the inhaling of them,  
the  
collecting of butts and the remaking of them, celebrating their  
power  
to bring people together across cultures and faiths, but mostly  
just  
smoking them -gis a fag, spare us a fag chuffing on them like  
little  
chimneys till the smoke grows so thick that those who had  
stoked the  
chimneys here back in 1886,  
back in the days of the workhouse, would not have felt out of  
place.  
And through the fog, Irie was looking for Millat. She had tried  
the  
basketball court, the smoking garden, the music department,  
the



cafeteria, the toilets of both sexes and the graveyard that backed on  
to the school. She had to warn him. There was going to be a raid, to  
catch all illicit smokers of weed or tobacco, a combined effort from  
the staff and the local constabulary. The seismic rumblings had come  
from Archie, angel of revelation; she had overheard his telephone  
conversation and the holy secrets of the Parent-Teacher Association;  
now Irie was landed with a burden far heavier than the seismologist,  
landed, rather, with the burden of the prophet, for she knew the day  
and time of the quake (today, two thirty), she knew its power (possible  
expulsion), and she knew who was likely to fall victim to its fault  
line. She had to save him. Clutching her vibrating chub and sweating  
through three inches of Afro hair, she dashed through the grounds,  
calling his name, inquiring of others, looking in all the usual places,  
but he was not with the cockney barrow-boys, the posh girls, the Indian  
posse or the black kids. She trudged finally to the science block,  
part of the old workhouse and a much loved blind-spot of the school,

its far wall and Eastern corner affording thirty precious yards of

grass, where a pupil indulging in illicit acts was entirely hidden from

the common view. It was a fine, crisp autumn day, the place was full;

Irie had to walk through the popular tonsil-tennis groping championships, step over Joshua Chalfen's Goblins and Gorgons game

("Hey, watch your feet! Mind the Cavern of the Dead!") and furrow

through a tight phalanx of fag smokers before she reached Millat at the

epic entre of it all, pulling laconically on a cone-shaped joint, listening to a tall guy with a mighty beard.

"Mill!"

"Not right now, Jones."

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"But Mill!"

"Please, Jones. This is Hifan. Old friend. I'm trying to listen to him."

The tall guy, Hifan, had not paused in his speech. He had a deep, soft

voice like running water, inevitable and constant, requiring a force

stronger than the sudden appearance of Me, stronger maybe, than

gravity, to stop it. He was dressed in a sharp black suit, a white shirt and a green bow-tie. His breast pocket was embroidered with a

small emblem, two hands cupping a flame, and something underneath it,  
too small to see. Though no older than Millat, his hair-growing capacity was striking, and his beard aged him considerably.  
‘. . . and so marijuana weakens one’s abilities, one’s power, and takes  
our best men away from us in this country: men like you, Millat, who  
have natural leadership skills, who possess within them the ability to  
take a people by the hand and lift them up. There is an hadith from  
the Bukhari, part five, page two: The best people of my community are  
my contemporaries and supporters. You are my contemporary, Millat, I  
pray you will also become my supporter; there is a war going on,  
Millat, a war.’”  
He continued like this, one word flowing from another, with no  
punctuation or breath and with the same chocolatey delivery one could  
almost climb into his sentences, one could almost fall asleep in them.  
“Mill. Mill. “Simportant.”  
Millat looked drowsy, whether from the hash or Hifan wasn’t clear.  
Shaking Me off his sleeve, he attempted an introduction. The , Hifan.  
Him and me used to go about together. Hifan -‘

Hifan stepped forward, looming over Me like a bell tower.

“Good to

meet you, sister. I am Hifan.”

“Great. Millat.”

The, man, shit. Could you just chill for one minute?” He passed’ her

the smoke. “I’m trying to listen to the guy, yeah? Hifan is the don.

Look at the suit . . . gangster sty lee Millat ran a

finger down Hifan’s lapel, and Hifan, against his better instinct,

beamed with pleasure. “Seriously, Hifan, man, you look wicked.

Crisp.”

“Yeah?”

“Better than that stuff you used to go around in back when we used to

hang, eh? Back in them Kilburn days. “Member when we went to

Bradford

and’

Hifan remembered himself. Reassumed his previous face of pious

determination. “I am afraid I don’t remember the Kilburn days,

brother. I did things in ignorance then. That was a different person.”

“Yeah,” said Millat sheepishly. “Course.”

Millat gave Hifan a joshing punch on the shoulder, in response to which

Hifan stood still as a gate post.

“So: there’s a fucking spiritual war going on that’s fucking crazy!

About time we need to make our mark in this bloody country. What was

the name, again, of your lot?”

“I am from the Kilburn branch of the Keepers of the Eternal and

Victorious Islamic Nation,” said Hifan proudly.

Me inhaled.

“Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation,” repeated

Millat, impressed. “That’s a wicked name. It’s got a wicked kung-fu

kick-arse sound to it.”

Irie frowned. “KEVIN?”

“We are aware,” said Hifan solemnly, pointing to the spot underneath

the cupped flame where the initials were minutely embroidered, ‘that we

have an acronym problem.”

“Just a bit.”

“But the name is Allah’s and it cannot be changed . . . but to continue

with what I was saying: Millat, my friend, you could be the head of the

Cricklewood branch ‘

“Mill.”

“You could have what I have, instead of this terrible confusion you are

in, instead of this reliance on a drug specifically imported

Me 1990, 1907

by governments to subdue the black and Asian community, to  
lessen our

powers

“Yeah,” said Millat sadly, in mid-roll of a new spliff. “I don’t  
really look at it like that. I guess I should look at it like that.”

“Mill.”

“Jones, give it a rest. I’m having a fucking debate. Hifan, what  
school you at now, mate?”

Hifan shook his head with a smile. “I left the English  
education

system some time ago. But my education is far from over. If I  
can

quote to you from the Tabrizi, hadith number 220: The person  
who goes

in search of knowledge is on active service for God until he  
returns

and the ‘

“Mill,” whispered Millat, beneath Hifan’s flow of mellifluous  
sound.

“Mill.”

“For fuck’s sake. What? Sorry, Hifan, mate, one minute.”

Irie pulled deeply on her joint and relayed her news. Millat  
sighed.

The, they come in one side and we go out the other. No biggie.  
It’s a

regular deal. All right? Now why don’t you go and play with  
the

kiddies? Serious business here.”

“It was good to meet you, Me,” said Hifan, reaching out his  
hand and

looking her up and down. “If I might say so, it is refreshing to see a

woman who dresses demurely, wearing her hair short. KEVIN believes a

woman should not feel the need to pander to the erotic fantasies of

Western sexuality.”

“Er, ye-ah. Thanks.”

Feeling sorry for herself and more than a bit stoned, Irie made her way

back through the wall of smoke and stepped through Joshua Chalfen’s

Goblins and Gorgons game once more.

“Hey, we’re trying to play here!”

Irie whipped round, full of swallowed fury. “AND?”

Joshua’s friends a fat kid, a spotty kid and a kid with an abnormally

large head shrank back in fear. But Joshua stood his ground. He

played oboe behind Irie’s second viola in the excuse for a school

orchestra, and he had often observed her

The MisediicdRdn oj utejt;:^

strange hair and broad shoulders and thought he might have half a

chance there. She was clever and not entirely un-pretty, and there was

something in her that had a strongly nerdy flavour about it, despite

that boy she spent her time with. The Indian one. She hung around

him, but she wasn't like him. Joshua Chalfen strongly suspected her of

being one of his own. There was something innate in her that he felt

he could bring out. She was a nerd-immigrant who had fled the land of

the fat, facially challenged and disarmingly clever. She had scaled

the mountains of Caldor, swum the River Leviathrax, and braved the

chasm Duilwen, in the mad dash away from her true countrymen to

another

land.

"I'm just saying. You seem pretty keen to step into the land of Golthon. Do you want to play with us?"

"No, I don't want to play with you, you fucking prick. I don't even

know you."

"Joshua Chalfen. I was in Manor Primary. And we're in English

together. And we're in orchestra together."

"No, we're not. I'm in orchestra. You're in orchestra. In no sense

are we there together."

The goblin, the elder and the dwarf, who appreciated a good play on

words, had a snivelly giggle at that one. But insults meant nothing to

Joshua. Joshua was the Cyrano de Bergerac of taking insults. He'd



taken insults (from the affectionate end, Chalfen the Chubster, Posh

Josh, Josh-with-the-Jewfro; from the other, That Hippy Fuck, Curly-haired Cocksucker, Shit-eater), he'd taken never-ending insults

all his damn life, and survived, coming out the other side to smug. An

insult was but a pebble in his path, only proving the intellectual

inferiority of she who threw it. He continued regardless.

"I like what you've done with your hair."

"Are you taking the piss?"

"No, I like short hair on girls. I like that androgyny thing.

Seriously."

Me 1990, 1907

"What is your fucking problem?"

Joshua shrugged. "Nothing. The vaguest acquaintance with basic

Freudian theory would suggest you are the one with the problem. Where

does all that aggression come from? I thought smoking was meant to

chill you out. Can I have some?"

Irie had forgotten the burning joint in her hand. "Oh, yeah, right.

Regular puff-head, are we?"

"I dabble."

The dwarf, elder and goblin emitted some snorts and liquid noises.

"Oh, sure," sighed Irie reaching down to pass it to him.

"Whatever."

TheI'

It was Millat. He had forgotten to take his joint off Irie and was now

running over to retrieve it. Irie, about to hand it over to Joshua, turning around in mid-action, at one and the same time spotted Millat

coming towards her and felt a rumble in the ground, a tremor that shook

Joshua's tiny cast-iron goblin army to their knees and then swept them

off the board.

"What the' said Millat.

It was the raid committee. Taking the suggestion of Parent Governor

Archibald Jones, an ex-army man who claimed expertise in the field of

ambush, they had resolved to come from both sides (never before

tested), their hundred-strong party utilizing the element of surprise,

giving no pre-warning but the sound of their approaching feet; simply

boxing the little bastards in, thus cutting off any escape route for

the enemy and catching the likes of Millat Iqbal, Irie Jones and Joshua

Chalfen in the very act of marijuana consumption.

The headmaster of Glenard Oak was in a continual state of implosion.

His hairline had gone out and stayed out like a determined tide, his

eye sockets were deep, his lips had been

sucked backwards into his mouth, he had no body to speak of, or rather

he folded what he had into a small, twisted package, sealing it with a

pair of crossed arms and crossed legs. As if to counter this personal,

internal collapse, the headmaster had the seating arranged in a large

circle, an expansive gesture he hoped would help everybody speak to and

see each other, allowing everybody to express their point and make

themselves heard so together they could work towards problem solving

rather than behaviour chastisement. Some parents worried the headmaster was a bleeding-heart liberal. If you asked Tina, his secretary (not that no one ever did ask Tina a bloody thing, oh no, no

fear, only questions like So, what are these three scallywags up for,

then?), it was more like a haemorrhage.

“So,” said the headmaster to Tina with a doleful smile, ‘what are these

three scallywags up for, then?’

Wearily, Tina read out the three counts of mari jew-ana’ possession.

Irie put her hand up to object, but the headmaster silenced her with a

gentle smile.

“I see. That’ll be all, Tina. If you could just leave the door ajar on your way out, yes, that’s it, bit more . . . fine don’t want anyone

to feel boxed in, as it were. OK. Now. I think the most civilized

way to do this,” said the headmaster laying his hands palm up and flat

on his knees to demonstrate he was packing no weapons, ‘so we don’t

have everybody talking over each other, is if I say my bit, you each

then say your bit, starting with you, Millat, and ending with Joshua,

and then once we’ve taken on board all that’s been said, I get to say

my final bit and that’s it. Relatively painless. All right? All right.”

“I need a fag,” said Millat.

The headmaster rearranged himself. He uncrossed his right leg and

slung his skinny left leg over instead, he brought his two forefingers

up to his lips in the shape of a church spire, he retracted his head

like a turtle.

“Millat, pkase.”

Me 1990, 1907

“Have you got a fag-tray?”

“No, now, Millat come on .. .”

Till just go an’ have one at the gates, then.”

In this manner, the whole school held the headmaster to ransom. He

couldn’t have a thousand kids lining the Crickle wood streets, smoking

fags, bringing down the tone of the school. This was the age of the

league table. Of picky parents nosing their way through The Times

Educational Supplement, summing up schools in letters and numbers and

inspectors' reports. The headmaster was forced to switch off the fire

alarms for terms at a time, hiding his thousand smokers within the

school's confines.

"Oh . . . look, just move your chair closer to the window. Come on,

come on, don't make a song and dance about it. That's it. All right?"

A Lambert & Butler hung from Millat's lips. "Light?"

The headmaster rifled about in his own shirt pocket, where a packet of

German rolling tobacco and a lighter were buried amidst a lot of tissue

paper and biros.

"There you go." Millat lit up, blowing smoke in the headmaster's

direction. The headmaster coughed like an old woman. "OK, Millat, you

first. Because I expect this of you, at least. Spill the legumes."

Millat said, "I was round there, the back of the science block, on a

matter of spiritual growth."

The headmaster leant forward and tapped the church spire against his

lips a few times. “You’re going to have to give me a little more to

work on, Millat. If there’s some religious connection here, it can

only work in your favour, but I need to know about it.”

Millat elaborated, “I was talking to my mate. Hifan.”

The headmaster shook his head. “I’m not following you, Millat.”

“He’s a spiritual leader. I was getting some advice.”

“Spiritual leader? Hifan? Is he in the school? Are we talking cult

here, Millat? I need to know if we’re talking cult.”

“No, it’s not a bloody cult,” barked Irie exasperated. “Can we get on

with it? I’ve got viola in ten minutes.”

“Millat’s speaking, Irie. We’re listening to Millat. And hopefully

when we get to you, Millat will give you a bit more respect than you’ve

just showed him. O K? We’ve got to have communication. OK, Millat.

Go on. What kind of spiritual leader?”

“Muslim. He was helping me with my faith, yeah? He’s the head of the

Cricklewood branch of the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic

Nation.”

The headmaster frowned. “KEVIN?”

They are aware they have an acronym problem,” explained Irie.

“So,” continued the headmaster eagerly, ‘this guy from KEVIN. Was he

the one who was supplying the gear?”

“No,” said Millat, stubbing his fag out on the windowsill. “It was my

gear. He was talking to me, and I was smoking it.”

“Look,” said Irie, after a few more minutes of circular conversation.

“It’s very simple. It was Millat’s gear. I smoked it without really

thinking, then I gave it to Joshua to hold for a second while I tied my

shoelace but he really had nothing to do with it. O K? Can we go

now?”

“Yes, I did!”

Irie turned to Joshua. “What?”

“She’s trying to cover for me. Some of it was my marijuana. I was

dealing marijuana. Then the pigs jumped me.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ. Chalfen, you’re nuts.”

Maybe. But in the past two days, Joshua had gained more respect, been

patted on the back by more people, and generally lorded it around more

than he ever had in his life. Some of the glamour of Millat seemed to

have rubbed off on him by association, and as for Irie well, he’d

allowed a ‘vague interest’ to develop, in the past two days, into a

full-blown crush. Wipe that. He had a full-blown crush on both of

them. There was

something compelling about them. More so than Elgin the dwarf or

Moloch the sorcerer. He liked being connected with them, however

tenuously. He had been plucked by the two of them out of nerd dom

accidentally whisked from obscurity into the school spotlight. He

wasn't going back without a struggle.

"Is this true, Joshua?"

"Yes . . . umm, it started small, but now I believe I have a real problem. I don't want to deal drugs, obviously I don't, but it's like

a compulsion "

"Oh, for God's sake . . ."

"Now, Irie, you have to let Joshua have his say. His say is as valid

as your say."

Millat reached over to the headmaster's pocket and pulled out his heavy

packet of tobacco. He poured the contents out on to the small coffee

table.

"Oi. Chalfen. Ghetto-boy. Measure out an eighth."

Joshua looked at the stinking mountain of brown. "A European eighth or

an English eighth?"

"Could you just do as Millat suggests," said the headmaster irritably,

leaning forward in his chair to inspect the tobacco. "So we can settle



this.”

Fingers shaking, Joshua drew a section of tobacco on to his palm and

held it up. The headmaster brought Joshua’s hand up under Millat’s

nose for inspection. “Barely a five-pound draw,” said Millat scornfully. “I wouldn’t buy shit from you.”

“OK, Joshua,” said the headmaster, putting the tobacco back in its

pouch. “I think we can safely say the game’s up. Even I knew that

wasn’t anywhere near an eighth. But it does concern me that you felt

the need to lie and we’re going to have to schedule a time to talk

about that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“In the meantime, I’ve talked to your parents, and in line with the

school policy move away from behaviour chastisement and

towards constructive conduct management, they’ve very generously

suggested a two-month programme.”

“Programme?”

“Every Tuesday and Thursday, you, Millat, and you, Irie, will go to

Joshua’s house and join him in a two-hour after-school study group

split between maths and biology, your weaker subjects and his stronger.”

Irie snorted, “You’re not serious?”

“You know, I am serious. I think it’s a really interesting idea. This way Joshua’s strengths can be shared equally amongst you, and the two of you can go to a stable environment, and one with the added advantage of keeping you both off the streets. I’ve talked to your parents and they are happy with the, you know, arrangement. And what’s really exciting is that Joshua’s father is something of an eminent scientist and his mother is a horticulturalist, I believe, so, you know, you’ll really get a lot out of it. You two have a lot of potential, but I feel you’re getting caught up with things that really are damaging to that potential whether that’s family environment or personal hassles, I don’t know but this is a really good opportunity to escape those. I hope you’ll see that it’s more than punishment. It’s constructive. It’s people helping people. And I really hope you’ll do this wholeheartedly, you know? This kind of thing is very much in the history, the spirit, the whole ethos of Glenard Oak, ever since Sir Glenard himself.”

The history, spirit and ethos of Glenard Oak, as any Glenardian worth their salt knew, could be traced back to Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard

(1842-1907), whom the school had decided to remember as their kindly

Victorian benefactor. The official party line stated that Glenard had

donated the money for the original building out of a devoted interest

in the social improvement of the disadvantaged. Rather than workhouse,

the official PTA

booklet described it as a ‘shelter, workplace and educational institute’ used in its time by a mixture of English and Caribbean

people. According to the PTA booklet, the founder of Glenard Oak was

an educational philanthropist. But then, according to the PTA booklet,

‘post-class aberration consideration period’ was a suitable replacement

for the word ‘detention’.

A more thorough investigation in the archives of the local Grange

Library would reveal Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard as a successful

colonial who had made a pretty sum in Jamaica farming tobacco, or

rather overseeing great tracts of land where tobacco was being farmed.

At the end of twenty years of this, having acquired far more money than

was necessary, Sir Edmund sat back in his impressive leather armchair

and asked himself if there were not something he could do. Something

to send him into his dotage cushioned by a feeling of goodwill and

worthiness. Something for the people. The ones he could see from his

window. Out there in the field.

For a few months Sir Edmund was stumped. Then one Sunday, while

taking

a leisurely late afternoon stroll through Kingston, he heard a familiar

sound that struck him differently. Godly singing. Hand-clapping.

Weeping and wailing. Noise and heat and ecstatic movement coming from

church after church and moving through the thick air of Jamaica like a

choir invisible. Now, there was something, thought Sir Edmund. For,

unlike many of his ex-patriot peers, who branded the singing caterwauling and accused it of being heathen, Sir Edmund had always

been touched by the devotion of Jamaican Christians. He liked the idea

of a jolly church, where one could sniff or cough or make a sudden

movement without the vicar looking at one queerly. Sir Edmund felt

certain that God, in all his wisdom, had never meant church to be a

stiff-collared miserable affair as it was in Tunbridge Wells, but rather a joyous thing, a singing and dancing thing, a foot-stamping

hand-clapping thing. The Jamaicans understood this. Sometimes it seemed to be the only thing they did under304 stand. Stopping for a moment outside one particularly vibrant church, Sir Edmund took the opportunity to muse upon this conundrum: the remarkable difference between a Jamaican's devotion to his God in comparison to his devotion towards his employer. It was a subject he'd had cause to consider many times in the past. Only this month, as he sat in his study trying to concentrate on the problem he had set himself, his wardens came to him with news of three strikes, various men found asleep or drugged while at work, and a whole collective of mothers (Bowden women amongst them) complaining about low pay, refusing to work. Now you see, that was the rub of it, right there. You could get a Jamaican to pray any hour of the day or night, they would roll into church for any date of religious note, even the most obscure but if you took your eye off 'em for one minute in the tobacco fields, then work ground to a halt. When they worshipped they were full of energy, moving like jumping beans, bawling in the aisles . . . yet when they

worked they were sullen and uncooperative. The question so puzzled him

he had written a letter on the subject to the Gleaner earlier in the

year inviting correspondence, but received no satisfactory replies. The

more Edmund thought about it, the more it became clear to him that the

situation was quite the opposite in England. One was impressed by the

Jamaican's faith but despairing of his work ethic and education. Vice

versa, one admired the Englishman's work ethic and education but

despaired of his poorly kept faith. And now, as Sir Edmund turned to

go back to his estate, he realized that he was in a position to influence the situation nay, more than that transform it! Sir Edmund,

who was a fairly corpulent man, a man who looked as if he might be

hiding another man within him, practically skipped all the way home.

The very next day he wrote an electrifying letter to The Times and

donated forty thousand pounds to a missionary group on the condition

that it went towards a large property in London. Here Jamaicans could

work side by side with Englishmen packaging

Me 1990, 1907

Sir Edmund's cigarettes and taking general instruction from the

Englishmen in the evening. A small chapel was to be built as an annex to the main factory. And on Sundays, continued Sir Edmund, the Jamaicans were to take the Englishmen to church and show them what worship should look like.

The thing was built, and, after hastily promising them streets of gold, Sir Edmund shipped three hundred Jamaicans to North London. Two weeks later, from the other side of the world, the Jamaicans sent Glenard a telegraph confirming their safe arrival and Glenard sent one back suggesting a Latin motto be put underneath the plaque already bearing his name. *Laborare est Orare*. For a while, things went reasonably well. The Jamaicans were optimistic about England. They put the freezing climate to the back of their minds and were inwardly warmed by Sir Edmund's sudden enthusiasm and interest in their welfare. But Sir Edmund had always had difficulties retaining enthusiasm and interest. His mind was a small thing with big holes through which passions regularly seeped out, and The Faith of Jamaicans was soon replaced in the inverse sieve of his consciousness by other interests: The

Excitability of the Military Hindoo; The Impracticalities of the English Virgin; The Effect of Extreme Heat on the Sexual Proclivities

of the Trinidadian. For the next fifteen years, apart from fairly regular cheques sent by Sir Edmund's clerk, the Glenard Oak factory

heard nothing from him. Then, in the 1907 Kingston earthquake, Glenard

was crushed to death by a toppled marble madonna while Irie's

grandmother looked on. (These are old secrets. They will come out

like wisdom teeth when the time is right.) The date was unfortunate.

That very month he had planned to return to British shores to see how

his long-neglected experiment was doing. A letter he had written,

giving the details of his travelling plans, arrived at Glenard Oak

around the same time a worm, having made the two-day passage through

his brain, emerged from the poor man's left ear. But though a vermiculous meal was made of him, Glenard was saved a nasty

ordeal, for his experiment was doing badly. The overheads involved in

shipping damp, heavy tobacco to England were impractical from the

start; when Sir Edmund's subsidies dried up six months previous, the

business went under, the missionary group discreetly disappeared, and



the Englishmen left to go to jobs elsewhere. The Jamaicans, unable to get work elsewhere, stayed, counting down the days until the food supplies ran out. They were, by now, entirely sensible of the subjunctive mood, the nine times table, the life and times of William the Conqueror and the nature of an equilateral triangle, but they were hungry. Some died of that hunger, some were jailed for the petty crimes hunger prompts, many crept awkwardly into the East End and the English working class. A few found themselves seventeen years later at the British Empire Exhibition of 1924, dressed up as Jamaicans in the Jamaican exhibit, acting out a horrible simulacrum of their previous existence tin drums, coral necklaces for they were English now, more English than the English by virtue of their disappointments. All in all, then, the headmaster was wrong: Glenard could not be said to have passed on any great edifying beacon to future generations. A legacy is not something you can give or take by choice, and there are no certainties in the sticky business of inheritance. Much though it may have dismayed him, Glenard's influence turned out to be personal, not

professional or educational: it ran through people's blood and the

blood of their families; it ran through three generations of immigrants

who could feel both abandoned and hungry even when in the bosom of

their families in front of a mighty feast; and it even ran through Me

Jones of Jamaica's Bowden clan, though she didn't know it (but then

somebody should have told her to keep a backward eye on Glenard;

Jamaica is a small place, you can walk around it in a day, and everybody who lived there rubbed up against everybody else at one time

or another).

Me 1990, 1907

"Do we really have a choice?" asked Me.

"You've been honest with me," said the headmaster, biting his colourless lip, 'and I want to be honest with you."

"We don't have a choice."

"Honestly, no. It's really that or two months of post-class aberration

consideration periods. I'm afraid we have to please the people, Me.

And if we can't please all of the people all of the time, we can at

least please some of-

"Yeah, great."

"Joshua's parents are really fascinating people, Me. I think this

whole experience is going to be really educational for you.

Don't you

think so, Joshua?"

Joshua beamed. "Oh yes, sir. I really think so."

"And you know, the exciting thing is, this could be a kind of guinea-pig project for a whole range of programmes," said the

headmaster, thinking aloud. "Bringing children of disadvantaged or

minority backgrounds into contact with kids who might have something to

offer them. And there could be an exchange, vice versa. Kids teaching

kids basketball, football et cetera. We could get funding." At the

magic of a funding, the headmaster's sunken eyes began to disappear

beneath agitated lids.

"Shit, man," said Millat, shaking his head in disbelief. "I need a

fag."

"Halves," said Me, following him out.

"See you guys on Tuesday!" said Joshua.

12 Canines: The Ripping Teeth

If it is not too far-fetched a comparison, the sexual and cultural revolution we have experienced these past two decades is not a million

miles away from the horticultural revolution that has taken place in

our herbaceous borders and sunken beds. Where once we were satisfied

with our biennials, poorly coloured flowers thrusting weakly out of the earth and blooming a few times a year (if we were lucky), now we are demanding both variety and continuity in our flowers, the passionate colours of exotic blooms 365 days a year. Where once gardeners swore by the reliability of the self-pollinating plant in which pollen is transferred from the stamen to the stigma of the same flower (autogamy), now we are more adventurous, positively singing the praises of cross pollination where pollen is transferred from one flower to another on the same plant (geitonogamy), or to a flower of another plant of the same species (xenogamy). The birds and the bees, the thick haze of pollen these are all to be encouraged! Yes, self-pollination is the simpler and more certain of the two fertilization processes, especially for many species that colonize by copiously repeating the same parental strain. But a species cloning such uniform offspring runs the risk of having its entire population wiped out by a single evolutionary event. In the garden, as in the social and political arena, change should be the only constant. Our parents and our parents' petunias have learnt this lesson the hard way.

The March of History is unsentimental, tramping over a generation and

its annuals with ruthless determination.

The fact is, cross-pollination produces more varied offspring that are

better able to cope with a changed environment. It is said cross pollinating plants also tend to produce more and better-quality seeds.

If my one-year-old son is anything to go by (a cross-pollination

between a lapsed-Catholic horticulturalist feminist, and an intellectual Jew!), then

Me 1990, 1907

I can certainly vouch for the truth of this. Sisters, the bottom line

is this: if we are to continue wearing flowers in our hair into the

next decade, they must be hardy and ever at hand, something only the

truly mothering gardener can ensure. If we wish to provide happy

playgrounds for our children, and corners of contemplation for our

husbands, we need to create gardens of diversity and interest. Mother

Earth is great and plentiful, but even she requires the occasional

helping hand!

Joyce Chalfen, from *The New Flower Power*, pub. 1976, Caterpillar

Press

Joyce Chalfen wrote *The New Flower Power* in a poky attic room overlooking her own rambling garden during the blistering summer of '76. It was an ingenuous beginning for a strange little book more about relationships than flowers that went on to sell well and steadily through the late seventies (not a coffee table essential by any means, but a close look at any baby-boomer's bookshelves will reveal it lying dusty and neglected near those other familiars, Dr. Spock, Shirley Conran, a battered Women's Press copy of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker). The popularity of *The New Flower Power* surprised no one more than Joyce. It had practically written itself, taking only three months, most of which she spent dressed in a tiny t-shirt and a pair of briefs in an attempt to beat the heat, breast-feeding Joshua intermittently, almost absent-mindedly, and thinking to herself, between easy-flowing paragraphs, that this was exactly the life she had hoped for. This was the future she dared to envisage when she first saw Marcus's intelligent little eyes giving her big white legs the once-over as she crossed the quad of his Oxbridge

college, miniskirted, seven years earlier. She was one of those  
people  
who knew immediately, at first sight, even as her future spouse  
opened  
his mouth to say an initial, nervous hello.  
A very happy marriage. That summer of '76, what with the  
heat and the  
flies and the endless melodies of ice-cream vans,  
things happened in a haze sometimes Joyce had to pinch  
herself to make  
sure this was real. Marcus's office was down the hall on the  
right;  
twice a day she'd pace down the corridor, Joshua on one  
substantial  
hip, nudging open the door with the other, just to check he was  
still  
there, that he really existed, and, leaning lustily over the desk,  
she'd grab a kiss from her favourite genius, hard at work on  
his  
peculiar helixes, his letters and numbers. She liked to pull him  
away  
from all that and show him the latest remarkable thing that  
Joshua had  
done or learnt; sounds, letter recognition, coordinated  
movement,  
imitation: just like you, she'd say to Marcus, good genes, he'd  
say to  
her, patting her behind and luxurious thighs, weighing each  
breast in  
his hand, patting her small belly, generally admiring his  
English Pear,  
his earth goddess . and then she'd be satisfied, padding back to  
her

office like a big cat with a cub in its jaws, covered in a light layer

of happy sweat. In an aimless happy way, she could hear herself

murmuring, an oral version of the toilet-door doodles of adolescents:

Joyce and Marcus, Marcus and Joyce.

Marcus was also writing a book that summer of '76. Not so much a book

(in Joyce's sense) as a study. It was called Chimeric Mice: An Evaluation and Practical Exploration of the Work of Brinster (1974)

Concerning the Embryonic Fusion of Mouse Strains at the Eight-cell

Stage of Development. Joyce had read biology in college, but she

didn't attempt to touch the many-paged manuscript that was growing like

a molehill at her husband's feet. Joyce knew her limitations. She had

no great desire to read Marcus's books. It was enough just to know

they were being written, somehow. It was enough to know the man she

had married was writing them. Her husband didn't just make money, he

didn't just make things, or sell things that other people had made, he

created beings. He went to the edges of his God's imagination and made

mice Yahweh could not conceive of: mice with rabbit genes, mice with



webbed feet (or so Joyce imagined, she didn't ask), mice who  
year after

year expressed more and more eloquently

3”

Me 1990, 1907

Marcus's designs: from the hit-or-miss process of selective  
breeding,

to the chimeric fusion of embryos, and then the rapid  
developments that

lay beyond Joyce's ken and in Marcus's future

DNA micro injection retrovirus-mediated trans genesis (for  
which he

came within an inch of the Nobel, 1987), embryonic stem cell-  
mediated

gene transfer all processes by which Marcus manipulated ova,  
regulated

the over or under expression of a gene, planting instructions  
and

imperatives in the germ line to be realized in physical

characteristics. Creating mice whose very bodies did exactly  
what

Marcus told them. And always with humanity in mind a cure  
for cancer,

cerebral palsy, Parkinson's

always with the firm belief in the perfectibility of all life, in  
the

possibility of making it more efficient, more logical (for  
illness was,

to Marcus, nothing more than bad logic on the part of the  
genome, just

as capitalism was nothing more than bad logic on the part of  
the social

animal), more effective, more Chalfenist in the way it proceeded. He expressed contempt equally towards the animal-rights maniacs horrible people Joyce had to shoo from the door with a curtain pole when a few extremists caught wind of Marcus's dealings in mice or theA hippies or the tree people or anyone who failed to grasp the simple fact that social and scientific progress were brothers-in-arms. It was the Chalfen way, handed down the family for generations; they had a congenital inability to suffer fools gladly or otherwise. If you were arguing with a Chalfen, trying to put a case for these strange French men who think truth is a function of language, or that history is interpretive and science metaphorical, the Chalfen in question would hear you out quietly, then wave his hand, dismissive, feeling no need to dignify such bunkum with a retort. Truth was truth to a Chalfen. And Genius was genius. Marcus created beings. And Joyce was his wife, industrious in creating smaller versions of Marcus. Fifteen years later and Joyce would still challenge anyone to show her a happier marriage than hers. Three more children had followed Joshua: Benjamin (fourteen), Jack (twelve) and Oscar (six), bouncy,

curly-haired boys, all articulate and amusing. The Inner Life of Houseplants (1984) and a college chair for Marcus had seen them through

the eighties boom and bust, financing an extra bathroom, a conservatory

and life's pleasures: old cheese, good wine, winters in Florence. Now

there were two new works in-progress: The Secret Passions of the

Climbing Rose and Transgenic Mice: A Study of the Inherent Limitations

of DNA Microinjection (Gordon and Ruddle, 1981) in Comparison with

Embryonic Stem (ES) Cell-mediated Gene Transfer (Gassier et al, 1986).

Marcus was also working on a 'pop science' book, against his better

judgement, a collaboration with a novelist that he hoped would finance

at least the first two children well into their university years.

Joshua was a star maths pupil, Benjamin wanted to be a geneticist just

like his father, Jack's passion was psychiatry, and Oscar could checkmate his father's king in fifteen moves. And all this despite the

fact that the Chalfens had sent their kids to Glenard Oak, daring to

take the ideological gamble their peers guiltily avoided, those nervous

liberals who shrugged their shoulders and coughed up the cash for a

private education. And not only were they bright children, they were

happy, not hot-housed in any way. Their only after-school activity (they despised sport) was the individual therapy five times a week at the hands of an old fashioned Freudian called Marjorie who did Joyce and Marcus (separately) on weekends. It might appear extreme to non Chalfens, but Marcus had been brought up with a strong respect for therapy (in his family therapy had long supplanted Judaism) and there was no arguing with the result. Every Chalfen proclaimed themselves mentally healthy and emotionally stable. The children had their oedipal complexes early and in the right order, they were all fiercely heterosexual, they adored their mother and admired their father, and, unusually, this feeling only increased Me 1990, 1907 as they reached adolescence. Rows were rare, playful and only ever over political or intellectual topics (the importance of anarchy, the need for higher taxes, the problem of South Africa, the soul body dichotomy), upon which they all agreed anyway. The Chalfens had no friends. They interacted mainly with the Chalfen extended family (the good genes which were so often referred to: two

scientists, one mathematician, three psychiatrists and a young  
cousin  
working for the Labour Party). Under sufferance and on public  
holidays, they visited Joyce's long-rejected lineage, the  
Connor clan,  
Daily Mail letter-writers who even now could not disguise  
their  
distaste for Joyce's Israelite love-match. Bottom line: the  
Chalfens  
didn't need other people. They referred to themselves as  
nouns, verbs  
and occasionally adjectives: It's the Chalfen way, And then he  
came out  
with a real Chalfenism, He's Chalfening again, We need to be  
a bit more  
Chalfenist about this. Joyce challenged anyone to show her a  
happier  
family, a more Chalfenist family than theirs.  
And yet, and yet... Joyce pined for the golden age when she  
was the  
linchpin of the Chalfen family. When people couldn't eat  
without her.  
When people couldn't dress without her assistance. Now even  
Oscar  
could make himself a snack. Sometimes there seemed nothing  
to improve,  
nothing to cultivate; recently she found herself pruning the  
dead  
sections from her rambling rose, wishing she could find some  
fault of  
Joshua's worthy of attention, some secret trauma of Jack's or  
Benjamin's, a perversion in Oscar. But they were all perfect.

Sometimes, when the Chalfens sat round their Sunday dinner,  
tearing

apart a chicken until there was nothing left but a tattered  
ribcage,

gobbling silently, speaking only to retrieve the salt or the  
pepper the

boredom was palpable. The century was drawing to a close  
and the

Chalfens were bored. Like clones of each other, their dinner  
table was

an exercise in mirrored perfection, Chalfenism and all its  
principles

reflecting itself infinitely, bouncing from Oscar to Joyce,  
Joyce to

Joshua, Joshua to Marcus, Marcus to Benjamin, Benjamin to  
Jack ad

nauseam across the meat and veg. They were still the same  
remarkable

family they always had been. But having cut all ties with their

Oxbridge peers judges, TV execs, advertisers, lawyers, actors  
and other

frivolous professions Chalfenism sneered at there was no one  
left to

admire Chalfenism itself. Its gorgeous logic, its compassion,  
its

intellect. They were like wild-eyed passengers of The  
Mayflower with

no rock in sight. Pilgrims and prophets with no strange land.  
They

were bored, and none more than Joyce.

To fill long days left alone in the house (Marcus commuted to  
his

college), Joyce's boredom often drove her to flick through the

Chalfens' enormous supply of delivered magazines (New  
Marxism, Living

Marxism, New Scientist, Oxfam Report, Third World Action,  
Anarchist's

Journal) and feel a yearning for the bald Romanians or  
beautiful

pot-bellied Ethiopians yes, she knew it was awful, but there it  
was

children crying out from glossy paper, needing her. She  
needed to be

needed. She'd be the first to admit it. She hated it, for  
example,

when one after the other her children, pop-eyed addicts of  
breast milk,

finally kicked the habit. She usually stretched it to two or three  
years, and, in the case of Joshua, four, but though the supply  
never

ended, the demand did. She lived in dread of the inevitable  
moment

when they moved from soft drugs to hard, the switch from  
calcium to the

sugared delights of Ribena. It was when she finished  
breastfeeding

Oscar that she threw herself back into gardening, back into the  
warm

mulch where tiny things relied on her.

Then one fine day Millat Iqbal and Me Jones walked  
reluctantly into her

life. She was in the back garden at the time, tearfully  
examining her

Garter Knight delphiniums (heliotrope and cobalt blue with a  
jet-black

centre, like a bullet hole in the sky) for signs of thrip a nasty pest

that had already butchered her bocconia. The doorbell rang. Tilting

her head back, Joyce waited till she could hear the slippered feet of

Marcus running down the stairs

Me 1990, 1907

from his study and then, satisfied that he would answer it, delved back

into the thick. With raised eyebrow she inspected the mouthy double

blooms which stood to attention along the delphinium's eight-foot

spine. Thrip, she said to herself out loud, acknowledging the dog-eared mutation on every other flower; thrip, she repeated, not

without pleasure, for it would need seeing to now, and might even give

rise to a book or at least a chapter; thrip. Joyce knew a thing or two

about thrip:

Thrips, common name for minute insects that feed on a wide range of

plants, enjoying in particular the warm atmosphere required for an

indoor or exotic plant. Most species are no more than 1.5 mm (0.06

inch) long as adults; some are wingless, but others have two pairs of

short wings fringed with hairs. Both adults and nymphs have sucking,



piercing mouth parts. Although thrips pollinate some plants and also

eat some insect pests, they are both boon and bane for the modern

gardener and are generally considered pests to be controlled with

insecticides, such as Lindex. Scientific classification: thrips make

up the order Thysanoptera.

-Joyce Chalfen, *The Inner Life of Houseplants* from the index on pests

and parasites

Yes. Thrips have good instincts: essentially they are charitable, productive organisms which help the plant in its development. Thrips

mean well, but thrips go too far, thrips go beyond pollinating and

eating pests; thrips begin to eat the plant itself, to eat it from within. Thrip will infect generation after generation of j delphiniums

if you let it. What can one do about thrip if, as in this case, the Lindex hadn't worked? What can you do but prune hard, prune ruthlessly

and begin from the beginning? Joyce took a deep breath. She was doing

this for the delphinium. She was doing this because without her the

delphinium had no chance. Joyce slipped the huge garden scissors out

of her apron pocket, grabbed the screaming orange handles firmly and

placed the |

exposed throat of a blue delphinium bloom between two slices of silver.

Tough love.

“Joyce! Ja-oyce! Joshua and his marijuana-smoking friends are

here!”

Pulchritude. From the Latin, pulcher, beautiful. That was the word

that first struck Joyce when Millat Iqbal stepped forward on to the

steps of her conservatory, sneering at Marcus’s bad jokes, shading his

violet eyes from a fading winter sun. Pulchritude: not just the concept but the whole physical word appeared before her as if someone

had typed it on to her retina Pulchritude beauty where you would least

suspect it, hidden in a word that looked like it should signify a belch

or a skin infection. Beauty in a tall brown young man who should have

been indistinguishable to Joyce from those she regularly bought milk

and bread from, gave her accounts to for inspection, or passed her

chequebook to from behind the thick glass of a bank till.

“Mill-yat Ick-Ball,” said Marcus, making a performance of the foreign

syllables. “And Irie Jones, apparently. Friends of Josh’s. I was just saying to Josh, these are the best-looking friends of his we’ve

ever seen! They're usually small and weedy, so long sighted they're

short-sighted, and with club-feet. And they're never female. Well!"

continued Marcus jovially, dismissing Joshua's look of horror.

"It's a

damn good thing you turned up. We've been looking for a woman to

marry

old Joshua . . ."

Marcus was standing on the garden steps, quite openly admiring Irie's

breasts (though, to be fair, Irie was a good head and shoulders taller

than him). "He's a good sort, smart, a bit weak on fractals but we

love him anyway. Well.. ."

Marcus paused for Joyce to come out of the garden, take off her gloves,

shake hands with Millat and follow them all into the kitchen.

"You are

a big girl."

"Er . . . thanks."

"We like that around here a healthy eater. All Chalfens are healthy

eaters. I don't put on a pound, but Joyce does. In all the right places, naturally. You're staying for dinner?"

Irie stood dumb in the middle of the kitchen, too nervous to speak.

These were not any species of parent she recognized.

"Oh, don't worry about Marcus," said Joshua with a jolly wink. "He's a

bit of an old leech. It's a Chalfen joke. They like to bombard you

the minute you get in the door. Find out how sharp you are.  
Chalfens

don't think there's any point in pleasantries. Joyce, this is Irie and

Millat. They're the two from behind the science block."

Joyce, partially recovered from the vision of Millat Iqbal, gathered

herself together sufficiently to play her designated role as Mother

Chalfen.

"So you're the two who've been corrupting my eldest son. I'm Joyce. Do

you want some tea? So you're Josh's bad crowd. I was just pruning the

delphiniums. This is Benjamin, Jack and that's Oscar in the hallway.

Strawberry and mango or normal?"

"Normal for me, thanks, Joyce," said Joshua.

"Same, thanks," said Irie.

"Yeah," said Millat.

"Three normal and one mango, please, Marcus, darling, please."

Marcus, who was just heading out the door with a newly packed tobacco

pipe, backtracked with a weary smile. "I'm a slave to this woman," he

said, grabbing her around the waist, like a gambler collecting his

chips in circled arms. "But if I wasn't, she might run off with any

pretty young man who rolled into the house. I don't fancy falling

victim to Darwinism this week.”

This hug, explicit as a hug can be, was directed front-ways-on, seemingly for the appreciation of Millat. Joyce's big milky-blue eyes

were on him all the time.

“That's what you want, Me,” said Joyce in a familial stage whisper, as

if they'd known each other for five years rather than five minutes, ‘a

man like Marcus for the long term. These

fly-by-nights are all right for fun, but what kind of fathers do they

make?”

Joshua coloured. “Joyce, she just stepped into the house! Let her

have some tea!”

Joyce feigned surprise. “I haven't embarrassed you, have I? You have

to forgive Mother Chalfen, my foot and mouth are on intimate terms.”

But Me wasn't embarrassed; she was fascinated, enamoured after five

minutes. No one in the Jones household made jokes about Darwin, or

said ‘my foot and mouth are on intimate terms’, or offered choices of

tea, or let speech flow freely from adult to child, child to adult, as

if the channel of communication between these two tribes was untrammelled, unblocked by history, free.

“Well,” said Joyce, released by Marcus and planting herself down at the

circular table, inviting them to do the same, ‘you look very exotic.

Where are you from, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Willesden,” said Irie and Millat simultaneously.

“Yes, yes, of course, but where originally?”

“Oh,” said Millat, putting on what he called a bud-budding accent.

“You are meaning where from am I originally.”

Joyce looked confused. “Yes, originally.”

“Whitechapel,” said Millat, pulling out a fag. “Via the Royal London

Hospital and the 207 bus.”

All the Chalfens milling through the kitchen, Marcus, Josh, Benjamin,

Jack, exploded into laughter. Joyce obediently followed suit.

“Chill out, man,” said Millat, suspicious. “It wasn’t that fucking

funny.”

But the Chalfens carried on. Chalfens rarely made jokes unless they

were exceptionally lame or numerical in nature or both: What did the

zero say to the eight? Nice belt.

“Are you going to smoke that?” asked Joyce suddenly when the laughter

died down, a note of panic in her voice. “In here? Only,

Me 1990, 1907

we hate the smell. We only like the smell of German tobacco. And if

we smoke it we smoke it in Marcus's room, because it upsets Oscar

otherwise, doesn't it, Oscar?"

"No," said Oscar, the youngest and most cherubic of the boys, busy

building a Lego empire, "I don't care."

"It upsets Oscar," repeated Joyce, in that stage-whisper again.

"He

hates it."

Till... take ... it... to ... the ... garden," said Millat slowly, in the kind of voice you use on the insane or foreign. "Back ... in

... a ... minute."

As soon as Millat was out of earshot, and as Marcus brought over the

teas, the years seemed to fall like dead skin from Joyce and she bent

across the table like a schoolgirl. "God, he's gorgeous, isn't he?

Like Omar Sharif thirty years ago. Funny Roman nose. Are you and he

... ?"

"Leave the girl alone, Joyce," admonished Marcus. "She's hardly going

to tell you about it, is she?"

"No," said Irie, feeling she'd like to tell these people everything.

"We're not."

"Just as well. His parents probably have something arranged for him,

no? The headmaster told me he was a Muslim boy. I suppose he should

be thankful he's not a girl, though, hmm? Unbelievable what they do to

the girls. Remember that Time article, Marcus?"

Marcus was foraging in the fridge for a cold plate of yesterday's

potatoes. "Mmm. Unbelievable."

"But you know, just from the little I've seen, he doesn't seem at all

like most Muslim children. I mean, I'm talking from personal experience, I go into a lot of schools with my gardening, working with

kids of all ages. They're usually so silent, you know, terribly meek

but he's so full of... spunk! But boys like that want the tall blondes, don't they? I mean, that's the bottom line, when . they're

that handsome. I know how you feel... I used to like the troublemakers

when I was your age, but you learn later, you

really do. Danger isn't really sexy, take my word for it. You'd do a

lot better with someone like Joshua."

"Mum!"

"He's been talking about you non-stop all week."

"Mum!"

Joyce faced her reprimand with a little smile. "Well, maybe I'm being

too frank for you young people. I don't know ... in my day, you just

were a lot more direct, you had to be if you wanted to catch the right



man. Two hundred girls in the university and two thousand men! They

were fighting for a girl but if you were smart, you were choosy.”

“My, you were choosy,” said Marcus, shuffling up behind her and kissing

her ear. “And with such good taste.”

Joyce took the kisses like a girl indulging her best friend’s younger

brother.

“But your mother wasn’t sure, was she? She thought I was too intellectual, that I wouldn’t want children.”

“But you convinced her. Those hips would convince anyone!”

“Yes, in the end . . . but she underestimated me, didn’t she? She didn’t think I was Chalfen material.”

“She just didn’t know you then.”

“Well, we surprised her, didn’t we!”

“A lot of hard copulation went into pleasing that woman!”

“Four grandchildren later!”

During this exchange, Me tried to concentrate on Oscar, now creating an

ouroboros from a big pink elephant by stuffing the trunk into its own

rear end. She’d never been so close to this strange and beautiful

thing, the middle class, and experienced the kind of embarrassment that

is actually intrigue, fascination. It was both strange and wondrous.

She felt like the prude who walks through a nudist beach, examining the

sand. She felt like Columbus meeting the exposed arawaks,  
not knowing  
where to look.

32.1

Me 1990, 1907

“Excuse my parents,” said Joshua. They can’t keep their hands  
off each

other.”

But even this was said with pride, because the Chalfen  
children knew

their parents were rare creatures, a happily married couple,  
numbering

no more than a dozen in the whole of Glenard Oak. Me  
thought of her

own parents, whose touches were now virtual, existing only in  
the

absences where both sets of fingers had previously been: the  
remote

control, the biscuit tin lid, the light switches.

She said, “It must be great to feel that way after twenty years  
or

whatever.”

Joyce swivelled round as if someone had released a catch. “It’s  
marvelous! It’s incredible! You just wake up one morning and  
realize

monogamy isn’t a bind it sets you free! And children need to  
grow up

around that. I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced it you  
read a lot

about how Afro-Caribbeans seem to find it hard to establish  
long-term

relationships. That’s terribly sad, isn’t it? I wrote about one

Dominican woman in *The Inner Life of Houseplants* who had moved her

potted azalea through six different men's houses; once by the windowsill, then in a dark corner, then in the south-facing bedroom,

etc. You just can't do that to a plant."

This was a classic Joyce tangent, and Marcus and Joshua rolled their

eyes, affectionately.

Millat, fag finished, sloped back in.

"Are we going to get some studying done, yeah? This is all very nice

but I want to go out this evening. At some point."

While Me had been lost in her reveries assessing the Chalfens like a

romantic anthropologist, Millat had been out in the garden, looking

through the windows, casing the joint. Where Me saw culture, refinement, class, intellect, Millat saw money, lazy money, money that

was just hanging around this family not doing anything in particular,

money in need of a good cause that might as well be him.

32.2.

"So," said Joyce, clapping her hands, trying to keep them all in the

room a little longer, trying to hold off, for as long as possible, the

reassertion of Chalfen silence, 'y u're all going to be studying together! Well, you and Me are really welcome. I was saying to your

headmaster, wasn't I, Marcus, that this really shouldn't feel like

punishment. It's not exactly a heinous crime. Between us, I used to

be a pretty good marijuana gardener myself at one time . . .”

“Way out,” said Millat.

Nurture, thought Joyce. Be patient, water regularly and don't lose

your temper when pruning.

‘. . . and your headmaster explained to us how your own home environments aren't exactly . . . well . . . I'm sure you'll find it easier to work here. Such an important year, the GCSEs. And it's so

obvious that you're both bright anyone can tell that just by looking at

your eyes. Can't they, Marcus?”

Josh, your mother's asking me whether IQ expresses itself in the

secondary physical characteristics of eye colour, eye shape, etc. Is

there a sensible answer to this inquiry?”

Joyce pressed on. Mice and men, genes and germs, that was Marcus's

corner. Seedlings, light sources, growth, nurture, the buried heart of

things that was hers. As on any missionary vessel, tasks were delegated. Marcus on the prow, looking for the storm. Joyce beneath

deck, checking the linen for bedbugs.

“Your headmaster knows how much I hate to see potential wasted that's

why he sent you to us.”

“And because he knows most of the Chalfens are four hundred times

smarter than him!” said Jack, doing a star jump. He was still young

and hadn’t yet learnt to demonstrate his pride in his family in a more

socially acceptable manner. “Even Oscar is.”

“No, I’m not,” said Oscar, kicking in a Lego garage he had recently

made. “I’m the stupidest in the world.”

“Oscar’s got an IQ of 178,” whispered Joyce. “It’s a bit daunting,

even when you’re his mum.”

32.3

Me 1990, 1907

“Wow,” said Me, turning, with the rest of the room, to appreciate Oscar

trying to ingest the head of a plastic giraffe. “That’s remarkable.”

“Yes, but he’s had everything, and so much of it is nurture, isn’t it?

I really believe that. We’ve just been lucky enough to give him so

much and with a daddy like Marcus it’s like having a strong sunbeam

shining on him twenty-four hours a day, isn’t it, darling? He’s so

fortunate to have that. Well, they all are. Now, you may think this

sounds strange, but it was always my aim to marry a man cleverer than

me.” Joyce put her hands on her hips and waited for Me to think that

sounded strange. “No, I really did. And I’m a staunch feminist, Marcus will tell you.”

“She’s a staunch feminist,” said Marcus from the inner sanctum of the fridge.

“I don’t suppose you can understand that your generation have different

ideas but I knew it would be liberating. And I knew what kind of

father I wanted for my children. Now, that’s surprised you, hasn’t it?

I’m sorry, but we really don’t do small talk around here. If you’re

going to be here every week, I thought it best you got a proper dose of

the Chalfensnow.”

All the Chalfens who were in earshot for this last comment smiled and

nodded.

Joyce paused and looked at Me and Millat the way she had looked at her

Garter Knight delphinium. She was a quick and experienced detector of

illness, and there was damage here. There was a quiet pain in the

first one (Irieanthits negressium marcus ilia a lack of a father figure

perhaps, an intellect untapped, a low self-esteem; and in the second

(Millaturea. brandolidia joyculatus) there was a deeper  
sadness, a  
terrible loss, a gaping wound. A hole that needed more than  
education  
or money. That needed love. Joyce longed to touch the site  
with the  
tip of her Chalfen green finger close the gap, knit the skin.  
“Can I ask? Your father? What does he?”  
(Joyce wondered what the parents did, what they had done.  
When she found a mutated first bloom, she wanted to know  
where the  
cutting had come from. Wrong question. It wasn’t the parents,  
it  
wasn’t just one generation, it was the whole century. Not the  
bud but  
the bush.)  
“Curry-shifter,” said Millat. “Bus-boy. Waiter.”  
“Paper,” began Irie. “Kind of folding it ... and working on  
things  
like perforations ... kind of direct mail advertising but not  
really  
advertising, at least not the ideas end ... kind of folding ‘ She  
gave  
up. “It’s hard to explain.”  
“Oh yes. Yes, yes, yes. When there’s a lack of a male role  
model you  
see ... that’s when things really go awry, in my experience. I  
wrote  
an article for Women’s Earth recently. I described a school I  
worked  
in where I gave all the children a potted Busy Lizzie and told  
them to

look after it for a week like a daddy or mummy looks after a baby. Each child chose which parent they were going to emulate. This lovely little Jamaican boy, Winston, chose his daddy. The next week his mother phoned and asked why I'd asked Winston to feed his plant Pepsi and put it in front of the television. I mean, it's just terrible, isn't it. But I think a lot of these parents just don't appreciate their children sufficiently. Partly, it's the culture, you know? It just makes me so angry. The only thing I allow Oscar to watch is Newsround for half an hour a day. That's more than enough."

"Lucky Oscar," said Millat.

"Anyway, I'm just really excited about you being here because, because, the Chalfens, I mean it may sound peculiar, but I really wanted to persuade your headmaster this was the best idea, and now I've met you both I'm even more certain because the Chalfens-

"Know how to bring the right things out in people," finished Joshua,

'they did with me.'

"Yes," said Joyce, relieved her search for the words was over, radiating pride. "Yes."

Joshua pushed his chair back from the table and stood up.

Me 1990, 1907

"Well, we'd better get down to some study. Marcus, could you come up



and help us a bit later on the biology? I'm really bad at reducing the

reproductive stuff in bite-size chunks."

"Sure. I'm working on my Future Mouse though." This was the family

joke name for Marcus's project, and the younger Chalfens sang Future

Mouse after him, imagining an anthropomorphic rodent in red shorts.

"And I've got to play a bit of piano with Jack first. Scott Joplin.

Jack's the left hand, I'm the right. Not quite Art Tatum," he said,

ruffling Jack's hair. "But we get by."

Me tried her hardest to imagine Mr. Iqbal playing the right hand of

Scott Joplin with his dead grey digits. Or Mr. Jones turning anything

into bite-size chunks. She felt her cheeks flush with the warm heat of

Chalfenist revelation. So there existed fathers who dealt in the present, who didn't drag ancient history around like a chain and ball.

So there were men who were not neck-high and sinking in the quagmire of

the past.

"You'll stay for dinner, won't you?" pleaded Joyce. "Oscar really

wants you to stay. Oscar loves having strangers in the house, he finds

it really stimulating. Especially brown strangers! Don't you, Oscar?"

“No, I don’t,” confided Oscar, spitting in Irie’s ear. “I hate brown strangers.”

“He finds brown strangers really stimulating,” whispered Joyce.

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This

has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only

this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac

Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang

O’Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Me Jones humming a tune. Children

with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that

secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold

arrivals, medical checks.

It is only this late in the day, and possibly only in Willesden, that

you can find best friends Sita and Sharon, constantly mistaken for each

other because Sita is white (her mother liked the name) and Sharon is

Pakistani (her mother thought it best less trouble). Yet, despite all

the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each

other’s lives with reasonable comfort (like a man returning to his

lover's bed after a midnight walk), despite all this, it is still  
hard

to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no  
one more

Indian than the English. There are still young white men who  
are angry

about that; who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit  
streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist.

But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the  
nationalist,

scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is  
small

fry, peanuts, compared to what the immigrant fears  
dissolution,

disappearance. Even the unflappable Alsana Iqbal would  
regularly wake

up in a puddle of her own sweat after a night visited by visions  
of

Millat (genetically BB; where B stands for Bengali-ness)  
marrying

someone called Sarah (aa where 'a' stands for Aryan),  
resulting in a

child called Michael (Ba), who in turn marries somebody  
called Lucy

(aa), leaving Alsana with a legacy of unrecognizable

great-grandchildren (Aaaaaaa!), their Bengali-ness thoroughly  
diluted,

genotype hidden by phenotype. It is both the most irrational  
and

natural feeling in the world. In Jamaica it is even in the  
grammar:

there is no choice of personal pronoun, no splits between me  
or you or

they, there is only the pure, homogenous I. When Hortense Bowden, half white herself, got to hearing about Clara's marriage, she came round to the house, stood on the doorstep, said, "Understand: I and I don't speak from this moment forth," turned on her heel and was true to her word. Hortense hadn't put all that effort into marrying black, into dragging her genes back from the brink, just so her daughter could bring yet more high-coloured children into the world.

Me 1990, 1907

Likewise, in the Iqbal house the lines of battle were clearly drawn.

When Millat brought an Emily or a Lucy back home, Alsana quietly wept

in the kitchen, Samad went into the garden to attack the coriander. The

next morning was a waiting game, a furious biting of tongues until the

Emily or Lucy left the house and the war of words could begin. But

with Me and Clara the issue was mostly unspoken, for Clara knew she was

not in a position to preach. Still, she made no attempt to disguise

her disappointment or the aching sadness. From Irie's bedroom shrine

of green-eyed Hollywood idols to the gaggle of white friends who

regularly trooped in and out of her bedroom, Clara saw an ocean of pink skins surrounding her daughter and she feared the tide that would take her away.

It was partly for this reason that Me didn't mention the Chalfens to her parents. It wasn't that she intended to mate with the Chalfens. . . but the instinct was the same. She had a nebulous fifteen-year-old's passion for them, overwhelming, yet with no real direction or object.

She just wanted to, well, kind of, merge with them. She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfishness. The purity of it. It didn't occur to her that the Chalfens were, after a fashion, immigrants too (third generation, by way of Germany and Poland, nee Chalfenovsky), or that they might be as needy of her as she was of them. To Me, the Chalfens were more English than the English. When Me stepped over the threshold of the Chalfen house, she felt an illicit thrill, like a Jew munching a sausage or a Hindu grabbing a Big Mac. She was crossing borders, sneaking into England; it felt like some terribly mutinous act, wearing somebody else's uniform or somebody else's skin.

She just said she had netball on Tuesday evenings and left it at

that.

Conversation flowed at the Chalfen house. It seemed to Me  
that here

nobody prayed or hid their feelings in a toolbox or silently  
stroked fading photographs wondering what might have been.

Conversation was the stuff of life.

“Hello, Me! Come in, come in, Joshua’s in the kitchen with  
Joyce,

you’re looking well. Millat not with you?”

“Coming later. He’s got a date.”

“Ah, yes. Well, if there are any questions in your exams on  
oral

communication, he’ll fly through them. Joyce! Irie’s here! So  
how’s

the study going? It’s been what? Four months now? The  
Chalfen genius

rubbing off?”

“Yeah, not bad, not bad. I never thought I had a scientific bone  
in my

body but... it seems to be working. I don’t know, though.  
Sometimes

my brain hurts.”

“That’s just the right side of your brain waking up after a long  
sleep,

getting back into the swing of things. I’m really impressed; I  
told

you it was possible to turn a wishy-washy arts student into a  
science

student in no time at all oh, and I’ve got the Future Mouse  
pictures.

Remind me later, you wanted to see them, no? Joyce, the big  
brown

goddess has arrived!”

“Marcus, chill out, man . . . Hi, Joyce. Hi, Josh. Hey, Jack.  
Oooh,  
hell-low, Oscar, you cutie.”

“Hello, Me! Come here and give me a kiss. Oscar, look, it’s  
Irie come

to see us again! Oh, look at his face . . . he’s wondering where  
Millat

is, aren’t you, Oscar?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Oh dear, yes he is . . . look at his little face . . . he gets very  
upset

when Millat doesn’t turn up. Tell Irie the name of the new  
monkey,

Oscar, the one Daddy gave you.”

“George.”

“No, not George you called it Millat the Monkey, remember?  
Because

monkeys are mischievous and Millat’s just as bad, isn’t he,  
Oscar?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care.”

“Oscar gets terribly upset when Millat doesn’t come.”

“He’ll be along in a while. He’s on a date.”

Me 1990, 1907

“When isn’t he on a date! All those busty girls! We might get  
jealous, mightn’t we, Oscar? He spends more time with them  
than us.

But we shouldn’t joke. I suppose it’s a bit difficult for you.”

“No, I don’t mind, Joyce, really. I’m used to it.”

“But everybody loves Millat, don’t they, Oscar! It’s so hard  
not to,

isn't it, Oscar? We love him, don't we, Oscar?"

"I hate him."

"Oh, Oscar, don't say silly things."

"Can we all stop talking about Millat, please."

"Yes, Joshua, all right. Do you hear how he gets jealous? I try to

explain to him that Millat needs a little extra care, you know. He's

from a very difficult background. It's just like when I give more time

to my peonies than my Michaelmas daisies, daisies will grow anywhere ..

. you know you can be very selfish sometimes, Joshi."

"OK, Mum, OK. What's happening with dinner-before study or after?"

"Before, I think, Joyce, no? I've got to work on Future Mouse all night."

Future Mouse

"Shh, Oscar, I'm trying to listen to Daddy."

"Because I'm delivering a paper tomorrow so best have dinner early. If

that's all right with you, Me, I know how you like your food."

"That's fine."

"Don't say things like that, Marcus, dear, she's very touchy about her

weight."

"No, I'm really not"

"Touchy? About her weight? But everybody likes a big girl, don't

they? I know I do."



“Evening all. Door was ajar. Let myself in. One day somebody’s going

to wander in here and murder the fucking lot of you.”

“Millat! Oscar, look it’s Millat! Oscar, you’re very happy to see

Millat, aren’t you, darling?”

Oscar screwed up his nose, pretended to barf and threw a wooden hammer

at Millat’s shins.

“Oscar gets so excited when he sees you. Well. You’re just in time

for dinner. Chicken with cauliflower cheese. Sit down. Josh, put

Millat’s coat somewhere. So. How are things?”

Millat sat down at the table with violence and eyes that looked like

they had recently seen tears. He pulled out his pouch of tobacco and

little bag of weed.

“Fuckin’ awful.”

“Awful how?” inquired Marcus with little attention, otherwise engaged

in cutting himself a chunk from an enormous block of Stilton.

“Couldn’t

get in girl’s pants? Girl wouldn’t get in your pants? Girl not

wearing pants? Out of interest, what kind of pants was she ‘

“Dad! Give it a rest,” moaned Joshua.

“Well, if you ever actually got in anybody’s pants, Josh,” said Marcus,

looking pointedly at Me, “I’d be able to get my kicks through you, but

so far’

“Shhh, the two of you,” snapped Joyce. “I’m trying to listen to Millat.”

Four months ago, having a cool mate like Millat had seemed to Josh one

hell of a lucky break. Having him round his house every Tuesday had

upped Josh’s ante at Glenard Oak by more than he could have imagined.

And now that Millat, encouraged by Me, had begun to come of his own

accord, to come socially, Joshua Chalfen, the Chalfen the Chubster,

should have felt his star rising. But he didn’t. He felt pissed off.

For Joshua had not bargained on the power of Millat’s attractiveness.

His magnet-like qualities. He saw that Me was still, deep down, stuck

on him like a paper clip and even his own mother seemed sometimes to

take Millat as her only focus; all her energy for her gardening, her

children, her husband, streamlined and drawn to this one object like so

many iron filings. It pissed him off.

“I can’t talk now? I can’t talk in my own house?”

33i

“Joshi, don’t be silly. Millat’s obviously upset.. . I’m just trying

to deal with that at the moment.”

“Poor little Joshi,” said Millat in slow, malicious, purring tones.

“Not getting enough attention from his mummy? Want mummy to wipe

his

bottom for him?”

“Fuck you, Millat,” said Joshua.

“OooooooooOOO .. .”

“Joyce, Marcus,” appealed Joshua, looking for an external judgement.

“Tell him.”

Marcus popped a great wedge of cheese in his mouth and shrugged his

shoulders. “I’m afraid Miyat’s oar mu’rer’s jurishdicshun.”

“Let me

just deal with this first, Joshi,” began Joyce. “And then later .. .”

Joyce allowed the rest of her sentence to get jammed in the kitchen

door just as her eldest son slammed it.

“Shall I go after .. . ?” asked Benjamin.

Joyce shook her head and kissed Benjamin on the cheek. “No, Benji.

Best leave him to it.”

She turned back to Millat, touching his face, tracing the salt path of

an old tear with her finger.

“Now. What’s been going on?”

Millat began slowly rolling his spliff. He liked to make them wait.

You could get more out of a Chalfen if you made them wait.

“Oh, Millat, don’t smoke that stuff. Every time we see you these days

you’re smoking. It upsets Oscar so much. He’s not that young and he

understands more than you think. He understands about marijuana.”

“What’s Mary want?” asked Oscar.

“You know what it is, Oscar. It’s what makes Millat all horrible, like

we were talking about today, and it’s what kills the little brain cells

he has.”

“Get off my fucking back, Joyce.”

“I’m just trying to .. Joyce sighed with melodrama, and drew her fingers through her hair. “Millat, what’s the matter? Do you need

some money?”

“Yeah, I do, as it happens

“Why? What happened? Millat. Talk to me. Family again?”

Millat tucked the orange cardboard roach in and stuck the joint between

his lips. “Dad chucked me out, didn’t he?”

“Oh God,” said Joyce, tears springing immediately, pulling her chair

closer and taking his hand, ‘if I was your mother, I’d well, anyway I’m

not, am I ... but she’s just so incompetent ... it makes me so.. . I

mean, imagine letting your husband take away one of your children and

do God knows what with the other one, I just-‘

“Don’t talk about my mother. You’ve never met her. I wasn’t even talking about her.”

“Well, she refuses to meet me, doesn’t she? As if it were some kind of competition.”

“Shut the fuck up, Joyce.”

“Well, there’s no point, is there? Going into ... it upsets you to ...

I can see that, clearly, it’s all too close to the ... Marcus, get some tea, he needs tea.”

“For fucks sake I don’t want any fucking tea. All you ever do is drink tea! You lot must piss pure bloody tea.”

“Millat, I’m just try ‘

“Well, don’t.”

A little hash seed fell out of Millat’s joint and stuck on his lips.

He picked it off and popped it in his mouth. “I could do with some

brandy, though, if there is any.”

Joyce motioned to Irie with a what can you do look and mimed a tiny

measure of her thirty-year-old Napoleon brandy between forefinger and

thumb. Irie stood on an overturned bucket to get it off the top shelf.

“OK, let’s all calm down. OK? OK. So. What happened this time?”

“I called him a cunt. He is a cunt.” Millat walloped Oscar’s

Me 1990, 1907

creeping fingers that were looking for a plaything and reaching speculatively for his matches. Till need somewhere to stay for a bit.”

“Well, that’s not even a question, you can stay at ours, naturally.”

Me reached between the two of them, Joyce and Millat, to place the

big-bottomed brandy glass on the table.

“OK, Me, give him a little space right now, I think.”

“I was just-“

“Yes, OK, Me he just doesn’t need crowding right at this moment-“

“He’s a bloody hypocrite, man,” Millat cut in with a growl, looking

into the middle distance and speaking to the conservatory as much as to

anyone, ‘he prays five times a day but he still drinks and he doesn’t

have any Muslim friends, then he has a go at me for fucking a white

girl. And then he’s pissed off about Magid. He takes all his shit out

on me. And he wants me to stop hanging around with KEVIN. I’m more

of

a fucking Muslim than he is. Fuck him!”

“Do you want to talk about it with all this lot about,” said Joyce,

looking meaningfully round the room. “Or just us?”

“Joyce,” said Millat, downing his brandy in one, “I don’t give a

fuck'

Joyce took that to mean just us and ushered the rest of them out of the

room with her eyes.

Me was glad to leave. In the four months that she and Millat had been

turning up to the Chalfens, ploughing through Double Science, band I,

and eating their selection of boiled food, a strange pattern had developed. The more progress Me made whether in her studies, her

attempts to make polite conversation or her studied imitation of

Chalfenism the less interest Joyce showed in her. Yet the more Millat

veered off the rails turning up uninvited on a Sunday night, off his

face, bringing round girls, smoking weed all over the house, drinking

their 1964 Dom

Perignon on the sly, pissing on the rose garden, holding a K E VIN

meeting in the front room, running up a three hundred pound phone bill

calling Bangladesh, telling Marcus he was queer, threatening to

castrate Joshua, calling Oscar a spoilt little shit, accusing Joyce

herself of being a maniac the more Joyce adored him. In four months he

already owed her over three hundred pounds, a new duvet and a bike

wheel.

“Are you coming upstairs?” asked Marcus, as he closed the kitchen door

on the two of them, and bent this way and that like a reed while his

children blew past him. “I’ve got those pictures you wanted to see.”

Irie gave Marcus a thankful smile. It was Marcus who seemed to keep an

eye out for her. It was Marcus who had helped her these four months as

her brain changed from something mushy to something hard and defined,

as she slowly gained a familiarity with the Chalfen way of thinking.

She had thought of this as a great sacrifice on the part of a busy man,

but more recently she wondered if there was not some enjoyment in it.

Like watching a blind man feeling out the contours of a new object,

maybe. Or a laboratory rat making sense of a maze. Either way, in

exchange for his attention, Irie had begun to take an interest, first

strategic and now genuine, in his Future Mouse Consequently

invitations to Marcus’s study at the very top of the house, by far her

favourite room, had become more frequent.

“Well, don’t stand there grinning like the village idiot. Come on

up.”



Marcus's room was like no place Irie had ever seen. It had no communal

utility, no other purpose in the house apart from being Marcus's room;

it stored no toys, bric-a-brac, broken things, spare ironing boards; no

one ate in it, slept in it or made love in it. It wasn't like Clara's attic space, a Xanadu of crap, all carefully stored in boxes and labelled just in case she should ever need to flee this land for another one. It wasn't like the spare rooms of immigrants packed to

the rafters with all that they

Me 1990, 1907

have ever possessed, no matter how defective or damaged, mountains of

odds and ends that stand testament to the fact that they have things

now, where before they had nothing.) Marcus's room was purely devoted

to Marcus and Marcus's work. A study. Like in Austen or Upstairs,

Downstairs or Sherlock Holmes. Except this was the first study Me had

ever seen in real life.

The room itself was small and irregular with a sloping floor, wooden

eaves that meant it was possible to stand in certain places but not

others and a skylight rather than a window which let light through in

slices, spotlights for dancing dust. There were four filing cabinets,

open-mouthed beasts spitting paper; paper in piles on the floor,  
on the  
shelves, in circles around the chairs. The smell of a rich, sweet  
Germanic tobacco sat in a cloud just above head level, staining the  
leaves of the highest books yellow, and there was an elaborate  
smoking  
set on a side table spare mouthpieces, pipes ranging from the  
standard  
U-bend to ever more curious shapes, snuffboxes, a selection of  
gauzes  
all laid out in a velvet-lined leather case like a doctor's  
instruments. Scattered about the walls and lining the fireplace  
were  
photos of the Chalfen clan, including comely portraits of Joyce  
in her  
pert-breasted hippy youth, a retrousse nose sneaking out  
between two  
great sheaths of hair. And then a few larger framed centre  
pieces A  
map of the Chalfen family tree. A head shot of Mendel  
looking pleased  
with himself. A big poster of Einstein in his American icon  
stage  
Nutty Professor hair, 'surprised' look and huge pipe subtitled  
with the  
quote God does not play dice with the world. Finally, Marcus's  
large  
oaken armchair backed on to a portrait of Crick and Watson  
looking  
tired but elated in front of their model of deoxyribonucleic  
acid, a

spiral staircase of metal clamps, reaching from the floor of  
their

Cambridge lab to beyond the scope of the photographer's lens.

"But where's Wilkins?" inquired Marcus, bending where the  
ceiling got

low and tapping the photo with a pencil. "1962, Wilkins won  
the Nobel

in medicine with Crick and Watson. But no sign

of Wilkins in the photos. Just Crick and Watson. Watson and  
Crick.

History likes lone geniuses or double acts. But it's got no time  
for

threesomes." Marcus thought again. "Unless they're  
comedians or jazz

musicians."

"Spouse you'll have to be a lone genius, then," said Me  
cheerfully,

turning from the picture and sitting down on a Swedish  
backless

chair.

"Ah, but I have a mentor, you see." He pointed to a poster-  
sized black

and white photograph on the other wall. "And mentors are a  
whole other

kettle offish."

It was an extreme close-up of an extremely old man, the  
contours of his

face clearly defined by line and shade, hachures on a  
topographic

map.

"Grand old Frenchman, a gentleman and a scholar. Taught me  
practically

everything I know. Seventy-odd and sharp as a whip. But you see, with

a mentor you needn't credit them directly. That's the great thing

about them. Now where's this bloody photo

While Marcus scabbled about in a filing cabinet, Me studied a small

slice of the Chalfen family tree, an elaborate illustrated oak that

stretched back into the 1600s and forward into the present day. The

differences between the Chalfens and the Jones/ Bowdens were

immediately plain. For starters, in the Chalfen family everybody

seemed to have a normal number of children. More to the point,

everybody knew whose children were whose. The men lived longer than

the women. The marriages were singular and long lasting. Dates of

birth and death were concrete. And the Chalfens actually knew who they

were in 1675. Archie Jones could give no longer record of his family

than his father's own haphazard appearance on the planet in  
the

back-room of a Bromley public house circa 1895 or 1896 or  
quite

possibly 1897, depending on which nonagenarian ex-barmaid  
you spoke

to.

Clara Bowden knew a little about her grandmother, and half  
believed

the story that her famed and prolific Uncle P. had

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thirty-four children, but could only state definitively that her  
own

mother was born at 2.45 p.m. 14 January 1907, in a Catholic  
church in

the middle of the Kingston earthquake. The rest was rumour,  
folk-tale

and myth:

another man & Great-great-great-Grandma (Lady The?) &

Great-great-great-Grandfather

another man & [Way Back When-Lord Knows]

%?G %?G %?G Old man Bob [Hoi heap of time]

[Way Back When-Lord Knows]

I I I | ^ I

Great-grandmother Great Uncle P. Great Auntie Great Auntie  
Great

Auntie

Ambrosia Bowden [iSpoish- i96oish] Meeshell Lavinia  
Patricia

[iSpoish-ipsoish] & God knows how & some no-good

Si Captain Charlie many women raggamuffins

“Whitey’ Durham [i88oish-Lord Knows]

Grandmother 34 children. unknown unknown 3 kids %? G

Hortense Bowden Amongst them, issue issue

[1907- ] Auntie Susie, Bobo,

= fm. 1947] G-man, Delroy,

Darcus Bowden Bigface,

[1910-1985] Lady Penelope

Clara Bowden = Archie Jones [1955- ] [1927- ]

fm. 1975]

Irie Ambrosia Jones [1975- ]

Key

& = copulated with % = paternity unsure ? = child’s name  
unknown G =

brought up by grandmother

“You guys go so far back,” said Irie, as Marcus came up  
behind her to

see what was of interest. “It’s incredible. I can’t imagine what  
that

must feel like.”

“Nonsensical statement. We all go back as far as each other.  
It’s

just that the Chalfens have always written things down said  
Marcus

thoughtfully, stuffing his pipe with fresh tobacco. “It helps if  
you

want to be remembered

“I guess my family’s more of an oral tradition said Irie with a  
shrug.

“But, man, you should ask Millat about his. He’s the descendant of-“

“A great revolutionary. So I’ve heard. I wouldn’t take any of that

seriously, if I were you. One part truth to three parts fiction in that family, I fancy. Any historical figure of note in your lot?” asked Marcus, and then, immediately uninterested in his own question,

returned to his search of filing cabinet number two.

“No ... no one ... significant. But my grandmother was born in

January 1907, during the Kingston ‘

“Here we are!”

Marcus emerged triumphant from a steel drawer, brandishing a thin

plastic folder with a few pieces of paper in it.

“Photographs. Especially for you. If the animal-rights lot saw these,

I’d have a contract out on my life. One by one now. Don’t grab

Marcus passed Irie the first photo. It was of a mouse on its back. Its

stomach was littered with little mushroom-like growths, brown and

puffy. Its mouth was unnaturally extended, by the prostrate position,

into a cry of agony. But not genuine agony, Irie thought, more like

theatrical agony. More like a mouse who was making a big show of

something. A barn-mouse. A luwie-mouse. There was something

sarcastic about it.

“You see, embryo cells are all very well, they help us understand the

genetic elements that may contribute to cancer, but what you really

want to know is how a tumour progresses in living tissue, I mean, you

can't approximate that in a culture, not really. So then you move on

to introducing chemical carcinogens in a target organ but

Irie was half listening, half engrossed in the pictures passed to her. The next one was of the same mouse, as far as she could tell,

this time on its front, where the tumours were bigger. There was one

on its neck that appeared practically the same size as its ear. But

the mouse looked quite pleased about it. Almost as if it had purposefully grown new apparatus to hear what Marcus was saying about

him. Irie was aware this was a stupid thing to think about a lab mouse. But, once again, the mouse-face had a mouse-cunning about it.

There was a mouse-sarcasm in its mouse-eyes. A mouse-smirk played

about its mouse-lips. Terminal disease? (the mouse said to Irie) What

terminal disease?

‘. . . slow and imprecise. But if you're-engineer the actual genome,

so that specific cancers are expressed in specific tissues at predetermined, times in the mouse's development, then you're no longer



dealing with the random. You're eliminating the random actions of a

mutagen. Now you're talking the genetic program of the mouse, a force

activating oncogenes within cells. Now you see, this particular mouse

is a young male . . .”

Now FutureMouse(c) was being held by his front paws by two pink giant

fingers and made to stand vertical like a cartoon mouse, thus forcing

his head up. He seemed to be sticking out his little pink

mouse-tongue, at the cameraman initially and now at Irie. On his chin

the tumours hung like big droplets of dirty rain.

‘. . . and he expresses the H-ras oncogene in certain of his skin cells, so he develops multiple benign skin papillomas. Now what's

interesting, of course, is young females don't develop it, which is ..

.”

One eye was closed, the other open. Like a wink. A crafty mouse-wink.

‘. . . and why? Because of inter-male rivalry the fights lead to abrasion. Not a biological imperative but a social one. Genetic result: the same. You see? And it's only with transgenic mice, by

adding experimentally to the genome, that you can understand those kind

of differences. And this mouse, the one you're looking

at, is a unique mouse, Me. I plant a cancer and a cancer turns up  
precisely when I expect it. Fifteen weeks into the development. Its  
genetic code is new. New breed. No better argument for a patent, if  
you ask me. Or at least some kind of royalties deal: 80 per cent  
God,  
20 per cent me. Or the other way round, depending on how  
good my  
lawyer is. Those poor bastards in Harvard are still fighting the  
point. I'm not interested in the patent, personally. I'm  
interested  
in the science."

"Wow," said Me, passing back the pictures reluctantly. "It's  
pretty  
hard to take in. I half get it and I half don't get it at all. It's  
just amazing."

"Well," said Marcus, mock humble. "It fills the time."

"Being able to eliminate the random . . ."

"You eliminate the random, you rule the world," said Marcus  
simply.

"Why stick to oncogenes? One could program every step in  
the

development of an organism: reproduction, food habits, life  
expectancy'

automaton voice, arms out like a zombie, rolling eyeballs

"WORLD

DOMINA-SHUN." "I can see the tabloid headlines," said Me.

"Seriously though," said Marcus, rearranging his photos in the  
folder

and moving towards the cabinet to refile them, ‘the study of isolated

breeds of transgenic animals sheds crucial light on the random. Are

you following me? One mouse sacrificed for 5.3 billion humans. Hardly

mouse apocalypse. Not too much to ask.”

“No, of course not.”

“Damn! This thing is such a bloody mess!”

Marcus tried three times to shut the bottom drawer of his cabinet, and

then, losing patience, levelled a kick at its steel sides. “Bloody thing!”

Me peered over the open drawer. “You need more dividers,” she said

decidedly. “And a lot of the paper you’re using is A3, a 2 or irregular. You need some kind of folding policy; at the moment you’re

just shoving them in.”

Marcus threw his head back and laughed. “Folding policy!

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Well, I suppose you should know; like father like daughter.”

He crouched down by the drawer and gave it a few more pushes.

“I’m serious. I don’t know how you work like that. My school shit is

better organized, and I’m not in the business of World Domination.”

Marcus looked up at her from where he was kneeling. She was like a

mountain range from that angle; a soft and pillowy version of the

Andes.

“Look, how about this: I’ll pay you fifteen quid a week if you come

round twice a week and get a grip on this filing disaster. You’ll

learn more, and I’ll get something I need done, done. Hey?

What about

it?”

What about it. Joyce already paid Millat a total of thirty-five quid a

week for such diverse activities as baby-sitting Oscar, washing the

car, weeding, doing the windows and recycling all the coloured paper.

What she was really paying for, of course, was the presence of Millat.

That energy around her. And that reliance.

Me knew the deal she was about to make; she didn’t run into it drunk or

stoned or desperate or confused, as Millat did. Furthermore, she

wanted it; she wanted to merge with the Chal fens, to be of one flesh;

separated from the chaotic, random flesh of her own family and

transgenically fused with another. A unique animal. A new breed.

Marcus frowned. “Why all the deliberation? I’d like an answer this

millennium, if you don’t mind. Is it a good idea or isn’t it?”

Me

nodded and smiled. "Sure is. When do I start?"

Alsana and Clara were none too pleased. But it took them a little

while to compare notes and consolidate their displeasure.

Clara was in

night school three days a week (courses: British Imperialism 1765 to

the Present; Medieval Welsh Literature; Black Femin

ism), Alsana was on the sewing machine all the daylight hours God gave

while a family war raged around her. They talked on the phone only

occasionally and saw each other even less. But both felt an

independent uneasiness about the Chalfens, of whom they had gradually

heard more and more. After a few months of covert surveillance, Alsana

was now certain that it was to the Chalfens Millat went during his

regular absences from the family home. As for Clara, she was lucky to

catch Me in on a week night, and had long ago rumbled her netball

excuses. For months now it had been the Chalfens this and the Chalfens

that; Joyce said this wonderful thing, Marcus is so terribly clever.

But Clara wasn't one to kick up a fuss; she wanted desperately what was

best for Irie', and she had always been convinced that sacrifice was

nine tenths of parenting. She even suggested a meeting, between

herself and the Chalfens, but either Clara was paranoid or Irie was

doing her best to avoid it. And there was no point looking to Archibald for support. He only saw Irie in flashes when she came home

to shower, dress or eat and it didn't seem to bother him whether she

raved endlessly about the Chalfen children (They sound nice, love), or

about something Joyce did (Did she? That's very clever, isn't it,

love?), or something Marcus had said (Sounds like a right old Einstein,

eh, love? Well, good for you. Must dash. Meeting Sammy at O'Connell's at eight). Archie had skin as thick as an alligator's.

Being a father was such a solid genetic position in his mind (the

solidest fact in Archie's life), it didn't occur to him that there might be any challenger to his crown. It was left to Clara to bite her

lip alone, hope she wasn't losing her only daughter, and swallow the

blood.

But Alsana had finally concluded that it was all-out war and she needed

an ally. Late January '91, Christmas and Ramadan safely out of the

way, she picked up the phone.

"So: you know about these Chaffinches?"

"Chalfens. I think the name is Chalfen. Yes, they're the parents of a

friend of Irie's, I think," said Clara disingenuously, wanting  
Me 1990, 1907

to know what Alsana knew first. "Joshua Chalfen. They sound  
a nice  
family."

Alsana blew air out of her nose. Till call them Chaffinches  
little

scavenging English birds pecking at all the best seeds! Those  
birds do

the same to my bay leaves as these people do to my boy. But  
they are

worse; they are like birds with teeth, with sharp little canines  
they

don't just steal, they rip apart! What do you know about  
them?"

"Well.. . nothing, really. They've been helping Me and Millat  
with

their sciences, that's what she told me. I'm sure there's no  
harm,

Alsi. And Irie's doing very well in school now. She is out of  
the

house all the time, but I can't really put my foot down."

Clara heard Alsana slap the Iqbal bannisters in fury. "Have  
you met

them? Because I haven't met them, and yet they feel free to  
give my

son money and shelter as if he had neither and bad mouth me,  
no doubt.

God only knows what he is telling them about me! Who are  
they? I am

not knowing them from Adam or Eve! Millat spends every  
spare minute

with them and I see no particular improvement in his grades  
and he is  
still smoking the pot and sleeping with the girls. I try and tell  
Samad, but he's in his own world; he just won't listen. Just  
screams  
at Millat and won't speak to me. We're trying to raise the  
money to  
get Magid back and in a good school. I'm trying to keep this  
family  
together and these Chaffinches are trying to tear it apart!"  
Clara bit her lip and nodded silently at the receiver.  
"Are you there, lady?"  
"Yes," said Clara. "Yes. You see, Me, well . . . she seems to  
worship  
them. I got quite upset at first, but then I thought I was just  
being  
silly. Archie says I'm being silly."  
"If you told that potato-head there was no gravity on the moon  
he'd  
think you were being silly. We get by without his opinion for  
fifteen  
years, we'll manage without it now. Clara," said Alsana, and  
her heavy  
breath rattled against the receiver, her voice  
sounded exhausted, 'we always stand by each other . . . I need  
you  
now."  
"Yes . . . I'm just thinking . . ."  
"Please. Don't think. I booked a movie, old and French, like  
you like  
two thirty today. Meet me in front of the Tricycle Theatre.



Niece-of-Shame is coming too. We have tea. We talk.”

The movie was A Bout de Souffle. 16 mm, grey and white.  
Old Fords

and

boulevards. Turn-ups and handkerchiefs. Kisses and cigarettes.  
Clara

loved it (Beautiful Belmondo! Beautiful Seberg! Beautiful  
Paris!),

Neena found it too French, and Alsana couldn't understand  
what the

bloody thing was about. “Two young people running around  
France

talking nonsense, killing policemen, stealing vehicles, never  
wearing

bras. If that's European cinema, give me Bollywood every day  
of the

week. Now, ladies, shall we get down to business?”

Neena went and collected the teas and plonked them on the  
little

table.

“So what's all this about a conspiracy of Chaffinches? Sounds  
like

Hitchcock.”

Alsana explained in shorthand the situation.

Neena reached into a bag for her Consulates, lit one up and  
exhaled

minty smoke. “Auntie, they just sound like a perfectly nice  
middle-class family who are helping Millat with his studies. Is  
that

what you dragged me from work for? I mean, it's hardly  
Jonestown, now,

is it?”

“No,” said Clara cautiously, ‘no, of course not but all your auntie is

saying is that Millat and Me spend such a lot of time over there, so

we’d just like to know a bit more about what they’re like, you know.

That’s natural enough, isn’t it?”

Alsana objected. That is not all I’m saying. I am saying these people

are taking my son away from me! Birds with teeth! They’re Englishifying him completely! They’re deliberately leading him away

from his culture and his family and his religion ‘

“Since when have you given two shits about his religion!”

Me 1990, 1907

“You, Niece-of-Shame, you don’t know how I sweat blood for that boy,

you don’t know about ‘

“Well, if I don’t know anything about anything, why the bloody hell

have you brought me here? I’ve got other fucking things to do, you

know.” Neena snatched her bag and made to stand up. “Sorry about

this, Clara. I don’t know why this always has to happen. I’ll see you

soon .. .”

“Sit down,” hissed Alsana, grabbing her by the arm. “Sit down, all

right, point made, Miss Clever Lesbian. Look, we need you, OK? Sit

down, apology, apology. OK? Better.”

“All right,” said Neena, viciously stubbing out her fag on a serviette.

“But I’m going to speak my mind and for once just shut that chasm of a

mouth while I do it. OK? OK. Right. Now, you just said Irie’s doing

tremendous in school, and if Millat’s not doing so well, it’s no great

mystery he doesn’t do any work. At least somebody’s trying to help

him. And if he’s seeing too much of these people, I’m sure that’s his

choice, not theirs. It’s not exactly Happy Land in your house at the

moment, is it? He’s running away from himself and he’s looking for

something as far away from the Iqbals as possible.”

“Ah ha! But they live two roads away!” cried Alsana triumphantly.

“No, Auntie. Conceptually far away from you. Being an Iqbal is

occasionally a little suffocating, you know? He’s using this other

family as a refuge. They’re probably a good influence or something.”

“Or something,” said Alsana ominously.

“What are you afraid of, Alsi? He’s second generation you always say

it yourself you need to let them go their own way. Yes, and look what

happened to me, blah blah blah I may be Niece-of-Shame to you, Alsi,

but I earn a good living out of my shoes.” Alsana looked dubiously at the knee-length black boots that Neena had designed, made and was wearing. “And I live a pretty good life you know, I live by principles. I’m just saying. He’s already having a war with uncle Samad. He doesn’t need one with you as well  
Alsana grumbled into her blackberry tea.  
“If you want to worry about something, Auntie, worry about these KEVIN people he hangs around with. They’re insane. And there’s bloody loads of them. All the ones you wouldn’t expect. Mo, you know, the butcher yes, you know the Hussein Ishmaels - Ardashir’s side of the family.  
Right, well, he’s one. And bloody Shiva, from the restaurant he’s converted!”  
“Good for him,” said Alsana tartly.  
“But it’s nothing to do with Islam proper, Alsi. They’re a political group. And some politics. One of the little bastards told me and Maxine we were going to roast in the pits of hell. Apparently we are the lowest forms of life, lower than the slugs. I gave his ball-bag a 360-degree twist. Those are the people you need to worry about.”

Alsana shook her head and waved Neena off with a hand.  
“Can’t you  
understand? I worry about my son being taken away from me.  
I have  
lost one already. Six years I have not seen Magid. Six years.  
And I  
see these people, these Chaffinches and they spend more time  
with  
Millat than I do. Can you understand that, at least?”  
Neena sighed, fiddled with a button on her top, and then,  
seeing the  
tears forming in her auntie’s eyes, conceded a silent nod.  
“Millat and Irie often go round there for dinner,” said Clara  
quietly.  
“And Alsana, well, your auntie and I were wondering.. . if  
once you  
could go with them you look young, and you seem young, and  
you could  
go  
and ‘  
“Report back,” finished Neena, rolling her eyes. “Infiltrate the  
enemy. That poor family they’ve no idea who they’re messing  
with, have  
they? They’re under surveillance and they don’t even know it.  
It’s  
like the bloody Thirty-nine Steps.”  
“Niece-of-Shame: yes or no?”  
Me 1990, 1907  
Neena groaned. “Yes, Auntie. Yes, if I must.” “Much  
appreciated,”  
said Alsana, finishing her tea.

Now, it wasn't that Joyce was a homophobe. She liked gay men. And they liked her. She had even inadvertently amassed a little gay fan club in university, a group of men who saw her as a kind of Barbra Streisand/Bette Davis/ Joan Baez hybrid and met once a month to cook her dinner and admire her dress sense. So Joyce couldn't be homophobic. But gay women . . . something confused Joyce about gay women. It wasn't that she disliked them. She just couldn't comprehend them. Joyce understood why men would love men; she had devoted her life to loving men, so she knew how it felt. But the idea of loving women was so far from Joyce's cognitive understanding of the world that she couldn't process it. The idea of them. She just didn't get it. God knows, she'd made the effort. During the seventies she dutifully read *The Well of Loneliness and Our Bodies Ourselves* (which had a small chapter); more recently she had read and watched *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, but none of it did her any good. She wasn't offended by it. She just couldn't see the point. So when Neena turned up for dinner, arm in arm with Maxine, Joyce just sat staring at the

two of them over the starter (pulses on rye bread), utterly fixated.

She was rendered dumbstruck for the first twenty minutes, leaving the

rest of the family to go through the Chalfen routine minus her own

vital bit-part. It was a little like being hypnotized or sitting in a dense cloud, and through the mist she heard snippets of dinner conversation continuing without her.

“So, always the first Chalfen question: what do you do?”

“Shoes. I make shoes.”

“Ah. Mmm. Not the material of sparkling conversation, I fear. What

about the beautiful lady?”

“I’m a beautiful lady of leisure. I wear the shoes she makes.”

“Ah. Not in college, then?”

“No, I didn’t bother with college. Is that OK?”

Neena was equally defensive. “And before you ask, neither did I.”

“Well, I didn’t mean to embarrass you ‘

“You didn’t.”

“Because it’s no real surprise ... I know you’re not the most academic

family in the world.”

Joyce knew things were going badly, but she couldn’t find her tongue to

smooth it out. A million dangerous double entendres were sitting at

the back of her throat, and, if she opened her mouth even a slit (I),

she feared one of them was going to come out. Marcus, who was always

oblivious to causing offence, chuddled on happily. “You two are

terrible temptations for a man.”

“Are we.”

“Oh, dykes always are. And I’m sure certain gentlemen would have half

a chance though you’d probably take beauty over intellect, I suspect,

so there go my chances.”

“You seem awfully certain of your intellect, Mr. Chalfen.”

“Shouldn’t I be? I am terribly clever, you know.”

Joyce just kept looking at them, thinking: Who relies on whom? Who

teaches whom? Who improves whom? Who pollinates and who nurtures?

“Well, it’s great to have another Iqbal round the table, isn’t it, Josh?”

I’m a Begum, not an Iqbal/ said Neena.

“I can’t help thinking,” said Marcus, unheeding, ‘that a Chalfen man

and an Iqbal woman would be a hell of a mix. Like Fred and Ginger.

You’d give us sex and we’d give you sensibility or something. Hey?

You’d keep a Chalfen on his toes you’re as fiery as an Iqbal. Indian

passion. Funny thing about your family: first generation are all loony

tunes, but the second generation have got heads just about straight on



their shoulders.”

“Umm, look: no one calls my family loony, OK? Even if they are. I’ll

call them loony.”

Me 1990, 1907

“Now, you see, try to use the language properly. You can say “no one

calls my family loony”, but that’s not a correct statement.

Because

people do and will. By all means say, “I don’t want people to, etc.”

It’s a small thing, but we can all understand each other better when we

don’t abuse terms and phrases.”

Then, just as Marcus was reaching into the oven to pull out the main

course (chicken hot pot Joyce’s mouth opened and for some inexplicable

reason this came out: “Do you use each other’s breasts as pillows?”

Neena’s fork, which was heading for her mouth, stopped just as it

reached the tip of her nose. Millat choked on a piece of cucumber,

trie struggled to bring her lower jaw back into alliance with the upper. Maxine began to giggle.

But Joyce wasn’t going to go purple. Joyce was descended from the kind

of bloody-minded women who continued through the African swamps

even

after the bag-carrying natives had dropped their load and turned back,  
even when the white men were leaning on their guns and shaking their  
heads. She was cut of the same cloth as the frontier ladies who, armed  
with only a bible, a shotgun and a net curtain, coolly took out the  
brown men moving forwards from the horizon towards the plains. Joyce  
didn't know the meaning of backing down. She was going to stand her  
ground.  
“It's just, in a lot of Indian poetry, they talk about using breasts  
for pillows, downy breasts, pillow breasts. I just just just wondered,  
if white sleeps on brown, or, as one might expect, brown sleeps on  
white? Extending the the the pillow metaphor, you see, I was just  
wondering which . . . way  
The silence was long, broad and malingering. Neena shook her head in  
disgust and dropped her cutlery on to her plate with a clatter.  
Maxine  
tapped her fingers on the tablecloth, marking out a nervous  
“William  
Tell’. Josh looked like he might cry.  
Finally, Marcus threw his head back, clapped his hands and let out an enormous Chalfen guffaw. “I've been wanting to ask that all  
night. Well done, Mother Chalfen!”

And so for the first time in her life Neena had to admit that her auntie was absolutely right. “You wanted a report, so here’s a full

report: crazy, nut so raisins short of a fruitcake, rubber walls, screaming-mad basket-cases. Every bloody one of them.”

Alsana nodded, open-mouthed, and asked Neena to repeat for the third

time the bit during dessert when Joyce, serving up a trifle, had inquired whether it was difficult for Muslim women to bake while

wearing those long black sheets didn’t the arm bits get covered in cake

mixture? Wasn’t there a danger of setting yourself alight on the gas

hobs?

“Bouncing off the walls,” concluded Neena.

But, as is the way with these things, once confirmation had arrived

nobody knew quite what to do with the information. Me and Millat were

sixteen and never tired of telling their respective mothers that they

were now of the legal age for various activities and could do whatever,

whenever. Short of putting locks on the doors and bars on the windows,

Clara and Alsana were powerless. If anything, things got worse. Irie

spent more time than ever immersing herself in Chalfenism. Clara

noticed her wincing at her own father’s conversation, and frowning at

the middlebrow tabloid Clara curled up with in bed. Millat disappeared

from home for weeks at a time, returning with money that was not his

and an accent that modulated wildly between the rounded tones of the

Chalfens and the street talk of the KEVIN clan. He infuriated Samad

beyond all reason. No, that's wrong. There was a reason. Millat was

neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian,

Englishman or Bengali; he lived for the in between, he lived up to his

middle name, Zulfikar, the dashing of two swords:

“How many times,” Samad growled, after watching his son  
35i

Me 1990, 1907

purchase the autobiography of Malcolm X, ‘is it necessary to say thank

you in a single transaction? Thank you when you hand the book over,

thank you when she receives it, thank you when she tells you the price,

thank you when you sign the cheque, thank you when she takes it! They

call it English politeness when it is simply arrogance. The only being

who deserves this kind of thanks is Allah himself!”

And Alsana was once again caught between the two of them, trying

desperately to find the middle ground. “If Magid was here,  
he’d sort

you two out. A lawyer’s mind, he’d make things straight.” But  
Magid

wasn’t here, he was there, and there was still not enough  
money to

change the situation.

Then the summer came and with it exams. Me came in just  
behind

Chalfen

the Chubster, and Millat did far better than anyone, including  
he, had

expected. It could only be the Chalfen influence, and Clara, for  
one,

felt a little ashamed of herself. Alsana just said, “Iqbal brains.  
In

the end, they triumph,” and decided to mark the occasion with  
a joint

Iqbal/Jones celebration barbecue to be held on Samad’s lawn.

Neena, Maxine, Ardashir, Shiva, Joshua, aunties, cousins,  
Irie’s

friends, Millat’s friends, KEVIN friends and the headmaster,  
all came

and made merry (except for KEVIN, who formed a circle in  
one corner)

with paper cups filled with cheap Spanish bubbly.

It was going well enough until Samad spotted the ring of  
folded arms

and green bow-ties.

“What are they doing here? Who let in the infidels?”

“Well, you’re here, aren’t you?” sniped Alsana, looking at the  
three

empty cans of Guinness Samad had already got through, the hotdog juice

dribbling down his chin. “Who’s casting the first stone at a barbecue?”

Samad glared and lurched away with Archie to admire their shared

handiwork on the reconstructed shed. Clara took the opportunity to

pull Alsana aside and ask her a question.

Alsana stamped a foot in her own coriander. “No! No way at all. What should I thank her for? If he did well, it was because of

his own brains. Iqbal brains. Not once, not once has that long-toothed Chaffinch even condescended to telephone me. Wild horses

will have to drag my dead body, lady.”

“But... I just think it would be a nice idea to go and thank her for

all the time she’s spent with the children ... I think maybe we misjudged her ‘

“By all means, go, Lady Jones, go if you like,” said Alsana scornfully.

“But as for me, wild horses, wild horses could not do it.”

“And that’s Dr. Solomon Chalfen, Marcus’s grandfather. He was one of

the few men who would listen to Freud when everybody in Vienna thought

they had a sexual deviant on their hands. An incredible face he has,

don’t you think? There’s so much wisdom in it. The first time Marcus

showed me that picture, I knew I wanted to marry him. I thought: if my

Marcus looks like that at eighty I'll be a very lucky girl!"

Clara smiled and admired the daguerreotype. She had so far admired

eight along the mantelpiece with Me trailing sullenly behind her, and

there were at least as many left to go.

"It's a grand old family, and if you don't find it too presumptuous,

Clara is "Clara" all right?"

"Clara's fine, Mrs. Chalfen."

Irie waited for Joyce to ask Clara to call her Joyce.

"Well, as I was saying, it's a grand old family and if you don't find

it too presumptuous I like to think of Irie as a kind of addition to

it, in a way. She's just such a remarkable girl. We've so enjoyed

having her around."

"She's enjoyed being around, I think. And she really owes you a lot.

We all do."

"Oh no, no, no. I believe in the Responsibility of Intellectuals besides which, it's been a joy. Really. I hope we'll still see her, Me 1990, 1907

even though the exams are over. There's still A-levels, if nothing

else!"

"Oh, I'm sure she'd come anyway. She talks about you all the time. The

Chalfens this, the Chalfens that.. .”

Joyce clasped Clara’s hands in her own. “Oh, Clara, I am pleased. And

I’m pleased we’ve finally met as well. Oh now, I hadn’t finished.

Where were we oh yes, well here are Charles and Anna great-uncles and

aunts long buried, sadly. He was a psychiatrist yes, another one and

she was a plant biologist woman after my own heart.”

Joyce stood back for a minute, like an art critic in a gallery, and put

her hands on her hips. “I mean, after a while, you’ve got to suspect

it’s in the genes, haven’t you? All these brains. I mean, nurture just won’t explain it. I mean, will it?”

“Er, no,” agreed Clara. “I guess not.”

“Now, out of interest I mean, I really am curious which side do you

think Me gets it from, the Jamaican or the English?”

Clara looked up and down the line of dead white men in starched

collars, some monocled, some uniformed, some sitting in the bosom of

their family, each member manacled into position so the camera could do

its slow business. They all reminded her a little of someone. Of her

own grandfather, the dashing Captain Charlie Durham, in his one extant

photograph: pinched and pale, looking defiantly at the camera, not so



much having his picture taken as forcing his image upon the acetate.

What they used to call a Muscular Christian. The Bowden family called

him Whitey. Djam fool bwoy taut he owned every ting he touched.

“My side,” said Clara tentatively. “I guess the English in my side.

My grandfather was an Englishman, quite la di da, I’ve been told. His

child, my mother, was born during the Kingston earthquake, 1907. I used

to think maybe the rumble knocked the Bowden brain cells into place

‘cos we been doing pretty well since then!”

Joyce saw that Clara was expecting a laugh and quickly supplied one.

“But seriously, it was probably Captain Charlie Durham. He taught my

grandmother all she knew. A good English education. Lord knows, I

can’t think who else it could be.”

“Well, how fascinating! It’s what I say to Marcus it 15 the genes,

whatever he says. He says I’m a simplifier, but he’s just too theoretical. I’m proven right all the time!”

As the front door closed behind her, Clara bit her own lip once more,

this time in frustration and anger. Why had she said Captain Charlie

Durham? That was a downright lie. False as her own white teeth. Clara

was smarter than Captain Charlie Durham. Hortense was smarter than

Captain Charlie Durham. Probably even Grandma Ambrosia was smarter

than Captain Charlie Durham. Captain Charlie Durham wasn't smart. He

had thought he was, but he wasn't. He sacrificed a thousand people

because he wanted to save one woman he never really knew. Captain

Charlie Durham was a no-good djam fool bwoy.

13 The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden

A little English education can be a dangerous thing. Alsana's favourite example of this was the old tale of Lord Ellenborough, who,

upon taking the Sind province from India, sent a telegram of only one

word to Delhi: peccavi, a conjugated Latin verb, meaning I have sinned.

"The English are the only people," she would say with distaste, 'who

want to teach you and steal from you at the same time.'" Alsana's

mistrust for the Chalfens was no more or less than that.

Clara agreed but for reasons that were closer to home: a family memory;

an unforgotten trace of bad blood in the Bowdens. Her own mother, when

inside her mother (for if this story is to be told, we will have to put

them all back inside each other like Russian dolls, Irie back in Clara,

Clara back in Hortense, Hortense back in Ambrosia), was  
silent witness

to what happens when all of a sudden an Englishman decides  
you need an

education. For it had not been enough for Captain Charlie  
Durham

recently posted to Jamaica to impregnate his landlady's  
adolescent

daughter one drunken evening in the Bowden larder, May  
1906. He was

not satisfied with simply taking her maidenhood. He had to  
teach her

something as well.

The? He wan' teach me?" Ambrosia Bowden had placed her  
hand over

the

tiny bump that was Hortense and tried to look as innocent as  
possible.

"Why he wan' teach me?"

"Tree times a week," replied her mother. "An' don' arks me  
why. But

Lord knows, you could do wid some improvin'. Be tankful for  
gen'

russ-ity. Dere is not required whys and wherefores when a han  
sum

upright English gentleman like Mr. Durham wan' be gen' russ

Even Ambrosia Bowden, a capricious, long-legged, maga  
village-child

who

had not seen a schoolroom in all of her fourteen years, knew  
this

advice was mistaken. When an Englishman wants to be generous, the

first thing you ask is why, because there is always a reason.

“You still here, pickney? “Im wan’ see you. Don’ let me spit pon de

floor and make you get up dere before it dry!”

So Ambrosia Bowden, with Hortense inside her, had dashed up to the

Captain’s room and returned there three times a week thereafter for

instruction. Letters, numbers, the bible, English history,

trigonometry and when that was finished, when Ambrosia’s mother was

safely out of the house, anatomy, which was a longer lesson, given on

top of the student as she lay on her back, giggling. Captain Durham

told her not to worry about the baby, he would do no damage to it.

Captain Durham told her that their secret child would be the cleverest

Negro boy in Jamaica.

As the months flicked by, Ambrosia learnt a lot of wonderful things

from the handsome captain. He taught her how to read the trials of Job

and study the warnings of Revelation, to swing a cricket bat, to recite

“Jerusalem’. How to add up a column of numbers. How to decline a

Latin noun. How to kiss a man’s ear until he wept like a child.

But

mostly he taught her that she was no longer a maidservant, that her

education had elevated her, that in her heart she was a lady, though

her daily chores remained unchanged. In here, in here, he liked to say

pointing to somewhere beneath her breastbone, the exact spot, in fact,

where she routinely rested her broom. A maid no more, Ambrosia, a maid

no more, he liked to say, enjoying the pun.

And then one afternoon, when Hortense was five months unborn,

Ambrosia

sprinted up the stairs in a very loose, disingenuous gingham dress,

rapped on the door with one hand, and hid a bunch of English marigolds

behind her back with the other. She wanted to surprise her lover with

flowers she knew would

remind him of home. She banged and banged and called and called. But

he was gone.

“Don’ arks me why,” said Ambrosia’s mother, eyeing her daughter’s

stomach with suspicion. “Im jus’ get up and go, on de sudden. Butim

leave a message dat he wan’ you to be looked after still. He wan’ you

to go over to de estate quick time and present yourself to Mr. Glenard,

a good Christian gentleman. Lord knows, you could do wid  
some

improvin'. You still here, pickney? Don' let me spit pon de  
floor

and

But Ambrosia was out the door before the words hit the  
ground.

It seemed Durham had gone to control the situation in a  
printing

company in Kingston, where a young man called Garvey was  
staging a

printers' strike for higher wages. And then he intended to be  
away for

three further months to train His Majesty's Trinidadian  
Soldiers, show

them what's what. The English are experts at relinquishing one  
responsibility and taking up another. But they also like to think  
of

themselves as men of good conscience, so in the interim  
Durham

entrusted the continued education of Ambrosia Bowden to his  
good friend

Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, who was, like Durham, of the  
opinion that

the natives required instruction, Christian faith and moral  
guidance.

Glenard was charmed to have her who wouldn't be? - a pretty,  
obedient

girl, willing and able round the house. But two weeks into her  
stay,

and the pregnancy became obvious. People began to talk. It  
simply

wouldn't do.

“Don’ arks me why,” said Ambrosia’s mother, grabbing Glen and’s letter

of regret from her weeping daughter, ‘maybe you kyan be improved!

Maybe

‘im don’ wan’ sin around de house. You back here now! Dere’s nuttin’

to be done now!” But in the letter, so it turned out, there was a consolatory suggestion. “It say here ‘im wan’ you to go and see a

Christian lady call Mrs. Brenton. “Im say you kyan stay wid her.”

Now, Durham had left instructions that Ambrosia be introduced to the

English Anglican Church, and Glenard had suggested the Jamaican

Methodist Church, but Mrs. Brenton, a fiery Scottish spinster who

specialized in lost souls, had her own ideas. “We are going to the

Truth,” she said decisively when Sunday came, because she did not care

for the word ‘church’. “You and I and the wee innocent,” she said,

tapping Ambrosia’s belly just inches from Hortense’s head, ‘are going

to hear the words of Jehovah.”

(For it was Mrs. Brenton who introduced the Bowdens to the Witnesses,

the Russellites, the Watchtower, the Bible Tract Society in those days

they went under many names. Mrs. Brenton had met Charles Taze

Russell

himself in Pittsburgh as the last century turned, and was struck by the

knowledge of the man, his dedication, his mighty beard. It was his

influence that made her a convert from Protestantism, and, like any

convert, Mrs. Brenton took great pleasure in the conversion of others.

She found two easy, willing subjects in Ambrosia and the child in her

belly, for they had nothing to convert from.)

The Truth entered the Bowdens that winter of 1906 and flowed through

the blood stream directly from Ambrosia to Hortense. It was Hortense's

belief that at the moment her mother recognized Jehovah, Hortense

herself became conscious, though still inside the womb. In later years

she would swear on any bible you put in front of her that even in her

mother's stomach each word of Mr. Russell's Millennial Dawn, as it was

read to Ambrosia night after night, passed as if by osmosis into

Hortense's soul. Only this would explain why it felt like a 'remembrance' to read the six volumes years later in adult life; why

she could cover pages with her hand and quote them from memory, though

she had never read them before. It is for this reason that any root



canal of Hortense must go right to the very beginning, because she was

there; she remembers; the events of 14 January 1907, the day of the

terrible Jamaican earthquake, are not hidden from her, but bright and

clear as a bell.

“Early will I seek thee. . . My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is . . .”

So sang Ambrosia as her pregnancy reached full term, and she bounced

with her huge bulge down King Street, praying for the return of Christ

or the return of Charlie Durham the two men who could save her so alike

in her mind she had the habit of mixing them up. She was halfway

through the third verse, or so Hortense told it, when that rambunctious

old rum pot Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, flushed from one snifter too

many at the Jamaica Club, stepped into their path. Captain Durham’s

maid! Hortense recalled him saying, by way of a greeting, and receiving nothing from Ambrosia but a glare, Fine day for it, eh?

Ambrosia had tried to sidestep him, but he moved his bulk in front of

her once more.

So are you a good girl these days, my dear? Gossip informs me Mrs.

Brenton has introduced you to her church. Very interesting,  
these

Witness people. But are they prepared, I wonder, for this new  
mulatto

member of their flock?

Hortense remembered well the feel of that fat hand landing hot  
against

her mother; she remembered kicking out at it with all her  
might.

Oh, it's all right, child. The Captain told me your little secret.  
But

naturally secrets have a price, Ambrosia. Just as yams and  
pimento and

my tobacco cost something. Now, have you seen the old  
Spanish church,

Santa Antonia? Have you been inside? It's just here. It's quite  
a

marvel inside, from the aesthetic rather than religious point of  
view.

It will only take a moment, my dear. One should never pass up  
the

opportunity of a link education, after all.

Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are  
two

different histories. Outside of Ambrosia there was much ,  
white stone,

no people, an altar peeling gold, little light, smoking candles,

Spanish names engraved in the floor, and a large marble  
madonna, her

head bowed, standing high upon a plinth. All was  
preternaturally calm

as Glenard began to touch her. But inside,

there was a galloping heart-beat, the crush of a million muscles that

wanted desperately to repel Glenard's attempts at an education, the

clammy fingers that even now were at her breast, slipping between thin

cotton and squeezing nipples already heavy with milk, milk never

intended for such a rough mouth. Inside she was already running down

King Street. But outside Ambrosia was frozen. Rooted to the spot, as

feminine a stone as any madonna.

And then the world began to shake. Inside Ambrosia, waters broke.

Outside Ambrosia, the floor cracked. The far wall crumbled, the

stained-glass exploded, and the madonna fell from a great height like a

swooning angel. Ambrosia stumbled from the scene, making it only as

far as the confessionals before the ground split once more a mighty

crack! and she fell down, in sight of Glenard himself, who lay crushed

underneath his angel, his teeth scattered on the floor, trousers round

his ankles. And the ground continued to vibrate. A second crack came.

And a third. The pillars fell, half the roof disappeared. Any other

afternoon in Jamaica, the screams of Ambrosia, the screams that

followed each contraction of her womb as Hortense pushed out, would have caught somebody's attention, brought somebody to her aid. But the world was ending that afternoon in Kingston. Everybody was screaming.

If this were a fairy-tale, it would now be time for Captain Durham to play hero. He does not seem to lack the necessary credentials. It is

not that he isn't handsome, or tall or strong, or that he doesn't want

to help her, or that he doesn't love her (oh, he loves her; just as the

English loved India and Africa and Ireland; it is the love that is the

problem, people treat their lovers badly) all those things are true.

But maybe it is just the scenery that is wrong. Maybe nothing that

happens upon stolen ground can expect a happy ending.

For when Durham returns, the day after the initial tremors, he finds an

island destroyed, two thousand already dead, fire in

the hills, parts of Kingston fallen into the sea, starvation, terror,

whole streets swallowed up by the earth and none of this horrifies him

as much as the realization that he might never see her again.

Now he

understands what love means. He stands in the parade ground, lonely

and distraught, surrounded by a thousand black faces he does not recognize; the only other white figure is the statue of Victoria, five aftershocks having turned her round by degrees until she appears to have her back to the people. This is not far from the truth. It is the Americans, not the British, who have the resources to pledge serious aid, three warships full of provisions presently snaking down the coast from Cuba. It is an American publicity coup that the British government does not relish, and like his fellow Englishmen Durham cannot help but feel a certain wounded pride. He still thinks of the land as his, his to help or his to hurt, even now when it has proved itself to have a mind all of its own. He still retains enough of his English education to feel slighted when he spots two American soldiers who have docked without permission (all landings must go through Durham or his superiors) standing outside their consulate building, insolently chewing their tobacco. It is a strange feeling, this powerlessness; to discover there is another country more equipped to save this little

island than the English. It is a strange feeling, looking out on  
to an  
ocean of ebony skins, unable to find the one he loves, the one  
he  
thinks he owns. For Durham has orders to stand here and call  
out the  
names of the handful of servants, butlers and maids, the  
chosen few the  
English will be taking with them to Cuba until the fires die  
down. If  
he knew her last name, God knows he would call it out. But in  
all that  
teaching, he never learnt it. He never asked.  
Yet it was not for this oversight that Captain Durham, the great  
educator, was remembered as a fool Irwoy in the annals of the  
Bowden  
clan. He found out soon enough where she was; he found little  
cousin  
Marlene amongst the throng, and sent her off with a note to the  
church  
hall where she had seen Ambrosia last,  
singing with the Witnesses, offering thanks for the Judgement  
Day.  
While Marlene ran as fast as her ashen legs would carry her,  
Durham  
walked calmly, thinking the last act was done, to King's  
House, the  
residence of Sir James Swettenham, governor of Jamaica.  
There he asked  
him to make an exception for Ambrosia-, an 'educated  
Negress' he wished  
to marry. She was not like the others. She must have a place  
with him

on the next outgoing ship.

But if you are to rule a land that is not yours, you get used to ignoring exceptions; Swettenham told him frankly there were no spaces

on his boats for black whores or livestock. Durham, hurt and vengeful,

inferred that Swettenham had no power of his own, that the arrival of

American ships was proof of that, and then, as a parting shot, mentioned the two American soldiers he had seen on British soil without

permission, presumptuous upstarts on land they didn't own. Does the

baby go out with the bathwater, demanded Durham, face red as a

pillar-box, resorting back to the religion of possession that was his

birthright, is this not still our country? Is our authority so easily

toppled by a few rumbles in the ground?

The rest is that terrible thing: history. As Swettenham ordered the

American boats to return to Cuba, Marlene came running back with

Ambrosia's reply. One sentence torn from Job: I will fetch my knowledge from afar. (Hortense kept the bible it was ripped from and

liked to say that from that day forth no Bowden woman took lessons from

anyone but the Lord.) Marlene handed the sentence to Durham, and ran

off into the parade ground happy as a clam, in search of her mother and father who were injured and weak, on their last legs and waiting for the boats like thousands of others. She wanted to tell them the good news, what Ambrosia had told her: It soon come, it soon come. The boats? Marlene had asked, and Ambrosia had nodded, though she was too busy with prayer, too ecstatic to hear the question. It soon come, it soon come, she said, repeating what she had learnt from Revelation; what Durham and then Glenard and then Mrs. Brenton had taught her in their different ways; what the fire and earth-cracks and thunder attested to. It soon come, she told Marlene, who took her word for gospel. A little English education can be a dangerous thing.

#### 14 More English than the English

In the great tradition of English education, Marcus and Magid became pen pals How they became pen pals was a matter of fierce debate (Alsana blamed Millat, Millat claimed Me had slipped Marcus the address, Me said Joyce had sneaked a peek in her address book the Joyce explanation was correct), but either way they were, and from March '91



onwards letters passed between them with a frequency let  
down only by  
the chronic inadequacies of the Bengal postal system. Their  
combined  
output was incredible. Within two months they had filled a  
volume at  
least as thick as Keats's and by four were fast approaching the  
length  
and quantity of the true epistophiles, St. Paul, Clarissa,  
Disgusted  
from Tunbridge Wells. Because Marcus made copies of all his  
own  
letters, Me had to rearrange her filing system to provide a  
drawer  
solely devoted to their correspondence. She split the filing  
system in  
two, choosing to file by author primarily, then chronologically,  
rather  
than let simple dates rule the roost. Because this was all about  
people. People making a connection across continents, across  
seas. She  
made two stickers to separate the wads of material. The first  
said:  
From Marcus to Magid. The second said: From Magid to  
Marcus.  
An unpleasant mixture of jealousy and animosity led Me to  
abuse her  
secretarial role. She pinched small collections of letters that  
wouldn't be missed, took them home, slipped them from their  
sheaths,  
and then, after close readings that would have shamed F. R.  
Leavis,  
carefully returned them to their file. What she found in those

brightly stamped airmail envelopes brought her no joy. Her mentor had

a new protege. Marcus and Magid. Magid and Marcus. It even sounded

better. The

Me 1990, 1907

way Watson and Crick sounded better than Watson, Crick and Wilkins.

John Donne said more than kisses, letters mingle souls and so they do;

Irie was alarmed to find such a commingling as this, such a successful

merging of two people from ink and paper despite the distance between

them. No love letters could have been more ardent. No passion more

fully returned, right from the very start. The first few letters were

filled with the boundless joy of mutual recognition: tedious for the

sneaky mailroom boys of Dhaka, bewildering to Irie, fascinating to the

writers themselves:

It is as if I had always known you; if I were a Hindu I would suspect

we met in some former life. - Magid.

You think like me. You're precise. I like that. Marcus.

You put it so well and speak my thoughts better than I ever could. In

my desire to study the law, in my longing to improve the lot of my poor

country which is victim to every passing whim of God, every hurricane

and flood in these aims, what instinct is fundamental? What is the

root, the dream which ties these ambitions together? To make sense of

the world. To eliminate the random. - Magid.

And then there was the mutual admiration. That lasted a good few

months:

What you are working on, Marcus these remarkable mice it is nothing

less than revolutionary. When you delve into the mysteries of inherited characteristics, surely you go straight to the soul of the

human condition as dramatically and fundamentally as any poet, except

you are armed with something essential the poet does not have: the

truth. I am in awe of visionary ideas and visionaries. I am in awe of

such a

man as Marcus Chalfen. I call it an honour to be able to call him

friend. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking such an

inexplicable and glorious interest in my family's welfare. - Magid.

It is incredible to me, the bloody fuss people make about an idea like

cloning. Cloning, when it happens (and I can tell you it will be

sooner rather than later) is simply delayed twinning, and never  
in my

life have I come across a couple of twins who prove more  
decidedly the

argument against genetic determinism than Millat and  
yourself. In

every area in which he lacks, you excel I wish I could turn that  
sentence around for a vice versa effect, but the hard truth is he  
excels in nothing apart from charming the elastic waistband  
off my

wife's knickers. Marcus.

And finally, there were the plans for the future, plans made  
blindly

and with amorous speed, like the English nerd who married a  
nineteen-stone Mormon from Minnesota because she sounded  
sexy on the

chat line:

You must get to England as soon as possible, early '93 at the  
very

latest. I'll stump up some of the cash myself if I have to. Then  
we

can enrol you in the local school, get the exams over and done  
with and

send you off post-haste to whichever of the dreaming spires  
tickles

your fancy (though obviously there's only one real choice) and  
while

you're at it you can hurry up and get older, get to the bar and  
provide

me with the kind of lawyer I need to fight in my corner. My

FutureMouse(c) needs a staunch defender. Hurry up, old chap.

I

haven't got all millennium. Marcus.

The last letter, not the last letter they wrote but the last one Me could stomach, included this final paragraph from Marcus:

Me 1990, 1907

Well, things are the same round here except that myfiks are in excellent order, thanks to Irie. You'll like her: she's a bright girl

and she has the most tremendous breasts .. . Sadly, I don't hold out

much hope for her aspirations in the field of 'hard science', more

specifically in my own biotechnology, which she appears to have her

heart set on ... she's sharp in a way, but it's the menial work, the

hard grafting, that she's good at she'd make a lab assistant maybe, but

she hasn't any head for the concepts, no head at all. She could try

medicine, I suppose, but even there you need a little bit more chutzpah

than she's got.. . 50 it might have to be dentistry for our Irie (she

could fix her own teeth at least), an honest profession no doubt, but

one I hope you'll be avoiding .. .

In the end, Irie wasn't offended. She had the sniffles for a while,

but they soon passed. She was like her mother, like her father a great

reinventor of herself, a great make-doer. Can't be a war

correspondent? Be a cyclist. Can't be a cyclist? Fold paper.  
Can't

sit next to Jesus with the 144,000? Join the Great Crowd.  
Can't stand

the Great Crowd? Marry, Archie. Irie wasn't so upset. She just  
thought, right: dentistry. I'll be a dentist. Dentistry. Right.

And meanwhile Joyce was below deck trying to sort out  
Millat's problems

with white women. Which were numerous. All women, of  
every shade,

from midnight-black to albino, were Millat's. They slipped  
him phone

numbers, they gave him blow jobs in public places, they  
crossed crowded

bars to buy him a drink, they pulled him into taxis, they  
followed him

home. Whatever it was the Roman nose, the eyes like a dark  
sea, the

skin like chocolate, the hair like curtains of black silk, or  
maybe

just his pure, simple stink it sure as hell worked. Now, don't be  
jealous. There's no point. There have always been and always  
will be people who simply exude sex (who breathe it, who  
sweat it). A

few examples from thin air: the young Brando, Madonna,  
Cleopatra, Pam

Grier, Valentino, a girl called Tamara who lives opposite the  
London

Hippodrome, right slap in the middle of town; Imran Khan,  
Michelangelo's David. You can't fight that kind of marvelous  
indiscriminate power, for it is not always symmetry or beauty  
per se

that does it (Tamara's nose is ever so slightly bent), and there are no

means by which you can gain it. Surely the oldest American sentence is

relevant here, pertinent to matters economic, politic and romantic: you

either got it or you don't. And Millat had it. In spades. He had the

choice of the known world, of every luscious female from a size 8 to a

28, Thai or Tongan, from Zanzibar to Zurich, his vistas of available

and willing pussy extending in every direction as far as the eye could

see. One might reasonably expect a man with such a natural gift to dip

into the tun-dishes of a great variety of women, to experiment far and

wide. And yet Millat Iqbal's main squeezes were almost all exclusively

size 10 white Protestant women aged fifteen to twenty-eight, living in

and around the immediate vicinity of West Hampstead.

Initially this neither bothered Millat nor felt unusual to him.

His

school was full of girls who fitted the general description. By the

law of averages as he was the only guy worth shagging in Glenard Oakhe

was going to end up shagging a large proportion of them. And with

Karina Cain, the present amour, things were really quite pleasant. He

was only cheating on her with three other women (Alexandra Andrusier,

Polly Houghton, Rosie Dew), and this was a personal record. Besides

which, Karina Cain was different. It wasn't just sex with Karina Cain.

He liked her and she liked him, and she had a great sense of humour,

which felt like a miracle, and she looked after him when he was down

and he looked after her too, in his own way, bringing her flowers and

stuff. It was both the law of averages, and a lucky, random thing that

had made him happier than he usually was. So that was that.

Except KEVIN didn't see it that way. One evening, after B

Karina had dropped him off at a KEVIN meeting in her mother's ^j

Renault, Brother Hifan and Brother Tyrone crossed Kilburn town 2

hall like two man-mountains, determined to deliver themselves “|

at the feet of Muhammed. They loomed large.

“Hey, Hifan, my speed, Tyrone, my man, why the long faces?”

But brothers Hifan and Tyrone wouldn't tell him why the long faces.

Instead they gave him a leaflet. It was called: Who is truly free!1

The Sisters of KE VIN or the Sisters of Soho Millat thanked them

cordially for it. Then he stuffed it in the bottom of his bag.



How was that? they asked him the following week. Was it a good read,  
Brother Millat? Truth was, Brother Millat hadn't got round to reading  
it (and to be honest, he preferred leaflets called things like The Big  
American Devil: How the United States Mafia Rules the World or Science  
versus the Creator: No Contest), but he could see it seemed to matter  
to Brother Tyrone and Brother Hifan, so he said he had. They looked  
pleased and gave him another one. This one was called: Lycra  
Liberation? Rape and the Western World.  
"Is light broaching your darkness, Brother Millat?" asked Brother  
Tyrone eagerly, at the following Wednesday's meeting. "Are things  
becoming clearer?"  
"Clearer' didn't seem to Millat to be exactly the right adjective.  
Earlier in the week he had set aside some time, read both leaflets and  
felt peculiar ever since. In three short days Karina Cain, a darling  
of a girl, a real good sort who never really irritated him (on the  
contrary, who made him feel happy! Chuffed!), had irritated him more  
than she had managed in the whole year they'd been shagging.  
And no  
ordinary irritation. A deep unsettle able unsolvable irritation,  
like

an itch on a phantom limb. And it was not clear to him why.  
“Yeah, man, Tyrone,” said Millat with a nod and a wide grin.  
“Crystal,  
mate, crystal.”

Brother Tyrone nodded back. Millat was pleased to see he  
looked pleased. It was like being in the real life Mafia or a  
Bond  
movie or something. Them both in their black and white suits,  
nodding  
at each other. I understand we understand each other.

“This is Sister Aeyisha,” said Brother Tyrone, straightening  
Millat’s  
green bow-tie and pushing him towards a tiny, beautiful black  
girl,  
with almond eyes and high cheekbones. “She’s an African  
goddess.”

“Really?” said Millat, impressed. “Whereabouts you from?”

“Clapham North,” said Sister Aeyisha, with a shy smile.

Millat clapped his hands together and stamped his foot. “Oh,  
man, you

must know the Redback Cafe?”

Sister Aeyisha the African goddess lit up. “Yeah, man, that  
was my

place from way back when! You go there?”

“All the time! Wicked place. Well, maybe I’ll see you round  
them

gates sometime. It was nice to meet you, sister. Brother  
Tyrone, I’ve

got to chip, man, my gal’s waiting for me.”

Brother Tyrone looked disappointed. Just before Millat left, he

pressed another leaflet into his hand and continued holding his hand

until the paper got damp between their two palms.

“You could be a great leader of men, Millat,” said Brother Tyrone (why

did everybody keep telling him that?), looking first at him, then at

Karina Cain, the curve of her breasts peeping over the car door,

beeping her car horn in the street. “But at the moment you are half

the man. We need the whole man.”

“Yeah, wicked, thanks, you too Brother,” said Millat, looking briefly

at the leaflet, and pushing open the doors. “Later.”

“What’s that?” asked Karina Cain, reaching over to open the passenger

door and spotting the slightly soggy paper in his hand.

Instinctively, Millat put the leaflet straight in his pocket.

Which

was weird. He usually showed Karina everything. Now just her asking

him grated somehow. And what was she wearing? Same belly top she

always wore. Except wasn’t it shorter? Weren’t the nipples clearer,

more deliberate?

He said, “Nothing.” Grumpily. But it wasn’t nothing. It was

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Me 1990, 1907

the final leaflet in the KEVIN series on Western women. The Right to

Bare: The Naked Truth about Western Sexuality.

Now, while we're on the subject of nakedness, Karina Cain had a nice

little body. All creamy chub and slender extremities. And come the

weekend she liked to wear something to show it off. First time Millat

noticed her was at some local party when he saw a flash of silver

pants, a silver boob-tube, and a bare mound of slightly protruding

belly rising up between the two with another bit of silver in the navel. There was something welcoming about Karina Cain's little belly.

She hated it, but Millat loved it. He loved it when she wore things

that revealed it. But now the leaflets were making things clearer. He

started noticing what she wore and the way other men looked at her.

And when he mentioned it she said, "Oh, I hate that. All those leery

old men." But it seemed to Millat that she was encouraging it; that

she positively wanted men to look at her, that she was as The Right to

Bare suggested 'prostituting herself to the male gaze'. Particularly

white males. Because that's how it worked between Western men and

Western women, wasn't it? They liked to do it all in public. The more

he thought about it, the more it pissed him off. Why couldn't she

cover up? Who was she trying to impress? African goddesses from

Clapham North respected themselves, why couldn't Karina Cain? "I can't

respect you," explained Millat carefully, making sure he repeated the

words just as he had read them, 'until you respect yourself Karina Cain

said she did respect herself, but Millat couldn't believe her. Which

was odd, because he'd never known Karina Cain to lie, she wasn't the

type.

When they got ready to go out somewhere, he said, "You're not dressing

for me, you're dressing for everybody!" Karina said she didn't dress

for him or anybody, she dressed for herself. When she sang "Sexual

Healing' at the pub karaoke, he said, "Sex is a private thing, between

you and me, it's not for everybody!" Karina said she was singing, not

having sex in front of the Rat and

Carrot regulars. When they made love, he said, "Don't do that . don't

offer it to me like a whore. Haven't you heard of unnatural acts?

Besides, I'll take it if I want it and why can't you be a lady, don't

make all that noise!” Karina Cain slapped him and cried a lot. She

said she didn’t know what was happening to him. Problem is, thought

Millat, as he slammed the door off its hinges, neither do I. And after

that row they didn’t talk for a while.

About two weeks later, he was doing a shift in the Palace for a little

extra money, and he brought the matter up with Shiva, a newish convert

to KEVIN and a rising star within the organization. “Don’t talk to me

about white women,” groaned Shiva, wondering how many generations of

Iqbals he’d have to give the same advice to. “It’s got to the point in

the West where the women are men! I mean, they’ve got the same desires

and urges as men they want it all thejucking time. And they dress like

they want everyone to know they want it. Now is that right? Is it?”

But before the debate could progress, Samad came through the double

doors looking for some mango chutney and Millat returned to his

chopping.

That evening after work, Millat saw a moon-faced, demure looking Indian

woman through the window of a Piccadilly cafe who looked, in profile,

not unlike youthful pictures of his mother. She was dressed in a black

polo-neck, long black trousers and her eyes were partly veiled by long

black hair, her only decoration the red patterns of mehendi on the palms

of her hands. She was sitting alone.

With the same thoughtless balls he used when chatting up dolly birds

and disco brains, with the guts of a man who had no qualms about

talking to strangers, Millat went in and started giving her the back

page of *The Right to Bare* pretty much verbatim, in the hope that she'd

understand. All about soulmates, about self-respect, about women who

seek to bring 'visual pleasure' only to the men who love them. He

explained: "It's the

liberation of the veil, in nit Look, like here: Free from the shackles

of male scrutiny and the standards of attractiveness, the woman is free

to be who she is inside, immune from being portrayed as sex symbol and

lusted after as if she were meat on the shelf to be picked at and looked over. That's what we think," he said, uncertain if that was

what he thought. "That's our opinion," he said, uncertain whether it

was his opinion. "You see, I'm from this group "

The lady screwed up her face and put her forefinger delicately across

his lip. "Oh, darling," she murmured sadly, admiring his beauty. "If

I give you money, will you go away?"

And then her boyfriend turned up, a surprisingly tall Chinese guy in a

leather jacket.

Deep in a blue funk, Millat resolved to walk the eight miles home,

beginning in Soho, glaring at the leggy whores and the crotchless

knickers and the feather boas. By the time he reached Marble Arch he

had worked himself into such a rage he called Karina Cain from a phone

box plastered with tits and ass (whores, whores, whores) and dumped her

unceremoniously. He didn't mind about the other girls he was shagging

(Alexandra Andrusier, Polly Houghton, Rosie Dew) because they were

straight up, posh-to tty slags. But he minded about Karina Cain,

because she was his love, and his love should be his love and nobody

else's. Protected like Liotta's wife in Good Fellas or Pacino's sister

in Scarface. Treated like a princess. Behaving like a princess. In a

tower. Covered up.

Walking slower now, dragging his heels, there being nobody to go home



to, he got waylaid in the Edgware Road, the old fat guys  
calling him  
over (“Look, it’s Millat, little Millat the Ladies’ Man! Millat  
the  
Prince of Pussy-pokers! Too big to have a smoke is he, now?”)  
and gave  
in with a rueful smile. Hookah pipes, hal al fried chicken and  
illegally imported absinthe consumed around wobbling  
outdoor tables;  
watching the women hurry by in full purdah, like busy black  
ghosts  
haunting the streets, late-night shopping, looking for their  
errant  
husbands. Millat liked to watch  
them go: the animated talk, the exquisite colours of the  
communicative  
eyes, the bursts of laughter from invisible lips. He remembered  
something his father once told him back when they used to  
speak to each  
other. You do not know the meaning of the erotic, Millat, you  
do not  
know the meaning of desire, my second son, until you have sat  
on the  
Edgware Road with a bubbling pipe, using all the powers of  
your  
imagination to visualize what is beyond the four inches of skin  
ha jib  
reveals, what is under those great sable sheets.  
About six hours later Millat turned up at the Chalfen kitchen  
table,  
very, very drunk, weepy and violent. He destroyed Oscar’s  
Lego fire

station and threw the coffee machine across the room. Then he did what

Joyce had been waiting for these twelve months. He asked her advice.

It seemed like months had been spent across that kitchen table since

then, Joyce shooing people out of the room, going through her reading

material, wringing her hands; the smell of dope mingling with the steam

that rose off endless cups of strawberry tea. For Joyce truly loved

him and wanted to help him, but her advice was long and complex. She

had read up on the subject. And it appeared Millat was filled with

self-revulsion and hatred of his own kind; that he had possibly a slave

mentality, or maybe a colour-complex centred around his mother (he was

far darker than she), or a wish for his own annihilation by means of

dilution in a white gene pool, or an inability to reconcile two opposing cultures . . . and it emerged that 60 per cent of Asian men did

this . and 90 per cent of Muslims felt that... it was a known fact

that Asian families were often . . . and hormonally boys were more

likely to ... and the therapist she'd found him was really very nice,

three days a week and don't worry about the money . and don't worry

about Joshua, he's just sulking . . . and, and, and.

Way-back-when in the fuddle of the hash and the talk Millat remembered

a girl called Karina Somethingoranother whom he

Me 1990, 1907

had liked. And she liked him. And she had a great sense of humour

which felt like a miracle, and she looked after him when he was down

and he looked after her too, in his own way, bringing her flowers and

stuff. She seemed distant now, like conker fights and childhood. And

that was that.

There was trouble at the Joneses. Me was about to become the first

Bowden or Jones (possibly, maybe, all things willing, by the grace of

God, fingers crossed) to enter a university. Her A-levels were chemistry, biology and religious studies. She wanted to study dentistry (white collar! 2 pounds k+ I), which everyone was very

pleased about, but she also wanted to take a 'year off' in the subcontinent and Africa (Malaria! Poverty! Tapeworm!), which led to

three months of open warfare between her and Clara. One side wanted

finance and permission, the other side was resolved to concede neither.

The conflict was protracted and bitter, and all mediators were sent

home empty-handed (She has made up her mind, there are no arguments to be had with the woman Samad) or else embroiled in the war of words (Why can't she go to Bangladesh if she wants to? Are you saying my country is not good enough for your daughter? - Alsana).

The stalemate was so pronounced that land had been divided and allocated; Me claimed her bedroom and the attic, Archie, a conscientious objector, asked only for the spare room, a television and a satellite (state) dish, and Clara took everything else, with the bathroom acting as shared territory. Doors were slammed. The time for talking was over.

On the 25th of October 1991, 01.00 hours, Me embarked upon a late-night attack. She knew from experience that her mother was most vulnerable

when in bed; late at night she spoke softly like a child, her fatigue

gave her a pronounced lisp; it was at this point that you were most

likely to get whatever it was you'd been pining for: pocket money, a

new bike, a later curfew. It was

such a well-worn tactic that until now Me had not considered it worthy

of this, her fiercest and longest dispute with her mother. But she

hadn't any better ideas.

The? Wha -? Iss sa middle of sa nice ... Go back koo bed

Me opened the door further, letting yet more hall light flood the

bedroom.

Archie submerged his head in a pillow. "Bloody hell, love, it's one in

the morning! Some of us have got work tomorrow."

"I want to talk to Mum," said Me firmly, walking to the end of the bed.

"She won't talk to me during the day, so I'm reduced to this."

The, please ... I'm exhausted.. . I'm shrying koo gesh shome shleep."

"I don't just want to have a year off, I need one. It's essential I'm

young, I want some experiences. I've lived in this bloody suburb all

my life. Everyone's the same here. I want to go and see the people of

the world .. . that's what Joshua's doing and his parents support

him!"

"Well, we can't bloody afford it," grumbled Archie, emerging from the

eidern. "We haven't all got posh jobs in science, now have we?"

"I don't care about the money I'll get a job, somehow or something, but

I do want your permission! Both of you. I don't want to spend six

months away and spend every day thinking you're angry."

“Well, it’s not up to me, love, is it? It’s your mother, really,  
I...”

“Yes, Dad. Thanks for stating the bloody obvious.”

“Oh, right,” said Archie huffily, turning to the wall. Till keep  
my

comments to me self then

“Oh, Dad, I didn’t mean . . . Mum? Can you please sit up and  
speak

properly? I’m trying to talk to you? It seems like I’m talking to  
myself here?” said Me with absurd intonations, for this was  
the year

Antipodean soap operas were teaching a generation of  
Me 1990, 1907

English kids to phrase everything as a question. “Look, I want  
your

permission, yeah?”

Even in the darkness, Me could see Clara scowl. “Permishon  
for what?

Koo go and share and ogle at poor black folk? Dr.  
Livingshone, I

prejume? Iz dat what you leant from da Shalfenz? Because if  
th ash

what you want, you can do dat here. Jush sit and look at me  
for shix

munfs!”

“It’s nothing to do with that! I just want to see how other  
people

live!”

“An’ gek you shelf killed in da pros ness Why don’ you go  
necksh door,

dere are uwer people dere. Go shee how dey live!”

Infuriated, Irie grabbed the bed knob and marched round Clara's side of

the bed. "Why can't you just sit up properly and talk to me properly

and drop the ridiculous little girl voice.

In the darkness Irie kicked over a glass and sucked in a sharp breath

as the cold water seeped between her toes and into the carpet.

Then,

as the last of the water ran away, Irie had the strange' and horrid

sensation that she was being bitten.

"Owl"

"Oh, for God's sake," said Archie, reaching over to the side lamp and

switching it on. "What now?"

Irie looked down to where the pain was. In any war, this was too low a

blow. The front set of some false teeth, with no mouth attached to

them, were bearing down upon her right foot.

"Fucking hell! What the fuck are they?"

But the question was unnecessary; even as the words formed in her

mouth, Irie had already put two and two together. The midnight voice.

The perfect daytime straightness and whiteness.

Clara hurriedly stretched to the floor and prised her teeth from Irie's

foot and, as it was too late for disguise now, placed them directly on

the bedside table.

“Shatishfied?” asked Clara wearily. (It wasn’t that she had deliberately not told her. There just never seemed a good time.)

But Irie was sixteen and everything feels deliberate at that age. To

her, this was yet another item in a long list of parental hypocrisies

and untruths, this was another example of the Jones/ Bowden gift for

secret histories, stories you never got told, history you never entirely uncovered, rumour you never unravelled, which would be fine if

every day was not littered with clues, and suggestions; shrapnel in

Archie’s leg . . . photo of strange white Grandpa Durham . . . the name

“Ophelia” and the word ‘madhouse’ . . . a cycling helmet and an ancient

mudguard . . . smell of fried food from O’ConnellTs . . . faint memory of

a late night car journey, waving to a boy on a plane . . . letters with

Swedish stamps, Horst Ibelgaufts, if not delivered return to sender . . .

Oh what a tangled web we weave. Millat was right: these parents were

damaged people, missing hands, missing teeth. These parents were full

of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear. But she

didn’t want it any more, she was tired of it. She was sick of never

getting the whole truth. She was returning to sender.



“Well, don’t look so shocked, love,” said Archie amicably.

“It’s just

some bloody teeth. So now you know. It’s not the end of the world.”

But it was, in a way. She’d had enough. She walked back into her

room, packed her schoolwork and essential clothes into a big rucksack

and put a heavy coat over her nightie. She thought about the Chalfens

for half a second, but she knew already there were no answers there,

only more places to escape. Besides, there was only one spare room and

Millat had it. Irie knew where she had to go, deep into the heart of

it, where only the n 17 would take her at this time of night, sitting

on the top deck, seats decorated with puke, rumbling through 47 bus

stops before it reached its destination. But she got there in the end.

Me 1990, 1907

“Lord a Jesus,” mumbled Hortense, iron-curlers unmoved, ib  
bleary-eyed

on the doorstep. The Ambrosia Jones, is that ?jj\*

you?”

15 Chalfenism versus Bowdenism

It was Me Jones all right. Six years older than the last time they

met. Taller, wider, with breasts and no hair and slippers just visible

underneath a long duffle coat. And it was Hortense Bowden.  
Six years  
older, shorter, wider, with breasts on her belly and no hair  
(though  
she took the peculiar step of putting her wig in curlers) and  
slippers  
just visible underneath a long, padded baby-pink housecoat.  
But the  
real difference was Hortense was eighty-four. Not a  
littleoldwoman by  
any means; she was a round robust one, her fat so taut against  
her skin  
the epidermis was having a hard time wrinkling. Still, eighty-  
four is  
not seventy seven or sixty-three; at eighty-four there is nothing  
but  
death ahead, tedious in its insistence. It was there in her face  
as Me  
had never seen it before. The waiting and the fear and the  
blessed  
relief.  
Yet though there were differences, walking down the steps and  
into  
Hortense's basement flat, Me was struck by the shock of  
sameness.  
Way-back-when, she had been a fairly regular visitor at her  
grandmother's: sneaky visits with Archie while her mother  
was at  
college, and always leaving with something unusual, a pickled  
fish  
head, chilli dumplings, the lyrics of a stray but persistent  
psalm.

Then at Darcus's funeral in 1985, ten-year-old Irie had let slip about

these social calls and Clara had put a stop to them altogether. They

still called each other on the phone, on occasion. And to this day

Irie received short letters on exercise paper with a copy of the Watchtower slipped inside. Sometimes Irie looked at her mother's face

and saw her grandmother: those majestic cheekbones, those feline eyes.

But they had not been face to face for six years.

As far as the house was concerned, six seconds seemed to have passed.

Still dark, still dank, still underground. Still decorated with hundreds of secular figurines ("Cinderella on her way to the Ball",

"Mrs. Tiddlytum shows the little squirrels the way to the picnic"),

all balanced on their separate doilies and laughing gaily amongst

themselves, amused that anyone would pay a hundred and fifty pounds in

fifteen instalments for such inferior pieces of china and glass as

they. A huge tripartite tapestry, which Irie remembered the sewing of,

now hung on the wall above the fireplace, depicting, in its first strip, the Anointed sitting in judgement with Jesus in heaven.

The

Anointed were all blond and blue-eyed and appeared as serene as

Hortense's cheap wool would allow, and were looking down at the Great

Crowd who were happy-looking, but not as happy as the Anointed

frolicking in eternal paradise on earth. The Great Crowd were in turn

looking piteously at the heathens (by far the largest group), dead in

their graves, and packed on top of each other like sardines.

The only thing missing was Darcus (whom Irie only faintly remembered as

a mixture of smell and texture; naphthalene and damp wool); there was

his huge empty chair, still fetid, and there was his television, still

on.

The, look at you! Pickney nah even got a gansey on child must be

freezin'! Shiverin' like a Mexico bean. Let me feel you. Fever! You

bringin' fever into my house?"

It was important, in Hortense's presence, never to admit to illness.

The cure, as in most Jamaican households, was always more painful than

the symptoms.

"I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with'

"Oh, really?" Hortense put Irie's hand on her own forehead.

"That's

fever as sure as fever is fever. Feel it?"

Irie felt it. She was hot as hell.

“Come ‘ere.” Hortense grabbed a rug from Darcus’s chair and wrapped it

around Irie’s shoulders, “Now come into the kitchen an’ cease an’

sekkle. Runnin’ roun’ on a night like dis, wearin’

flimsy nonsense! You’re having a hot drink of cer ace and den gone a

bed quicker den you ever did in your life.”

Irie accepted the smelly wrap and followed Hortense into the tiny

kitchen, where they both sat down.

“Let me look at you.”

Hortense leant against the oven with hands on hips. “You look like Mr.

Death, your new lover. How you get here?”

Once again, one had to be careful in answering. Hortense’s contempt

for London Transport was a great comfort to her in her old age. She

could take one word like train and draw a melody out of it (Northern

Line), which expanded into an aria (The Underground) and blossomed into

a theme (The Overground) and then grew exponentially into an operetta

(The Evils and Inequities of British Rail).

“Er . . . Bus. ni/. It was cold on the top deck. Maybe I caught a chill.”

“I don’ tink dere’s any maybes about it, young lady. An’ I’m sure I

don’ know why you come ‘pon de bus, when it take tree hours to arrive

an' leave you waitin' in de col' an' den' when you get pon it  
de

windows are open anyway an' you freeze half to death.”

Hortense poured a colourless liquid from a small plastic  
container into

her hand. “Come ‘ere.”

“Why?” demanded Irie, immediately suspicious. “What’s  
that?”

“Nuttin’, come ‘ere. Take off your spectacles.”

Hortense approached with a cupped hand.

“Not in my eye! There’s nothing wrong with my eye!” “Stop  
fussin’.

I’m not puttin’ nuttin’ in your eye.”

“Just tell me what it is,” pleaded Irie, trying to work out for  
which

orifice it was intended and screaming as the cupped hand  
reached her

face, spreading the liquid from forehead to chin.

“Aaagh! It burns!”

“Bay rum,” said Hortense matter-of-factly. “Burns de fever  
away. No,

don’ wash it off. Jus’ leave it to do its biznezz.”

Me 1990, 1907

Irie gritted her teeth as the torture of a thousand pinpricks  
faded to

five hundred, then twenty-five, until finally it was just a warm  
flush

of the kind delivered by a slap.

“So!” said Hortense, entirely awake now and somewhat  
triumphant. “You

finally dash from that godless woman, I see. An' caught a flu while

you doin' it! Well . . . there are those who wouldn't blame you, no,

not at all... No one knows better than me what dat woman be like. Never

at home, learnin' all her isms and skisms in the university, leavin'

husband and pickney at home, hungry and maga. Lord, naturally you

flee! Well.. ." She sighed and put a copper kettle on the stove. "It

is written. You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to

Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days

of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the

holy

ones will be with him. Zechariah 14:5. In the end the good ones will flee

from the evil. Oh, Irie Ambrosia . . . I knew you come in de end. All

God's children return in de end."

"Gran, I haven't come to find God. I just want to do some - quiet study

here and get my head together. I need to stay a few months at least

till the New Year. Oh . . . ough . . . I feel a bit woozy. Can I have an

orange?"

"Yes, dey all return to de Lord Jesus in de end," continued Hortense to

herself, placing the bitter root of cer ace into a kettle. “Dat’s not

a real orange, dear. All de fruit is plasticated. De flowers are plasticated also. I don’t believe de Lord meant me to spend de little

housekeeping money I possess on perishable goods. Have some dates.”

Irie grimaced at the shrivelled fruit plonked in front of her.

“So you lef Archibald wid dat woman. . . poor ting. Me always like

Archibald,” said Hortense sadly, scrubbing the brown scum from a teacup

with two soapy fingers. “Him was never my objection as such. He

always been a level-headed sort a fellow. Blessed are de peacekeepers.

He always strike me as a peacekeeper. But it more de principle of de

ting, you know? Black and

white never come to no good. De Lord Jesus never meant us to mix it

up. Dat’s why he made a hoi’ heap a fuss about de children of men

building de tower of Babel. “Im want everybody to keep tings separate.

And the Lord did confound the language of all the earth and from thence

did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

Genesis 11:9. When you mix it up, nuttin’ good can come. It wasn’t

intended. Except you,” she added as an afterthought. “You’re about de



only good ting to come out of dat.. . Bwoy, sometime it like lookin’

in a mirror-glass,” she said, lifting Irie’s chin with her wrinkled

digits. “You built like me, big, you know! Hip and tie and rhas, and

titties. My mudder was de same way. You even named after my

mudder.”

“Irie?” asked Me, trying hard to listen, but feeling the damp smog of

her fever pulling her under.

“No, dear, Ambrosia. De stuff dat make you live for ever. Now,” she

said, clapping her hands together, catching Irie’s next question

between them, ‘you sleepin’ in de living room. I’ll get a blanket and

pillows and den we talk in de marnin’. I’m up at six, ‘cos I got

Witness biznezz, so don’ tink you sleeping none after eight.

Pickney,

you hear me?”

“Mmm. But what about Mum’s old room? Can’t I just sleep in there?”

Hortense took Irie’s weight half on her shoulder and led her into the

living room. “No, dat’s not possible. Dere is a certain situation,”

said Hortense mysteriously. “Dat can wait till de sun is up to be

hexplained. Fear them not therefore: for there is nothing covered that

shall not be revealed,” she intoned quietly, turning to go. “And

nothing hid, that shall not be known. Dat is Mat-chew, 10:26.”

An autumn morning was the only time worth spending in that basement

flat. Between 6 and 7 a.m. when the sun was still low, light shot

through the front window, bathed the lounge in yellow, dappled the long thin allotment (7 ft x 30 ft) and gave a healthy veneer to the tomatoes. You could almost convince yourself, at 6 a.m.”

that you were downstairs in some Continental cabana, or at least street

level in Torquay, rather than below ground in Lambeth. The glare was

such that you couldn't make out the railway sidings where the strip of

green ended, or the busy everyday feet that passed by the lounge

window, kicking dust through the grating at the glass. It was all

white light and clever shade at six in the morning. Hugging a cup of

tea at the kitchen table, squinting at the grass, Me saw vineyards out

there; she saw Florentine scenes instead of the uneven

higgledy-piggledy of Lambeth rooftops; she saw a muscular shadowy

Italian plucking full berries and crushing them underfoot. Then the

mirage, sun reliant as it was, disappeared, the whole scene swallowed

by a devouring cloud. Leaving only some crumbling Edwardian housing.

Railway sidings named after a careless child. A long, narrow strip of allotment where next to nothing would grow. And a bleached-out bandy-legged red-headed man with terrible posture and Wellington boots, stamping away in the mulch, trying to shake the remnants of a squashed tomato from his heel.

“Dat is Mr. Topps,” said Hortense, hurrying across the kitchen in a dark maroon dress, the eyes and hooks undone, and a hat in her hand with plastic flowers askew. “He has been such a help to me since Darcus died. He soothes away my vexation and calms my mind.”

She waved to him and he straightened up and waved back. Me watched him pick up two plastic bags filled with tomatoes and walk in his strange pigeon-footed manner up the garden towards the back kitchen door.

“An’ he de only man who made a solitary ting grow out dere. Such a crop of tomatoes as you never did see! Me Ambrosia, stop starin’ and come an’ do up dis dress. Quickbefore your goggle-eye fall out.”

“Does he live here?” whispered Me in amazement, struggling to join the two sides of Hortense’s dress over her substantial flank.

“I mean, with you?”

“Not in de sense you meaning,” sniffed Hortense. “He is jus’ a great

help to me in my of’ age. He bin wid me deez six years, God bless ‘im

and keep ‘is soul. Now, pass me dat pin.”

Me passed her the long hat pin which was sitting on top of a butter

dish. Hortense set the plastic carnations straight on her hat and stabbed them fiercely, then brought the pin back up through the felt,

leaving two inches of exposed silver sticking up from the hat like a

German pickelhaube.

“Well, don’ look so shock. It a very satisfactory arrangement. Women

need a man ‘bout de house, udder wise ting an’ ting get messy. Mr.

Topps and I, we of’ soldiers fightin’ the battle of de Lord. Some time

ago he converted to the Witness church, an’ his rise has been quick an’

sure. I’ve waited fifty years to do so meting else in de Kingdom Hall

except clean,” said Hortense sadly, ‘but dey don’ wan’ women interfering with real church biz ness Got Mr. Topps do a great deal,

and ‘im let me help on occasion. He’s a very good man. Butim family

are nasty-nasty,” she murmured confidentially. The farder is a terrible man, gambler an’ whoremonger ... so after a while, I arks him

to come and live with me, seem' how de room empty and Darcus gone.

"Im

a very civilized bwoy. Never married, though. Married to de church,

yes, suh! An' 'im call me Mrs. Bowden deez six years, never any ting

else." Hortense sighed ever so slightly. "Don' know de meaning of

being' improper. De only ting he wan' in life is to become one of de

Anointed. I have de greatest hadmiration for him. He him proved so

much. He talk so posh now, you know! And 'im very good wid de pipin'

an' plum ming also. How's your fever?"

"Not great. Last hook . . . there that's done."

Hortense fairly bounced away from her and walked into the hall to open

the back door to Ryan.

"But Gran, why does he live "

Me 1990, 1907

"Well, you're going to have to eat up dis marnin' feed a fever, starve

a col'. Deez tomatoes fried wid plantain and some of las' night's

fish. I'll fry it up and den pop it in de microwave."

"I thought it was starve a fe "

"Good marnin', Mr. Topps."

"Good mornin', Missus Bowden," said Mr. Topps, closing the door behind

him and peeling off a protective cagoule to reveal a cheap blue suit,

with a tiny gold cross pendant on the collar. "I trust you is almost

of a readiness? We've got to be at the hall on the dot of seven."

As yet, Ryan had not spotted Me. He was bent over shaking the mud from

his boots. And he did it formidably slowly, just as he spoke, and with

his translucent eyelids fluttering like a man in a coma. Me could only

see half of him from where she stood: a red fringe, a bent knee and the

shirt cuff of one hand.

But the voice was a visual in itself: cockney yet refined, a voice that

had had much work done upon it missing key consonants and adding

others

where they were never meant to be, and all delivered through the nose

with only the slightest help from the mouth.

"Fine mornin', Mrs. B." fine mornin'. Somefing to fankthe Lord

for."

Hortense seemed terribly nervous about the imminent likelihood that he

should raise his head and spot the girl standing by the stove. She

kept beckoning Me forward and then shooining her back, uncertain whether

they should meet at all.

“Oh yes, Mr. Topps, it is, an’ I am ready as ready can be. My hat

give me a little trouble, you know, but I just got a pin an’

“But the Lord ain’t interested in the vanities of the flesh, now, is he

Mrs. B.?” said Ryan, slowly and painfully enunciating each word while

crouching awkwardly and removing his left boot. “Jehovah is in need of

your soul.”

“Oh yes, surely dat is de holy troot,” said Hortense anxiously, fingering her plasticated carnations. “But at de same time, surely

a Witness lady don’ wan’ look like a, well, a buguyaga in de house of

de Lord.”

Ryan frowned. “My point is, you must avoid interpretin’ scripture by

yourself, Mrs. Bowden. In future, discuss it wiv myself and my

colleagues. Ask us: is pleasant clothing a concern of the Lord’s? And

myself and my colleagues amongst the Anointed, will look up the

necessary chapter and verse ...”

Ryan’s sentence faded into a general Erhummmm, a sound he was prone to

making. It began in his arched nostrils and reverberated through his

slight, elongated, misshapen limbs like the final shiver of a hanged

man.

“I don’ know why I do it, Mr. Topps,” said Hortense shaking her head.

“Sometime I tink I could be one of dem dat teach, you know?

Even

though I am a woman ... I feel like the Lord talk to me in a special

way ... It jus’ a bad habit... but so much in de church change recently, sometimes me kyan keep up wid all de rules and regulations.”

Ryan looked out through the double glazing. His face was pained.

“Nuffin’ changes about the word of God, Mrs. B. Only people are

mistaken. The best thing you can do for the Truth, is just pray that

the Brooklyn Hall will soon deliver us with the final date.

Erhummmm.”

“Oh yes, Mr. Topps. I do it day and night.”

Ryan clapped his hands together in a pale imitation of enthusiasm.

“Now, did I ‘ear you say plantain for breakfast, Mrs. B.?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Topps, and dem tomatoes if you will be kind enough to

ban’ dem over to de chef.”

As Hortense had hoped, the passing of the tomatoes coincided with the

spotting of Irie.

“Now, dis is my grand darter Me Ambrosia Jones. And dis is Mr. Ryan

Topps. Say hello, Irie, dear.”



Irie did so, stepping forward nervously and reaching out her hand to shake his. But there was no response from Ryan Topps, and the inequality was only increased when on the sudden he Me 1990, 1907 seemed to recognize her; there was a pulse of familiarity as his eyes moved over her, whereas Me saw nothing, not even a type, not even a genre of face in his; the monstrosity of him was quite unique, redder than any red-head, more freckled than the freckled, more blue-veined than a lobster.

“She’s she’s Clara’s darter said Hortense tentatively. “Mr. Topps knew your mudder, long time. But it all right, Mr. Topps, she come to live wid us now.”

“Only for a little time Me corrected hurriedly, noting the look of vague horror on Mr. Topps’s face. “Just for a few months maybe, through the winter while I study. I’ve got exams in June/ Mr. Topps did not move. Moreover nothing on him moved. Like one of China’s terra cotta army, he seemed poised for battle yet unable to move.

“Clara’s darter repeated Hortense in a tearful whisper. “She might

have been yours.”

Nothing surprised Me about this final, whispered aside; she just added

it to the list: Ambrosia Bowden gave birth in an earthquake . . .

Captain Charlie Durham was a no-good djam fool bwoy. . .  
false teeth in

a glass . . . she might have been yours . . .

Half-heartedly, with no expectation of an answer, Me asked,  
“What?”

“Oh, nuttin’, Me, dear. Nuttin’, nuttin’. Let me start fryin’. I  
can

hear bellies rumblin’. You remember Clara, don’t you Mr.  
Topps? You

and she were quite good . . . friends. Mr. Topps?”

For two minutes now Ryan had been fixing Me with an  
unwavering stare,

his body held absolutely straight, his mouth slightly open. At  
the

question, he seemed to compose himself, closed his mouth and  
took his

seat at the un laid table.

“Clara’s daughter, is it? Erhummmm . . .” He removed what  
looked like

a small policeman’s pad from his breast pocket and poised a  
pen upon it

as if this would kick start his memory.

“You see, many of the episodes, people and events from my  
earlier life

have been, as it were, severed from myself by the

almighty sword that cut me from my past when the Lord  
Jehovah saw fit

to enlighten me with the Truth, and as he has chosen me for a new role

I must, as Paul so wisely recommended in his epistle to the Corinthians,

put away childish things, allowing earlier incarnations of myself to be

enveloped into a great smog in which said Ryan Topps, taking only the

smallest breath and his cutlery from Hortense, ‘it appears that your

mother, and any memory I might ‘ave of her, ‘ave disappeared. Erhummmm.”

“She never mentioned you either,” said Me.

“Well, it was all a long time ago now,” said Hortense with forced

joviality. “But you did try your best wider Mr. Topps. She was my

miracle child, Clara. I was forty-eight! I taut she was God’s child.

But Clara was bound for evil . . . she never was a godly girl an’ in de

end dere was nuttin’ to be done.”

“He will send down His vengeance, Mrs. B.,” said Ryan, with more

cheerful animation than Me had yet seen him display. “He will send

terrible torture to those who ‘ave earned it. Three plantain for me,

if you please.”

Hortense set all three plates down and Me, realizing she hadn’t eaten

since the previous morning, scraped a mountain of plantain on to her

plate.

“Ah! It’s hot!”

“Better hot than lukewarm,” said Hortense grimly, with a meaningful

shudder. “Ever so, ha men

“Amen,” echoed Ryan, braving the red-hot plantain. “Amen. So. What

exactly is it that you are studying in T he asked, looking so intently past

Me that it took a moment before she realized he was addressing her.

“Chemistry, biology and religious studies.” Me blew on a hot piece of

plantain. “I want to be a dentist.”

Ryan perked up. “Religious studies? And do they acquaint you with the

only true church?”

Me shifted in her seat. “Er . . . I guess it’s more the big three.

Jews, Christians, Muslims. We did a month on Catholicism.”

Me 1990, 1907

Ryan grimaced. “And do you have any other interests?”

Irie considered. “Music. I like music. Concerts, clubs, that kind of

thing.”

“Yes, erhummm. I used to go in for all that myself at one time.

Until the Good News was delivered unto me. Large gatherings of yooof,

of the kind that frequent popular conceits, are commonly breeding

grounds for devil worship. A girl of your physical . . . assets might

find herself lured into the lascivious arms of a sexualist,” said Ryan,

standing up from the table and looking at his watch. “Now that I fink

about it, in a certain light you look a lot like your mother. Similar

. . . cheekbones.”

Ryan wiped a pearly line of sweat from his forehead. There was a

silence in which Hortense stood motionless, clinging nervously to a

dishcloth, and Irie had to physically cross the room for a glass of

water to remove herself from Mr. Topps’s stare.

“Well. That’s twenty minutes and counting, Mrs. B. I’ll get the gear,

shall I?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Topps,” said Hortense beaming. But the moment Ryan left

the room the beam turned to a scowl.

“Why must you go an’ say tings like dat, hmm? You wan’ ‘im to tink you

some devilish heathen gal? Why kyan you say stamp-collecting or some

ting? Come on, I gat to clean deez plates finish up.”

Irie looked at the pile of food left on her plate and guiltily tapped

her stomach.

“Cho! Just as I sus peck Your eyes see more clan your belly can hoi’!

Give it ‘ere.”

Hortense leant against the sink and began popping bits of plantain into

her mouth. “Now, you don’ back chat Mr. Topps while you here. You

gat study to do an’ he gat study too,” said Hortense, lowering her

voice. “He’s in consultation with the Brooklyn gentlemen at de moment

.. . fixing de final date; no mistakes dis time. You jus’ ‘ave to look

at de trouble goin’ on in de world to know we That far from de appointed day.”

Chalfenism versus Bovcdenism

“I won’t be any trouble,” said Me, approaching the washing-up as a

gesture of goodwill. “He just seems a little .. . weird.”

“De ones who are chosen by the Lord always seem peculiar to de heathen.

Mr. Topps is jus’ misunderstood. “Im mean a lot to me. Me never have

nobody before. Your mudder don’ like to tell you since she got all

hitey-titey, but de Bowden family have had it hard long time. I was

barn during an cart-quake. Almost kill fore I was barn. An’ den when

me a fully grown woman, my own darter run from me. Me never see my

only grandpickney. I only have de Lord, all dem years. Mr. Topps de first human man who look pon me and take pity an' care. Your mudder was a fool to letim go, true sir!"

Irie gave it one last try. "What? What does that mean?"

"Oh, nuttin, nuttin, dear Lord... I and I talking all over de place dis

marnin .. . Oh Mr. Topps, dere you are. We not going to be late now, are we?"

Mr. Topps, who had just re-entered the room, was fully adorned in

leather from head to toe, a huge motorcycle helmet on his head, a small

red light attached to his left ankle and a small white light strapped

to his right. He flipped up the visor.

"No, we're all right, by the grace of God. Where's your helmet, Mrs.

B.?"

"Oh, I've started keepin' it in the oven. Keeps it warm and toasty on

de col' marnins. Irie Ambrosia, fetch it for me please."

Sure enough, on the middle shelf preheated to gas mark 2 sat Hortense's

helmet. Irie scooped it out and carefully fitted it over her grandmother's plasticated carnations.

"You ride a motorbike," said Irie, by way of conversation.

But Mr. Topps seemed defensive. "A G S Vespa. Nuffink fancy. I did

fink about givin' it away at one point. It represented a life I'd  
raaver forget, if you get my meaning. A motorbike is a sexual  
magnet,

an' God forgive me, but I misused it in that fashion. I was all  
set on

getting' rid of it. But then Mrs. B. convinced me that what wiv  
all

my public speaking, I need somefing quick to get

Me 1990, 1907

around on. An' Mrs. B. don't want to be messin' about with  
buses and

trains at her age, do you Mrs. B.?"

"No, indeed. He got me dis little buggy "

"Sidecar," corrected Ryan tetchily. "It's called a sidecar.  
Minetto

Motorcycle-combination, 1973 model."

"Yes, of course, a sidecar, an' it is comfortable as a bed. We go  
everywhere in it, Mr. Topps an' I."

Hortense took down her overcoat from a hook on the door, and  
reached in

the pockets for two Velcro reflector bands which she strapped  
round

each arm.

"Now, Me, I've got a great deal of biz ness to be getting' on  
with

today, so you're going to have to cook for yourself, because I  
kyan

tell what time we'll be home. But don' worry. Me soon come."

"No problem."

Hortense sucked her teeth. "No problem. Dat's what her name  
mean in



patois: Irie, no problem. Now, what kind of a name is dat to . . .  
?”

Mr. Topps didn't answer. He was already out on the pavement,  
revving

up the Vespa.

“First I have to keep her from those Chalfens,” growls Clara  
over the

phone, her voice a resonant tremolando of anger and fear.

“And now you

people again.”

On the other end, her mother takes the washing out of the  
machine and

listens silently through the cordless that is tucked between ear  
and

weary shoulder, biding her time.

“Hortense, I don't want you filling her head with a whole load  
of

nonsense. You hear me? Your mother was fool to it, and then  
you were

fool to it, but the buck stopped with me and it ain't going no  
further.

If Irie comes home spouting any of that claptrap, you can  
forget about

the Second Comin' 'cos you'll be dead by the time it arrives.”

Big words. But how fragile is Clara's atheism! Like one of  
those tiny

glass doves Hortense keeps in the lounge cabinet a breath  
would knock

it over. Talking of which, Clara still holds hers when passing

churches the same way adolescent vegetarians scurry by  
butchers; she

avoids Kilburn on a Saturday for fear of streetside preachers  
on their  
upturned apple crates. Hortense senses Clara's terror. Coolly  
cramming in another load of whites and measuring out the  
liquid with a  
thrifty woman's eye, she is short and decided: "Don' you  
worry about Me  
Ambrosia. She in a good place now. She'll tell you herself As  
if she  
had ascended with the heavenly host rather than entombed  
herself below  
ground in the borough of Lambeth with Ryan Topps.  
Clara hears her daughter getting on the extension; an initial  
crackle  
and then a voice as clear as a carillon. "Look, I'm not coming  
home,  
all right, so don't bother. I'll be back when I'm back, just don't  
worry about me." And there should be nothing to worry about  
and there  
is nothing to worry about, except maybe that outside in the  
streets it  
is cold packed on cold, even the dogshit has crystallized, there  
is the  
first suggestion of ice on the windscreens and Clara has been  
in that  
house through the winters. She knows what it means. Oh,  
wonderfully  
bright at 6 a.m., yes, wonderfully clear for an hour. But the  
shorter  
the days, the longer the nights, the darker the house, the easier  
it  
is, the easier it is, the easier it is, to mistake a shadow for the

writing on the wall, the sound of overland footsteps for the distant crack of thunder, and the midnight chime of a New Year clock for the bell that tolls the end of the world.

But Clara needn't have feared. Irie's atheism was robust. It was

Chalfenist in its confidence, and she approached her stay with Hortense

with detached amusement. She was intrigued by the Bowden household. It

was a place of end games and after times full stops and finales; where

to count on the arrival of tomorrow

Me 1990, 1907

was an indulgence, and every service in the house, from the milkman to

the electricity, was paid for on a strictly daily basis so as not to spend money on utilities or goods that would be wasted should God turn

up in all his holy vengeance the very next day. Bowdenism gave a whole

new meaning to the phrase 'hand-to-mouth'. This was living in the

eternal instant, ceaselessly teetering on the precipice of total annihilation; there are people who take a great deal of drugs simply to

experience something comparable to 84-year-old Hortense Bowden's

day-to-day existence. So you've seen dwarfs rip open their bellies and

show you their insides, you've been a television switched off without

warning, you've experienced the whole world as one Krishna consciousness, free of individual ego, floating through the infinite

cosmos of the soul? Big fucking deal. That's all bullshit next to St.

John's trip when Christ laid the twenty-two chapters of Revelation on

him. It must have been a hell of a shock for the apostle (after that

thorough spin-job, the New Testament, all those sweet words and sublime

sentiments) to discover Old Testament vengeance lurking round the

corner after all. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. That must

have been some eye-opener.

Revelation is where all crazy people end up. It's the last stop on the

nut so express. And Bowdenism, which was the Witnesses plus

Revelation

and then some, was as left field as they come. Par exemple: Hortense

Bowden interpreted Revelation 3:15 - / know thy works, that thou an

neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because

thou an lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my

mouth as a literal mandate. She understood 'lukewarm' to be an evil

property in and of itself. She kept a microwave on hand at all times

(her sole concession to modern technology for a long time it was a

toss-up between pleasing the Lord and laying oneself open to the United

States mind-ray control programme as operated through high-frequency

radio waves in order to heat every meal to an impossible temperature;

she kept whole buckets of ice to chill every glass of water 'colder

than cold'. She wore two pairs of knickers at all times like a wary

potential traffic-victim; when Me asked why, she sheepishly revealed

that upon hearing the first signs of the Lord (approaching thunder,

bellowing voice, Wagner's Ring Cycle), she intended to whip off the one

closest to her and replace it with the outer pair, so that Jesus would

find her fresh and odour less and ready for heaven. She kept a tub of

black paint in the hallway so when the time came she might daub the

neighbours' doors with the sign of the Beast, saving the Lord all that

trouble of weeding out the baddies, separating sheep from goats. And

you couldn't form any sentence in that house which included the words

‘end’, ‘finished’, ‘done’, etc.’ for these were like so many triggers

setting off both Hortense and Ryan with the usual ghoulish relish:

Irie: I finished the washing-up.

Ryan Topps (shaking his head solemnly at the truth of it): As one day

we all shall be finished, Irie, my dear; be zealous therefore, and

repent. Or

Irie: It was a such a good film. The end was great! Hortense Bowden

(tearfully): And dem dat ex peck such an end to dis world will be

sorely disappointed, for He will come trailin’ terror and Lo de generation dat witness de events of 1914 shall now witness de turd part

of de trees burn, and the turd part of de sea become as blood, and de

turd part of de . . .

And then there was Hortense’s horror of weather reports. Whoever it

was, however benign, honey-voiced and inoffensively dressed, she cursed

them bitterly for the five minutes they stood there, and then, out of

what appeared to be sheer perversity, proceeded to take the opposite of

whatever advice had been proffered (light jacket and no umbrella for

rain, full cagoule and

Me 1990, 1907

rain hat for sun). It was several weeks before Me understood that weathermen were the secular antithesis of Hortense's life work, which was, essentially, a kind of supercosmic attempt to second guess the Lord with one almighty biblical exegesis of a weather report. Next to that weathermen were nothing but upstarts . . . And tomorrow, coming in from the east, we can expect a great furnace to rise up and envelop the area with flames that give no light, but rather darkness visible . . . while I'm afraid the northern regions are advised to wrap up warm against thick-ribbed ice, and there's a fair likelihood that the coast will be beaten with perpetual storms of whirlwind and dire hail which on firm land thaws not... Michael Fish and his ilk were stabbers-in-the-dark, trusting to the tomfoolery of the Met Office, making a mockery of that precise science, eschatology, that Hortense had spent over fifty years in the study of.

"Any news, Mr. Topps?" (This question almost invariably asked over breakfast; and girlishly, breathlessly, like a child asking after Santa.)

"No, Mrs. B. We are still completing our studies. You must let my

colleagues and myself deliberate thoroughly. In this life there are

them that are teachers and then there are them that are pupils. There

are eight million Witnesses of Jehovah waiting for our decision,

waiting for the Judgement Day. But you must learn to leave such things

to them that 'ave the direct line, Mrs. B." the direct line."

After bunking for a few weeks, Me returned to school. But it seemed so

distant; even the journey from South to North each morning felt like an

almighty polar trek, and worse, one that stopped short of its goal and

ended up instead in the tepid regions, a non-event compared with the

boiling maelstrom of the Bowden home. So then because thou art

lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

You become so used to extremity, suddenly nothing else will do.

She saw Millat regularly, but their conversations were brief.

He was

green-tied now and otherwise engaged. She still did Marcus's filing

twice a week, but avoided the rest of the family. She saw Josh

fleetingly. He seemed to be avoiding the Chalfens as assiduously as

she. Her parents she saw on weekends, icy occasions when everybody



called everybody by their first names (Irie, can you pass the salt to Archie? Clara, Archie wants to know where the scissors are), and all parties felt deserted. She sensed that she was being whispered about in the way North Londoners will when they suspect someone of coming down with religion, that nasty disease. So she hurried back to No. 28 Lindaker Road, Lambeth, relieved to be back in the darkness, for it was like hibernating or being cocooned, and she was as curious as everyone else to see what kind of Irie would emerge. It wasn't any kind of prison. That house was an adventure. In cupboards and neglected drawers and in grimy frames were the secrets that had been hoarded for so long, as if secrets were going out of fashion. She found pictures of her great-grandmother Ambrosia, a bony, beautiful thing, with huge almond eyes, and one of Charlie "Whitey" Durham standing in a pile of rubble with a sepia-print sea behind him. She found a bible with one line torn from it. She found photo-booth snaps of Clara in school uniform, grinning maniacally, the true horror of the teeth revealed.

She read alternately from *Dental Anatomy* by Gerald M. Cathey and *The*

*Good News Bible*, and raced voraciously through Hortense's small and

eclectic library, blowing the red dust of a Jamaican schoolhouse off

the covers and often using a pen knife to cut never-before-read pages.

February's list was as follows:

*An Account of a West Indian Sanatorium*, by Geo. J. H. Sutton Moxly.

London: Sampson, Low, Marston & Co." 1886. (There was an inverse

correlation between the length of the author's name and the poor

quality of his book.)

*Tom Cringle's Log*, by Michael Scott. Edinburgh: 1875.

Me 1990, 1907

*In Sugar Cane Land*, by Eden Phillpotts. London: McClure & Co." 1893. *Dominica: Hints and Notes to Intending Settlers*, by His

Honour

H. Hesketh Bell, CMC. London: A. & C. Black, 1906.

The more she read, the more that picture of dashing Capt. Durham

aroused her natural curiosity: handsome and melancholy, surveying the

bricks of half a church, looking worldly-wise despite his youth,

looking every inch the Englishman, looking like he could tell someone

or another a thing or two about something. Maybe Me herself.  
Just in

case, she kept him under her pillow. And in the mornings it  
wasn't

Italian ate vineyards out there any more, it was sugar, sugar,  
sugar,

and next door was nothing but tobacco and she  
presumptuously fancied

that the smell of plantain sent her back to somewhere,  
somewhere quite

fictional, for she'd never been there. Somewhere Columbus  
called St.

Jago but the arawaks stubbornly re-named Xaymaca, the name  
lasting

longer than they did. Well-wooded and Watered. Not that Me  
had heard

of those little sweet-tempered potbellied victims of their own  
sweet-tempers. Those were some other Jamaicans, fallen short  
of the

attention-span of history. She laid claim to the past her version  
of

the past aggressively, as if retrieving misdirected mail. So this  
was

where she came from. This all belonged to her, her birthright,  
like a

pair of pearl earrings or a post office bond. X marks the spot,  
and Me

put an X on everything she found, collecting bits and bobs  
(birth

certificates, maps, army reports, news articles) and storing  
them under

the sofa, so that as if by osmosis the richness of them would  
pass

through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her.

As the buds came with the spring, so like any anchoress she was

visited. First, by voices. Coming crackling over Hortense's neolithic

radio, Joyce Chalfen on Gardeners' Question Time:

Foreman: Another question from the audience, I think. Mrs. Sally

Whitaker from Bournemouth has a question for the panel, I believe. Mrs.

Whitaker?

Mrs. Whitaker: Thank you, Brian. Well, I'm a new gardener and this is

my first frost and in two short months my garden's gone from being a

real colour explosion to a very bare thing indeed . . . Friends have

advised flowers with a compact habit but that leaves me with lots of

tiny auricula and double daisies, which look silly because the garden's

really quite large. Now, I'd really like to plant something a little

more striking, around the height of a delphinium, but then the wind

gets it and people look over their fences thinking: Dear oh dear

(sympathetic laughter from the studio audience). So, my question to

the panel is, how do you keep up appearances in the bleak midwinter?

Foreman: Thank you, Mrs. Whitaker. Well, it's a common problem . . .

and it doesn't necessarily get any easier for the seasoned gardener.

Personally, I never get it quite right. Well, let's hand the question

over to the panel, shall we? Joyce Chalfen, any answers or suggestions

for the bleak midwinter?

Joyce Chalfen: Well, first I must say your neighbours sound very nosy.

I'd tell them to mind their own beeswax if I were you (laughter from

audience). But to be serious, I think this whole trend for round-the-clock bloom is actually very unhealthy for the garden and the

gardener and particularly the soil, I really do ... I think the winter

should be a time of rest, subdued colours, you know and then when the

late spring does finally arrive the neighbours get a hell of a shock!

Boom! There it is, this wonderful explosion of growth. I think the

deep winter is really a time for nurturing the soil, turning it over,

allowing it a rest and plotting its future all the better to surprise

the nosy people next door. I always think of a

garden's soil like a woman's body moving in cycles, you know, fertile

at some times and not others, and that's really quite natural.

But if

you really are determined, then Lenten roses *Helleborus corsicus* do

remarkably well in cold, calcareous soil, even if they're quite  
in

the

Irie switched Joyce off. It was quite therapeutic switching  
Joyce off.

This was not entirely personal. It just seemed tiring and  
unnecessary

all of a sudden, that struggle to force something out of the  
recalcitrant English soil. Why bother when there was now this  
other

place? (For Jamaica appeared to Irie as if it were newly made.  
Like

Columbus himself, just by discovering it she had brought it  
into

existence.) This well-wooded and watered place. Where things  
sprang

from the soil riotously and without supervision, and a young  
white

captain could meet a young black girl with no complications,  
both of

them fresh and untainted and without past or dictated future a  
place

where things simply were. No fictions, no myths, no lies, no  
tangled

webs this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because  
homeland is one

of the magical fantasy words like unicorn and soul and infinity  
that

have now passed into the language. And the particular magic  
of

homeland, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like  
a

beginning. The beginning est of beginnings. Like the first morning of

Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page.

But every time Irie felt herself closer to it, to the perfect blankness

of the past, something of the present would ring the Bowden doorbell

and intrude. Mothering Sunday brought a surprise visit from Joshua,

angry on the doorstep, at least a stone and a half lighter, and much

scruffier than usual. Before Irie had a chance to express either concern or shock, he had flounced into the lounge and slammed the door.

"I'm sick of it! Sick to the back fucking teeth with it!"

The vibration of the door knocked Capt. Durham from his perch on

Irie's windowsill, and she carefully re-erected him.

"Yeah, nice to see you too, man. Why don't you sit down and slow down.

Sick of what?"

"Them. They sicken me. They go on about rights and freedoms, and then

they eat fifty chickens every fucking week! Hypocrites!"

Me couldn't immediately see the connection. She took out a fag in

preparation for a long story. To her surprise Joshua took one too, and

they went to kneel on the window seat, blowing smoke through the grate

up into the street.

"Do you know how battery chickens live?"

Me didn't. Joshua explained. Cooped up for most of their poor chicken

lives in total chicken darkness, packed together like chicken sardines

in their chicken shit and fed the worst type of chicken grain.

And

this, according to Joshua, was apparently nothing on how pigs and cows

and sheep spent their time. "It's a fucking crime. But try telling

Marcus that. Try getting him to give up his Sunday hog-fest.

He's so

fucking ill informed. Have you ever noticed that? He knows this

enormous amount about one thing, but there's this whole other world

that.. . Oh, before I forget you should take a leaflet."

Me never thought she would see the day when Joshua Chalfen handed her

a

leaflet. But here it was in her palm. It was called: Meat is Murder:

The Facts and the Fiction, a publication from the FATE organization.

"It stands for Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation.

They're like

the hardcore end of Greenpeace or whatever. Read it they're not just

hippy freaks, they're coming from a solid scientific and academic

background and they're working from an anarchist perspective. I feel



like I've really found my niche, you know? It's a really incredible

group. Dedicated to direct action. The deputy's an ex-Oxford fellow."

"Mmmm. How's Millat?"

Joshua shook off the question. "Oh, I don't know. Barmy. Going

barmy. And Joyce is still pandering to his every whim. Just don't ask me. They all sicken me. Everything's changed." Josh ran

his fingers anxiously through his hair, which just reached his shoulders now in what Willesdeners affectionately call a Jew-fro

Mullet. "I just can't tell you how everything's changed. I'm having

these real... moments of clarity."

Irie nodded. She was sympathetic to moments of clarity. Her seventeenth year was proving chock-a-block with them. And she wasn't

surprised by Joshua's metamorphosis. Four months in the life of a

seventeen-year-old is the stuff of swings and roundabouts; Stones fans

into Beatles fans, Tories into Liberal Democrats and back again, vinyl

junkies to C D freaks. Never again in your life do you possess the

capacity for such total personality overhaul.

"I knew you'd understand. I wish I'd talked to you before, but I just

can't bear to be in the house these days and when I do see you Millat

always seems to be in the way. It's really good to see you."

"You too. You look different."

Josh gestured dismissively at his clothes, which were distinctly less

nerdy than they had been.

"I guess you can't wear your father's old corduroy for ever."

"I guess not."

Joshua clapped his hands together. "Well, I've booked my ticket for

Glastonbury and I might not come back. I met these people from FATE

and I'm going with them."

"It's March. Not till the summer, surely."

"Joely and Crispin that's these people I met say we might go up there

early. You know, camp out for a bit."

"And school?"

"If you can bunk, I can bunk . . . it's not as if I'm going to fall behind. I've still got a Chalfen head on my shoulders, I'll just come

back for the exams and then fuck off again. Irie, you've just got to

meet these people. They're just . . . incredible. He's a Dadaist. And

she's an anarchist. A real one. Not like Marcus. I

told her about Marcus and his bloody Future Mouse She thinks he's a

dangerous individual. Quite possibly psychopathic."

Me thought about this. "Mmm. I'd be surprised."

Without stubbing out his fag, he threw it up on to the pavement. "And

I'm giving up all meat. I'm a pescatarian at the moment, but that's

just half measures. I'm becoming a fucking vegetarian."

Me shrugged, not certain what the right response should be.

"There's a lot to be said for the old motto, you know?"

"Old motto?"

"Fight fire with fire. It's only by really fucking extreme behaviour

that you can get through to somebody like Marcus. He doesn't even know

how out there he is. There's no point being reasonable with him

because he thinks he owns reasonableness. How do you deal with people

like that? Oh, and I'm giving up leather wearing it and all other

animal by-products. Gelatin and stuff."

After a while of watching the feet go by leathers, sneakers, heels Me

said, "That'll show 'em."

On April Fool's Day, Samad turned up. He was all in white, on his way

to the restaurant, crumpled and creased like a disappointed saint. He

looked to be on the brink of tears. Me let him in.

"Hello, Miss Jones," said Samad, bowing ever so slightly.

"And how is

your father?"

Me smiled with recognition. "You see him more than we do.

How's

God?"

"Perfectly fine, thank you. Have you seen my good-for-nothing son

recently?"

Before Me had a chance to give her next line, Samad broke down in front

of her and had to be led into the living room, sat in Darcus's chair

and brought a cup of tea before he could speak.

"Mr. Iqbal, what's wrong?"

"What is right?"

Me 1990, 1907

"Has something happened to Dad?"

"Oh no, no... Archibald is fine. He is like the washing-machine

advert. He carries on and on as ever."

Then what?"

"Millat. He has been missing these three weeks."

"God. Well, have you tried the Chalfens?"

“He is not with them. I know where he is. Out of the trying  
pan and  
into the fire. He is on some retreat with these lunatic green-tie  
people. In a sports centre in Chester.”

“Bloody hell.”

Me sat down cross-legged and took out a fag. “I hadn’t seen  
him in

school, but I didn’t realize how long it had been. But if you  
know

where he is . . .” “I didn’t come here to find him, I came to ask  
your

advice, Me. What can I do? You know him how does one get  
through?”

Me bit her lip, her mother’s old habit. “I mean, I don’t know .  
we’re

not as close as we were . . . but I’ve always thought that maybe  
it’s

the Magid thing . . . missing him . . . I mean he’d never admit it  
. . . but

Magid’s his twin and maybe if he saw him

“No, no. No, no, no. I wish that were the solution. Allah  
knows how

I pinned all my hopes on Magid. And now he says he is  
coming back to

study the English law paid for by these Chalfen people. He  
wants to

enforce the laws of man rather than the laws of God. He has  
learnt

none of the lessons of Muhammad peace be upon Him! Of  
course, his

mother is delighted. But he is nothing but a disappointment to  
me.

More English than the English. Believe me, Magid will do  
Millat no

good and Millat will do Magid no good. They have both lost  
their way.

Strayed so far from the life I had intended for them. No doubt  
they

will both marry white women called Sheila and put me in an  
early grave.

All I wanted was two good Muslim boys. Oh, Me ...” Samad  
took her

free hand and patted it with sad affection. “I just don’t  
understand

where I have gone wrong. You teach them but they

do not listen because they have the “Public Enemy” music on  
at full

blast. You show them the road and they take the bloody path to  
the

Inns of Court. You guide them and they run from your grasp to  
a

Chester sports centre. You try to plan everything and nothing  
happens

in the way that you expected ...”

But if you could begin again, thought Irie, if you could take  
them back

to the source of the river, to the start of the story, to the  
homeland

... But she didn’t say that, because he felt it as she felt it and

both knew it was as useless as chasing your own shadow.

Instead she

took her hand from underneath his and placed it on top,  
returning the

stroke. “Oh, Mr. Iqbal. I don’t know what to say

“There are no words. The one I send home comes out a pukka  
Englishman,  
white suited, silly wig lawyer. The one I keep here is fully  
paid-up  
green bow-tie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist. I sometimes  
wonder why  
I bother,” said Samad bitterly, betraying the English inflections  
of  
twenty years in the country, “I really do. These days, it feels to  
me  
like you make a devil’s pact when you walk into this country.  
You hand  
over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want  
to make a  
little money, get yourself started . . . but you mean to go back!  
Who  
would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food,  
dreadful  
newspapers who would want to stay? In a place where you are  
never  
welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an  
animal  
finally house-trained. Who would want to stay? But you have  
made a  
devil’s pact . . . it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable  
to  
return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong  
nowhere.”  
“Oh, that’s not true, surely.”  
“And then you begin to give up the very idea of belonging.  
Suddenly  
this thing, this belonging, it seems like some long, dirty lie . . .  
and

I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is

an accident. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you

do? What does anything matter?"

Me 1990, 1907

As Samad described this dystopia with a look of horror, Me was ashamed

to find that the land of accidents sounded like paradise to her.

Sounded like freedom.

"Do you understand, child? I know you understand."

And what he really meant was: do we speak the same language? Are we

from the same place? Are we the same?

Irie squeezed his hand and nodded vigorously, trying to ward off his

tears. What else could she tell him but what he wanted to hear?

"Yes," she said. "Yes, yes, yes."

When Hortense and Ryan came home that evening after a late-night prayer

meeting, both were in a state of high excitement. Tonight was the

night. After giving Hortense a flurry of instructions as to the typesetting and layout of his latest Watchtower article, Ryan went into

the hallway to make his telephone call to Brooklyn to get the news.

"But I thought he was in consultation with them."

"Yes, yes, he is ... but de final confirmation, you understand, must



come from Mr. Charles Wintry himself in Brooklyn,” said Hortense

breathlessly. “What a day dis is! What a day! Help me wid liftin’

dis typewriter now ... I need it on de table.”

Irie did as she was told, carrying the enormous old Remington to the

kitchen and laying it down in front of Hortense. Hortense passed Irie

a bundle of white paper covered in Ryan’s tiny script.

“Now you read dat to me, Irie Ambrosia, slowly now ... an’ I’ll get it

down in type.”

Irie read for half an hour or so, wincing at Ryan’s horrible corkscrew

prose, passing the whiting fluid when it was required, and gritting her

teeth at the author’s interruptions as every ten minutes he popped back

into the room to adjust his syntax or rephrase a paragraph.

“Mr. Topps, did you get trew yet?”

“Not yet, Mrs. B.” not yet. Very busy, Mr. Charles Wintry. I’m going to try again now.”

A sentence, Samad’s sentence, was passing through Irie’s tired brain.

Sometimes I wonder why I bother. And now that Ryan was out of the

way,

Irie saw her opportunity to ask it, though she framed it carefully.

Hortense leant back in her chair and placed her hands on her lap. “I

bin doin' dis a very long time, Irie Ambrosia. I bin' waitin'  
ever

since I was a pickney in long socks.”

“But that’s no reason ‘

“What d’you know fe reasons? Nuttin’ at all. The Witness  
church is

where my roots are. It bin good to me when nobody else has. It  
was de

good ting my mudder gave me, an’ I That going to let it go  
now we so

close to de end.”

“But Gran, it’s not.. . you won’t ever .. .”

“Lemme tell you so meting I’m not like dem Witnesses jus’  
scared of

dyin’. Jus’ scared. Dem wan’ everybody to die excep’ dem.  
Dat’s not

a reason to dedicate your life to Jesus Christ. I gat very  
different

aims. I still hope to be one of de Anointed evan if I am a  
woman. I

want it all my life. I want to be dere wid de Lord making de  
laws and

de decisions.” Hortense sucked her teeth long and loud. “I gat  
so

tired wid de church always tellin’ me I’m a woman or I’m  
That hedicated

enough. Everybody always tryin’ to heducate you; heducate  
you about

dis, heducate you about dat .. . Dat’s always bin de problem  
wid de

women in dis family. Somebody always tryin’ to heducate  
them about so

meting pretendin' it all about learnin' when it all about a battle  
of

de wills. But if I were one of de hundred an' forty-four, no one  
gwan

try to heducate me. Dat would be my job! I'd make my own  
laws an' I

wouldn't be wanting anybody else's opinions. My mudder was  
strong-willed deep down, and I'm de same. Lord knows, your  
mudder was

de same. And you de same."

"Tell me about Ambrosia," said Irie, spotting a chink in Hor  
tense's

armour that one might squeeze through. "Please."

But Hortense remained solid. "You know enough already. De  
past is

done wid. Nobody learn nuttin' from it. Top of page five  
please I

tink dat's where we were."

At that moment Ryan returned to the room, face redder than  
ever.

"What, Mr. Topps? Is it? Do you know?"

"God help the heathen, Mrs. B." for the day is indeed at hand!  
It is

as the Lord laid out clearly in his book of Revelation. He never  
intended a third millennium. Now I'll need that article typed  
up, and

then another one that I'll dictate to you off the cuff you'll need  
to

telephone all the Lambeth members, and leaflet the-

"Oh, yes, Mr. Topps but jus' let me tyake it in jus' a minute It  
couldn't be any udder date, could it, Mr. Topps? I tol' you I  
felt it

in my bones.”

“I’m not sure as to how much your bones had to do wiv it,  
Mrs. B.

Surely more credit is due to the thorough scriptural study done  
by

myself and my colleagues ‘

“And God, presumably,” said Irie, cutting him a sharp glare,  
going over

to hold Hortense, who was shaking with sobs. Hortense kissed  
Irie on

both cheeks and Irie smiled at the hot wetness.

“Oh, Irie Ambrosia. I’m so glad you’re here to share dis. I live  
dis

century I came into dis world in an cart-quake at de very  
beginning and

I shall see the hevil and sinful pollution be hera sed in a  
mighty

rumbling cart-quake once more. Praise de Lord! It is as he  
promised

after all. I knew I’d make it. I got jus’ seven years to wait.

Ninety-two!” Hortense sucked her teeth contemptuously.

“Cho! My

grandmudder live to see one hundered-and-tree an de woman  
could skip

rope till de day she keel over and drop col’. Me gwan make it.  
I make

it dis far. My mudder suffer to get me here but she knew de  
true

church and she make heffort to push me out in de mos’  
difficult

circumstances so I could live to see that glory day.”

“Amen!”

“Oh, ha men Mr. Topps. Put on de complete suit of armour of God! Now,

Irie Ambrosia, witness me as I say it: I’m gwan be dere. An’ I’m gwan

to be in Jamaica to see it. I’m going home that year of our Lord. An’

you can come dere too if you learn from me and listen. You wan come

Jamaica in de year two thousand?”

Irie let out a little scream and rushed to give her grandmother another

hug.

Hortense wiped her tears with her apron. “Lord Jesus, I live dis

century! Well and truly I live dis terrible century wid all its troubles and vexations. And tanks to you, Lord, I’m gwan a feel a

rumble at both ends.”

Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992,1999

fundamental/a. & n. 1MB. adj. i Of or pertaining to the basis or

groundwork; going to the root of the matter. 2 Serving as the base or

foundation; essential or indispensable. Also, primary, original; from

which others are derived. 3 Of or pertaining to the foundations) of a

building. 4 Of a stratum: lowest, lying at the bottom.

Fundamentalism n. E2,o [f. prec. +ism.] The strict maintenance of

traditional orthodox religious beliefs or doctrines; esp. belief in

the in errancy of religious texts.

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

You must remember this, a kiss is still a kiss,

A sigh is just a sigh;

The fundamental things apply,

As time goes by.

Herman Hupfeld, "As Time Goes By" (1931 song)

16 The Return of Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal

"Excuse me, you're not going to smoke that, are you?"

Marcus closed his eyes. He hated the construction. He always wanted

to reply with equal grammatical perversity: Yes, I'm not going to smoke

that. No, I am going to smoke that.

"Excuse me, I said you're "

"Yes, I heard you the first time," said Marcus softly, turning to his

right to see the speaker with whom he shared a single armrest, each two

chairs being assigned only one between them in the long line of moulded

plastic. "Is there a reason why I shouldn't?"

Irritation vanished at the sight of his interlocutor: a slim, pretty

Asian girl, with an alluring gap between her front teeth, army trousers

and a high ponytail, who was holding in her lap (of all things!) a copy

of his collaborative pop science book of last spring (with the novelist

Surrey The. Banks), Time Bombs and Body Clocks: Adventures in Our

Genetic Future.

“Yes, there’s a reason, arsehok. You can’t smoke in Heathrow.  
Not in

this bit of it. And you certainly can’t smoke a fucking pipe.

And

these chairs are welded to each other and I’ve got asthma.

Enough

reasons?”

Marcus shrugged amiably. “Yes, more than. Good book?”

This was a new experience for Marcus. Meeting one of his  
readers.

Meeting one of his readers in the waiting lounge of an airport.

He had

been a writer of academic texts all his life, texts whose  
audience was

tiny and select, whose members he more often than not knew  
personally.

He had never sent his work off into the world like a party-  
popper,

unsure where the different strands would land.

“Pardon?”

Magid, Millat and Atoms 1992, 1999

“Don’t worry, I won’t smoke if you don’t want me to. I was  
just

wondering, is it a good book?”

The girl screwed up her face, which was not as pretty as  
Marcus had

first thought, the jawline a tad too severe. She closed the book  
(she

was halfway through) and looked at its cover as if she had  
forgotten

which book it was.

“Oh, it’s all right, I suppose. Bit bloody weird. Bit of a head fuck

Marcus frowned. The book had been his agent’s idea: a split level high

low culture book, whereby Marcus wrote a ‘hard science’ chapter on one

particular development in genetics and then the novelist wrote a twin

chapter exploring these ideas from a futuristic, fictional, what-if-this-led-to-this point of view, and so on for eight chapters

each. Marcus had university-bound sons plus Magid’s law schooling to

think about, and he had agreed to the project for pecuniary reasons. To

that end, the book had not been the hit that was hoped for or required,

and Marcus, when he thought of it at all, thought it was a failure.

But weird? A head fuck

“Umm, in what way weird?”

The girl looked suddenly suspicious. “What is this? An interrogation?”

Marcus shrank back a little. His Chalfenist confidence was always less

evident when he strayed abroad, away from the bosom of his family. He

was a direct man who saw no point in asking anything other than the

direct questions, but in recent years he had become aware that this



directness did not always garner direct answers from strangers, as it

did in his own small circle. In the outside world, outside of his college and home, one had to add things to speech.

Particularly if one

was somewhat strange-looking, as Marcus gathered he was; if one was a

little old, with eccentric curly hair and spectacles missing their lower rims. You had to add things to your speech to make it more

palatable. Niceties, throwaway phrases, pleases and thank yous.

“No, not an interrogation. I was just thinking of reading it

The Return of Magid Mahfboz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal

myself, you see. I heard it was quite good, you know. And I was

wondering why you thought it was weird.”

The girl, deciding at that moment that Marcus was neither mass murderer

nor rapist, let her muscles relax and slid back in her chair. “Oh, I

don’t know. Not so much weird, I guess, more scary.”

“Scary how?”

“Well, it’s scary isn’t it, all this genetic engineering.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah, you know, messing about with the body. They reckon there’s a

gene for intelligence, sexuality practically everything, you know?

Recombinant DNA technology,” said the girl, using the term cautiously,

as if testing the water to see how much Marcus knew. Seeing no recognition in his face, she continued with more confidence. “Once you know the restriction enzyme for a particular, like, bit of DNA, you can switch anything on or off, like a bloody stereo. That’s what they’re doing to those poor mice. It’s pretty fucking scary. Not to mention, like, the pathogenic, i.e.” disease-producing, organisms they’ve got sitting in petri dishes all over the place. I mean, I’m a politics student, yeah, and I’m like: what are they creating? And who do they want to wipe out? You’ve got to be seriously naive if you don’t think the West intend to use this shit in the East, on the Arabs. Quick way to deal with the fundamentalist Muslims no, seriously, man,” said the girl in response to a raised eyebrow from Marcus, ‘things are getting scary. I mean, reading this shit you just realize how close science is to science fiction.’”

As far as Marcus could see, science and science fiction were like ships in the night, passing each other in the fog. A science fiction robot, for example even his son Oscar’s expectation of a robot was a thousand years ahead of anything either robotics or artificial intelligence

could yet achieve. While the robots in Oscar's mind were singing,  
dancing and empathizing with his every joy and fear, over at MIT some  
poor bastard was slowly  
4i7  
and painstakingly trying to get a machine to re-create the movements of  
a single human thumb. On the flip side of the coin, the simplest  
biological facts, the structure of animal cells for instance, were a  
mystery to all but fourteen-year-old children and scientists like  
himself; the former spending their time drawing them in class, the  
latter injecting them with foreign DNA. In between, or so it appeared  
to Marcus, flowed a great ocean of idiots, conspiracists, religious  
lunatics, presumptuous novelists, animal rights activists, students of  
politics, and all the other breeds of fundamentalists who professed  
strange objections to his life's work. In the past few months, since  
his Future Mouse had gained some public attention, he had been forced  
to believe in these people, believe they actually existed en masse, and  
this was as hard for him as being taken to the bottom of the garden and  
told that here lived fairies.

“I mean, they talk about progress,” said the girl shrilly, becoming somewhat excited. “They talk about leaps and bounds in the field of medicine yada yada yada, but bottom line, if somebody knows how to eliminate “undesirable” qualities in people, do you think some government’s not going to do it? I mean, what’s undesirable? There’s just something a little fascist about the whole deal... I guess it’s a good book, but at points you do think: where are we going here? Millions of blonds with blue eyes? Mail order babies? I mean, if you’re Indian like me you’ve got something to worry about, yeah? And then they’re planting cancers in poor creatures; like, who are you to mess with the make-up of a mouse? Actually creating an animal just so it can die it’s like being God! I mean personally I’m a Hindu, yeah? I’m not religious or nothing, but you know, I believe in the sanctity of life, yeah? And these people, like, program the mouse, plot its every move, yeah, when it’s going to have kids, when it’s going to die. It’s just unnatural.”

Marcus nodded and tried to disguise his exhaustion. It was exhausting just to listen to her. Nowhere in the book did Marcus

The Return of Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqba.1  
even touch upon human eugenics it wasn't his field, and he  
had no  
particular interest in it. And yet this girl had managed to read a  
book almost entirely concerned with the more prosaic  
developments in  
recombinant DNA gene therapy, proteins to dissolve blood  
clots, the  
cloning of insulin and emerge from it full of the usual neo-  
fascist  
tabloid fantasies mindless human clones, genetic policing of  
sexual and  
racial characteristics, mutated diseases, etc. Only the chapter  
on his  
mouse could have prompted such a hysterical reaction. It was  
to his  
mouse that the title of the book referred (again, the agent's  
idea),  
and it was his mouse upon which media attention had landed.  
Marcus saw  
clearly now what he had previously only suspected, that if it  
were not  
for the mouse there would have been little interest in the book  
at all.  
No other work he had been involved with seemed to catch the  
public  
imagination like his mice. To determine a mouse's future  
stirred  
people up. Precisely because people saw it that way: it wasn't  
determining the future of a cancer, or a reproductive cycle, or  
the  
capacity to age. It was determining the future of the mouse.  
People

focused on the mouse in a manner that never failed to surprise him.

They seemed unable to think of the animal as a site, a biological site

for experimentation into heredity, into disease, into mortality. The

mouse-ness of the mouse seemed inescapable. A picture from Marcus's

laboratory of one of his transgenic mice, along with an article about

the struggle for a patent, had appeared in The Times. Both he and the

paper received a ton of hate-mail from factions as disparate as the

Conservative Ladies Association, the Anti-Vivisection lobby, the Nation

of Islam, the rector of St. Agnes's Church, Berkshire, and the editorial board of the far-left Schnews. Neena Begum phoned to inform

him that he would be reincarnated as a cockroach. Glenard Oak, always

acute to a turning media tide, retracted their invitation for Marcus to

come to school during National Science week. His own son, his Joshua,

still refused to speak to him. The insanity of all of it genuinely shook him. The fear he

had unwittingly provoked. And all because the public were three |B

steps ahead of him like Oscar's robot, they had already played ,^ out

their end games already concluded what the result of his 12 research

would be something he did not presume to imagine! ;lB full of their

clones, zombies, designer children, gay genes. Of \*i| course, he

understood the work he did involved some element of moral luck; so it

is for all men of science. You work partly in the dark, uncertain of

future ramifications, unsure what blackness your name might yet carry,

what bodies will be laid at your door. No one working in a new field,

doing truly visionary work, can be certain of getting through his

century or the next without blood on his palms. But stop the work? Gag

Einstein? Tie Heisen berg's hands? What can you hope to achieve?

"But surely," Marcus began, more rattled than he expected himself to

be, 'surely that's rather the point. All animals are in a sense programmed to die. It's perfectly natural. If it appears random, that's only because we don't clearly understand it, you see. We don't

properly understand why some people seem predisposed to cancer. We

don't properly understand why some people die of natural causes at

sixty-three and some at ninety seven. Surely it would be interesting

to know a little more about these things. Surely the point of something like an oncomouse is that we're given the opportunity to see

a life and a death stage by stage under the micro ‘

“Yeah, well,” said the girl, putting the book in her bag.

“Whatever.

I’ve got to get to gate 52. It was nice talking to you. But yeah, you

should definitely give it a read. I’m a big fan of Surrey The .  
Banks

... he writes some freaky shit.”

Marcus watched the girl and her bouncing ponytail progress  
down the

wide walkway until she merged with other dark-haired girls  
and was

lost. Instantly, he felt relieved and remembered with pleasure  
his own

appointment with gate 32 and Magid Iqbal, who was a  
different kettle

offish, or a blacker kettle, or whatever the phrase was. With  
fifteen

minutes to spare, he abandoned his

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coffee which had gone rapidly from scalding to lukewarm, and  
began to

walk in the direction of the lower 505. The phrase ‘a meeting  
of

minds’ was running through his head. He knew this was an  
absurd thing

to think of a seventeen-year-old boy, but still he thought it, felt  
it:

a certain elation, maybe equal to the feeling his own mentor  
experienced when the seventeen-year-old Marcus Chalfen first  
walked

into his poky college office. A certain satisfaction. Marcus was



familiar with the mutually beneficial smugness that runs from mentor to

protege and back again (ah, but you are brilliant and deign to spend

your time with me! Ah, but I am brilliant and catch your attention

above all others!). Still, he indulged himself. And he was glad to be

meeting Magid for the first time, alone, though he hoped he was not

guilty of planning it that way. It was more a series of fortunate accidents. The Iqbals' car had broken down, and Marcus's hatchback was

not large. He had persuaded Samad and Alsana that there would not be

enough room for Magid's luggage if they came with him. Millat was in

Chester with KEVIN and had been quoted as saying (in language

reminiscent of his Mafia video days), "I have no brother." Me had an

exam in the morning. Joshua refused to get in any car if Marcus was in

it; in fact, he generally eschewed cars at present, opting for the environmentally ethical option of two wheels. As far as Josh's decision went, Marcus felt as he did about all human decisions of this

kind. One could neither agree nor disagree with them as ideas. There

was no rhyme nor reason for so much of what people did. And in his

present estrangement from Joshua he felt more powerless than ever. It

hurt him that even his own son was not as Chalfenist as he'd hoped. And over the past few months he had built up great expectations of Magid (and this would explain why his pace quickened, gate 28, gate 29, gate 30); maybe he had begun to hope, begun to believe, that Magid would be a beacon for right-thinking Chalfenism even as it died a death here in the wilderness. They would save each other. This couldn't be faith could it, Marcus? He questioned himself directly on this point as he scurried along. For a gate and a half the question unnerved him. Then it passed and the answer was reassuring. Not faith, no, Marcus, not the kind with no eyes. Something stronger, something firmer. Intellectual faith. So. Gate 32. It would be just the two of them, then, meeting at last, having conquered the gap between continents; the teacher, the willing pupil, and then that first, historic handshake. Marcus did not think for a second it could or would go badly. He was no student of history (and science had taught him that the past was where we did things through a glass, darkly, whereas the future was always brighter, a

place where we did things right or at least righter he had no stories  
to scare him concerning a dark man meeting a white man, both with heavy  
expectations, but only one with the power. He had brought no piece of  
white cardboard either, some large banner with a name upon it, like the  
rest of his fellow waiters, and as he looked around gate 32, that  
concerned him. How would they know each other? Then he remembered  
he  
was meeting a twin, and remembering that made him laugh out loud. It  
was incredible and sublime, even to him, that a boy should walk out of  
that tunnel with precisely the same genetic code as a boy he already  
knew, and yet in every conceivable way be different. He would see him  
and yet not see him. He would recognize him and yet that recognition  
would be false. Before he had a chance to think what this meant,  
whether it meant anything, they were coming towards him, the passengers  
of BA flight 261; a talkative but exhausted brown mob who rushed  
towards him like a river, turning off at the last minute as if he were  
the edge of a waterfall. Nomoskdr .. . saldm a lekum .. . kamon dcho?

This is what they said to each other and their friends on the other side of the barrier; some women in full purdah, some in saris, men in strange mixtures of fabrics, leather, tweed, wool and nylon, with little boat-hats that reminded Marcus of Nehru; children in jumpers made by the Taiwanese and rucksacks of bright reds and yellows; pushing through the doors to the

The Return of Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal

concourse of gate 32; meeting aunts, meeting drivers, meeting children, meeting officials, meeting sun-tanned white-toothed airline representatives . . .

“You are Mr. Chalfen.”

Meeting minds. Marcus lifted his head to look at the tall young man standing in front of him. It was Millat’s face, certainly, but it was cleaner cut, and somewhat younger in appearance. The eyes were not so violet, or at least not so violently violet. The hair was floppy in the English public school style and brushed forward. The form was ever so thickly set and healthy. Marcus was no good on clothes, but he could say at least that they were entirely white and that the overall impression was of good materials, well made and soft. And he was

handsome, even Marcus could see that. What he lacked in the  
Byronic

charisma of his brother, he seemed to gain in nobility, with a  
sturdier

chin and a dignified jaw. These were all pins in haystacks,  
however,

these were the differences you notice only because the  
similarity is so

striking. They were twins from their broken noses to their  
huge,

ungainly feet. Marcus was conscious of a very faint feeling of  
disappointment that this was so. But superficial exteriors  
aside,

there was no doubting, Marcus thought, who this boy Magid  
truly

resembled. Hadn't Magid spotted Marcus from a crowd of  
many? Hadn't

they recognized each other, just now, at a far deeper,  
fundamental

level? Not twinned like cities or the two halves of a randomly  
split

ovum, but twinned like each side of an equation: logically,  
essentially, inevitably. As rationalists are wont, Marcus  
abandoned

rationalism for a moment in the face of the sheer wonder of  
the thing.

This instinctive meeting at gate 32 (Magid had strode across  
the floor

and walked directly to him), finding each other like this in a  
great

swell of people, five hundred at least: what were the chances?  
It

seemed as unlikely as the feat of the sperm who conquer the blind

passage towards the egg. As magical as that egg splitting in two.

Magid and Marcus. Marcus and Magid.

“Yes! Magid! We finally meet! I feel as if I know you already well,

I do, but then again I don’t but, bloody hell, how did you know it was

me?”

Magid’s face grew radiant and revealed a lopsided smile of much angelic

charm. “Well, Marcus, my dear man, you are the only white fellow at

gate 32.”

The return of Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim shook the houses of

Iqbal,

Jones and Chalfen considerably. “I don’t recognize him,” said Alsana

to Clara in confidence, after he had spent a few days at home.

“There

is something peculiar about him. When I told him Millat was in

Chester, he did not say a word. Just a stiff-upper lip. He hasn’t

seen his brother in eight years. But not a little squeak, not a

whisperoo. Samad says this is some clone, this is not an Iqbal.

One

hardly likes to touch him. His teeth, he brushes them six times a day.

His underwear, he irons them. It is like sitting down to breakfast

with David Niven.”

Joyce and Me viewed the new arrival with equal suspicion.  
They had

loved the one brother so well and thoroughly for so many  
years, and now

suddenly this new, yet familiar face; like switching on your  
favourite

TV soap only to find a beloved character slyly replaced by  
another

actor with a similar haircut. For the first few weeks they  
simply did

not know what to make of him. As for Samad, if he had had  
his way, he

would have hidden the boy away for ever, locked him under  
the stairs or

sent him to Greenland. He dreaded the inevitable visits of all  
his

relatives (the ones he had boasted to, all the tribes who had  
worshipped at the altar of the framed photograph) when they  
caught an

eye-load of this Iqbal the younger, with his bow-ties and his  
Adam

Smith and his E. M. bloody Forster and his atheism! The only  
up-side

was the change in Alsana. The A-Z? Yes, Samad Miah, it is in  
the top

right-hand drawer, yes, that’s where it is, yes. The first time  
she

did it, he almost jumped out of his skin.

The curse was lifted. No more maybe Samad Miah, no more  
possibly

Samad

Miah. Yes, yes, yes. No, no, no. The fundamentals. It was a blessed relief, but it wasn't enough. His sons had failed him. The pain was excruciating. He shuffled through the restaurant with his eyes to the ground. If aunts and uncles phoned, he deflected questions or simply lied. Millat? He is in Birmingham, working in the mosque, yes, renewing his faith. Magid? Yes, he is marrying soon, yes, a very good young man, wants a lovely Bengali girl, yes, upholder of traditions, yes.

So. First came the musical-living-arrangements, as everybody shifted one place to the right or left. Millat returned at the beginning of October. Thinner, fully bearded and quietly determined not to see his twin on political, religious and personal grounds. "If Magid stays said Millat (De Niro, this time), "I go." And because Millat looked thin and tired and wild-eyed, Samad said Millat could stay, which left no other option but for Magid to stay with the Chalfens (much to Alsana's chagrin) until the situation could be resolved. Joshua, furious at being displaced in his parents' affections by yet another



Iqbal, went to the Joneses', while Me, though ostensibly having returned to her family home (on the concession of a 'year off'), spent all her time at the Chalfens, organizing Marcus's affairs so as to earn money for her two bank accounts (Amazon Jungle Summer '93 and Jamaica 2000), often working deep into the night and sleeping on the couch.

"The children have left us, they are abroad," said Samad over the phone to Archie, in so melancholy a fashion that Archie suspected he was quoting poetry. "They are strangers in strange lands." They've run to the bloody hills, more like," replied Archie grimly. "I tell you, if I had a penny for every time I've seen Me in the past few months He'd have about ten pence. She was never home. Me was stuck between a rock and a hard place, like Ireland, like Israel, like India. A no-win situation. If she stayed home there was Joshua berating her about her involvement with Marcus's mice. Arguments she had no answer for, nor any stomach: should living organisms be patented? Is it right to plant pathogens in animals? Trie didn't know

and so, with her father's instincts, shut her mouth and kept her distance. But if she was at the Chalfens', working away at what had

become a full-time summer job, she had to deal with Magid. Here, the

situation was impossible. Her work for Marcus, which had begun nine

months earlier as a little light filing, had increased seven fold; the

recent interest in Marcus's work meant she was required to deal with

the calls of the media, sackfuls of post, organize appointments; her

pay had likewise increased to that of a secretary. But that was the

problem, she was a secretary, whereas Magid was a confidant, an

apprentice and disciple, accompanying Marcus on trips, observing him in

the laboratory. The golden child. The chosen one. Not only was he

brilliant, but he was charming. Not only was he charming, but he was

generous. For Marcus, he was an answer to prayers. Here was a boy who

could weave the most beautiful moral defences with a professionalism

that belied his years, who helped Marcus formulate arguments he would

not have had the patience to do alone. It was Magid who encouraged him

out of the laboratory, taking him by the hand squinting into the sunlit

world where people were calling for him. People wanted  
Marcus and his  
mouse, and Magid knew how to give it to them. If the New  
Statesman  
needed two thousand words on the patent debate, Magid  
would write while  
Marcus spoke, translating his words into elegant English,  
turning the  
bald statements of a scientist disinterested in moral debates  
into the  
polished arguments of a philosopher. If Channel 4 News  
wanted an  
interview, Magid explained how to sit, how to move one's  
hands, how to  
incline one's head. All this from a boy who had spent the  
greater  
proportion of his life in the Chittagong Hills, without  
television or  
newspaper. Marcus even though he had a lifelong hatred of  
the word, even though he hadn't used it since his own father  
clipped  
his ear for it when he was three was tempted to call it a  
miracle. Or,  
at the very least, extremely fortuitous. The boy was changing  
his life  
and that was extremely fortuitous. For the first time in his life,  
Marcus was prepared to concede faults in himself  
small ones, mind but still.. faults. He had been too insular,  
perhaps, perhaps. He had been aggressive towards public  
interest in  
his work, perhaps, perhaps. He saw room for change. And the  
genius of

it, the master stroke, was that Magid never for a moment let Marcus

feel that Chalfenism was being compromised in any way whatsoever. He

expressed his undying affection and admiration for it every day. All

Magid wanted to do, he explained to Marcus, was bring Chalfenism to the

people. And you had to give the people what they wanted in a form they

could understand. There was something so sublime in the way he said

it, so soothing, so true, that Marcus, who would have spat on such an

argument six months before, gave in without protest.

“There’s room for one more chap this century,” Magid told him (this guy

was a master in flattery), “Freud, Einstein, Crick and Watson ..  
.

There is an empty seat, Marcus. The bus is not quite full capacity.

Ding! Ding! Room for one more

And you can’t beat that for an offer. You can’t fight it. Marcus and

Magid. Magid and Marcus. Nothing else mattered. The two of them were

oblivious to the upset they caused Me, or to the widespread displacement, the strange seismic ripples, that their friendship had

set off in everyone else. Marcus had pulled out, like Mounthatten from

India, or a satiated teenage boy from his latest mate. He abrogated

responsibility, for everything and everybody

- Chalfens, Iqbals and Joneses everything and everyone bar  
Magid and

his mice. All others were fanatics. And Me bit her tongue  
because

Magid was good, and Magid was kind, and Magid walked  
through the

house

in white. But like all manifestations of the Second Coming, all  
saints, saviours and gurus, Magid Iqbal was also, in Neena's  
eloquent

words, a first-class, one hundred

Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1999 ]

per cent, bona fide, total and utter pain in the arse. A typical H  
conversation: ^

"Irie, I am confused." S

"Not right now, Magid, I'm on the phone." API

"I don't wish to take from your valuable time, but it is a matter  
of

some urgency. I am confused."

"Magid, could you just "

"You see. Joyce very kindly bought me these jeans. They are  
called

Levis."

"Look, could I call you back? Right ... OK... . Bye. What,  
Magid?

That was an important call. What is it?"

"So you see I have these beautiful American Levi jeans, white  
jeans,

that Joyce's sister brought back from a holiday in Chicago, the  
Windy

City they call it, though I don't believe there is anything particularly unusual about its climate, considering its proximity to

Canada. My Chicago jeans. Such a thoughtful gift! I was overwhelmed

to receive them. But then I was confused by this label in the inner

lining that states that the jeans are apparently "shrink-to-fit". I asked myself, what can this mean: "shrink to-fit"?"

"They shrink until they fit, Magid. That would be my guess."

"But Joyce was percipient enough to buy them in precisely the right

size, you see? A 32, 34."

"All right, Magid, I don't want to see them. I believe you. So don't

shrink them."

That was my original conclusion, also. But it appears there is no

separate procedure for shrinking them. If one washes the jeans, they

will simply shrink."

"Fascinating."

"And you appreciate at some juncture the jeans will require washing?"

"What's your point, Magid."

"Well, do they shrink by some pre-calculated amount, and if so, by how

much? If the amount was not correct, they would

open themselves up to a great deal of litigation, no? It is no good if

they shrink-to-fit, after all, if they do not shrink-to-fit me.

There

is another possibility, as Jack suggested, that they shrink to the contours of the body. Yet how can such a thing be possible?”

“Well, why don’t you get in the fucking bath with the fucking jeans on

and see what happens?”

But you couldn’t upset Magid with words. He turned the other cheek.

Sometimes hundreds of times a day, like a lollipop lady on ecstasy. He

had this way of smiling at you, neither wounded nor angry, and then

inclining his head (to the exact same angle his father did when taking

an order of curried prawns) in a gesture of total forgiveness.

He had

absolute empathy for everybody, Magid. And it was an unbelievable pain

in the arse.

“Umm, I didn’t mean to ... Oh shit. Sorry. Look... I don’t know ...

you’re just so ... have you heard from Millat?”

“My brother shuns me,” said Magid, that same expression of universal

calm and forgiveness unchanged. “He marks me like Cain because I am a

non-believer. At least not in his god or any others with a name.

Because of this, he refuses to meet me, even to talk on the telephone.”

“Oh, you know, he’ll probably come round. He always was a stubborn

bastard.”

“Of course, yes, you love him,” continued Magid, not giving Irie a

chance to protest. “So you know his habits, his manners. You will

understand, then, how fiercely he takes my conversion. I have converted to Life. I see his god in the millionth position of pi, in

the arguments of the Phaedrus, in a perfect paradox. But that is not

enough for Millat.”

Irie looked him square in the face. There was something in there she

had been unable to put her finger on these four months, because it was

obscured by his youth, his looks, his clean clothes and his personal

hygiene. Now she saw it clearly. He was touched by it the same as Mad

Mary, the Indian with the white face and the blue lips, and the guy who

carried his wig around on a piece

of string. The same as those people who walk the Willesden streets

with no intention of buying Black Label beer, or stealing a stereo,

collecting the dole or pissing in an alleyway. The ones with a wholly

different business. Prophecy. And Magid had it in his face. He wanted to tell you and tell you and tell you.

“Millat demands complete surrender.”

“Sounds typical.”



“He wants me to join Keepers of the Eternal and ‘

“Yeah, KEVIN, I know them. So you have spoken to him.”

“I don’t need to speak to him to know what he thinks. He is my twin. I

don’t wish to see him. I don’t need to. Do you understand the nature

of twins? Do you understand the meaning of the word cleave!

Or

rather, the double meaning that’

“Magid. No offence, but I’ve got work to do.”

Magid gave a little bow. “Naturally. You will excuse me, I have to go

and submit my Chicago jeans to the experiment you proposed.”

Me gritted her teeth, picked up the phone and re dialled the number she

had cut off. It was a journalist (it was always journalists these days), and she had something to read to him. She’d had a crash course

in media relations since her exams, and dealing with them it had taught

her there was no point in trying to deal with each one separately. To

give some unique point of view to the FT and then to the Mirror and

then to the Daily Mail was impossible. It was their job, not yours, to

get the angle, to write their separate book of the huge media bible.

Each to their own. Reporters were factional, fanatical, obsessively

defending their own turf, propounding the same thing day after day. So

it had always been. Who would have guessed that Luke and John would

take such different angles on the scoop of the century, the death of

the Lord? It just went to prove that you couldn't trust these guys.

Irie's job, then, was to give the information as it stood, every time,

verbatim from a piece of paper written by Marcus and Magid, stapled to

the wall.

"All right," said the jour no "Tape's running."

And here Irie stumbled at the first hurdle of PR: believing in what you

sell. It wasn't that she lacked the moral faith. It was more fundamental than that. She didn't believe in it as a physical fact.

She didn't believe it existed. FutureMouse(c) was now such an enormous, spectacular, cartoon of an idea (in every paper's column,

agonized over by jour nos Should it get a patent? Eulogized by hacks

Greatest achievement of the century?), one expected the damn mouse to

stand up and speak by itself. Irie took a deep breath. Though she had

repeated the words many times, they still seemed fantastical, absurd

fiction on the wings of fantasy with more of a dash of Surrey The.

Banks in them:

PRESS RELEASE: 15 OCTOBER 1992

Subject: Launch of FutureMouse(c)

Professor Marcus Chalfen, writer, celebrated scientist and leading

figure of a group of research geneticists from St. Jude's College,

intends to 'launch' his latest 'design' in a public space; to increase

understanding of transgenics and to raise interest and further investment in his work. The design will demonstrate the sophistication

of the work being done on gene manipulation and demystify this much

maligned branch of biological research. It will be accompanied by a

full exhibition, a lecture hall, a multimedia area and interactive games for children. It will be funded in part by the government's

Millennial Science Commission, with additional monies from business and

industry.

A two-week-old Future Mouse\* is to be put on display at the Perret

Institute in London on 31 December 1992. There it will remain on

public display until 31 December 1999. This mouse is genetically

normal except for a select group of novel genes that are added to the

genome.

A

DNA clone of these genes is' injected into the fertilized mouse egg,  
thus linking them to the chromosomal DNA in the zygote,  
which is  
subsequently inherited by cells of the resulting embryo. Before  
injection into the germ line, these genes are custom-designed  
so they  
can be 'turned on' and expressed only in specific mouse tissue  
and  
along a predictable timetable. The mouse will be the site for an  
experiment into the ageing of cells, the progression of cancer  
within  
cells, and a few other matters that will serve as surprises along  
the  
way!

The journalist laughed. "Jesus. What the fuck does that mean?"

"I dunno," said Me. "Surprises, I guess." She continued:

The mouse will live the seven years it is on display, roughly  
double

the normal life expectancy of a mouse. The mouse  
development is

retarded, therefore, at a ratio of two years for every one. At the  
end

of the first year the SV40 large-T oncogene, which the mouse  
carries in

the insulin-producing pancreas cells, will express itself in  
pancreatic

carcinomas that will continue to develop at a retarded pace  
throughout

its life. At the end of the second year the H-ras oncogene in its  
skin

cells will begin to express itself in multiple benign papillomas that

an observer will be able to see clearly three months later with the

naked eye. Four years into the experiment the mouse will begin to lose

its ability to produce melanin by means of a slow, programmed eradication of the enzyme tyrosinase. At this point the mouse will

lose all its pigmentation and become albino: a white mouse. If no

external or unexpected interference occurs, the mouse will live until

31 December 1999, dying within the month after that date.

The Future

Mouse6 experiment offers the

public a unique opportunity to see a life and death in 'close-up'. The

opportunity to witness for themselves a technology that might yet slow

the progress of disease, control the process of ageing and eliminate

genetic defect. The Future Mouse8 holds out the tantalizing promise of

a new phase in human history where we are not victims of the random but

instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate.

"Bloody hell," said the jour no "Scary shit

"Yeah, I guess," said Me vacantly (she had ten more calls to make this

morning). "Do you want me to post on some of the photographic

material?”

“Yeah, go on. Save me going through the archive. Cheers.”

Just as Me put down the phone, Joyce flew into the room like a hippy

comet, a great stream of black fringed velvet, kaftan and multiple silk

scarves.

“Don’t use the phone! I’ve told you before. We’ve got to keep the

phone free. Millat might be trying to ring.”

Four days earlier Millat had missed a psychiatrist’s appointment Joyce

had arranged for him. He had not been seen since. Everyone knew he

was with KEVIN, and everyone knew he had no intention of ringing

Joyce.

Everyone except Joyce.

“It’s simply essential that I talk with him if he rings. We’re so close to a breakthrough. Marjorie’s almost certain it’s Attention

Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.”

“And how come you know all this? I thought Marjorie was a doctor. What

the fuck happened to doctor-patient privilege?”

“Oh, Me, don’t be silly. She’s a friend too. She’s just trying to keep me informed.”

“Middle-class mafia, more like.”

“Oh really. Don’t be so hysterical. You’re getting more hysterical by

the day. Look, I need you to keep off the phone.”

“I know. You said.”

“Because if Marjorie’s right, and it is ADD, he really needs to get to

a doctor and some methylphenidate. It’s a very debilitating condition.”

“Joyce, he hasn’t got a disorder, he’s just a Muslim. There are one

billion of them. They can’t all have ADD.”

Joyce took in a little gasp of air. “I think you’re being very cruel.

That’s exactly the kind of comment that isn’t helpful.”

She stalked over to the bread board, tearfully cut off a huge lump of

cheese and said, “Look. The most important thing is that I get the two

of them to face each other. It’s time.”

Me looked dubious. “Why is it time?”

Joyce popped the lump of cheese into her mouth. “It’s time because

they need each other

“But if they don’t want to, they don’t want to.”

“Sometimes people don’t know what they want. They don’t know what

they

need. Those boys need each other like .. .” Joyce thought for a moment. She was bad with metaphor. In a garden you never planted

something where something else was meant to be. “They need each other

like Laurel and Hardy, like Crick needed Watson ‘

“Like East Pakistan needed West Pakistan.”

“Well, I don’t think that’s very funny, Me.”

“I’m not laughing, Joyce.”

Joyce cut more cheese from the block, tore two hunks of bread from a

loaf, and sandwiched the three together.

“The fact is both these boys have serious emotional problems and it’s

not helped by Millat refusing to see Magid. It upsets him so much.

They’ve been split by their religions, by their cultures. Can you

imagine the trauma?”

Me wished at that moment she had allowed Magid to tell her to tell her

to tell her. She would at least have had information. She would have

had something to use against Joyce. Because if you listen to prophets,

they give you ammunition. The nature of twins. The millionth position

of pi (do infinite numbers have

beginnings?). And most of all, the double meaning of the word cleave.

Did he know which was worse, which more traumatic: pulling together or

tearing apart?

“Joyce, why don’t you worry about your own family for once? Just for a

change. What about Josh? When’s the last time you saw Josh?”

Joyce’s upper lip stiffened. Josh is in Glastonbury.” “Right.



Glastonbury's been over two months, Joyce." "He's doing a little travelling. He said he might." "And who's he with? You don't know anything about those people. Why don't you worry about that for a while, and keep the fuck out of everybody else's business." Joyce didn't even flinch at this. It is hard to explain just how familiar teenage abuse was to Joyce; she got it so regularly these days from her own children and other people's that a swearword or a cruel comment just couldn't affect her. She simply weeded them out. "The reason I don't worry about Josh, as you well know," said Joyce, smiling broadly and speaking in her Chalfenguide-to-parenting voice, 'is because he's just trying to get a little bit of attention. Rather like you are at this moment. It's perfectly natural for well-educated middle-class children to act up at his age." (Unlike many others around this time, Joyce felt no shame about using the term 'middle class'. In the Chalfen lexicon the middle classes were the inheritors of the enlightenment, the creators of the welfare state, the intellectual elite and the source of all culture. Where they got this idea, it's hard to say.) "But they soon come back into the fold. I'm

perfectly confident about Joshua. He's just acting up against his father and it will pass. But Magid has some real problems. I've been doing my research, Me. And there are just so many signs. I can read them."

"Well, you must be misreading them," Me shot back, because a battle was about to begin, she could sense it. "Magid's fine. I was just talking to him. He's a Zen master. He's the most fucking serene individual I ever met in my life. He's working with Marcus, which is what he wants to do, and he's happy. How about we all try a policy of non-involvement for once? A little laissez-faire? Magid's fine."

The, darling," said Joyce, moving Me along one chair and positioning herself next to the phone. "What you never understand is that people are extreme. It would be wonderful if everyone was like your father, carrying on as normal even if the ceiling's coming down around his ears. But a lot of people can't do that. Magid and Millat display extreme behaviour. It's all very well saying laissez-faire and being terribly clever about it, but the bottom line is Millat's going to get

himself into terrible trouble with these fundamentalist people.  
Terrible trouble. I hardly sleep for worrying about him. You read  
about these groups in the news . . . And it's putting a terrible  
mental  
strain on Magid. Now, am I meant to just sit back and watch  
them tear  
themselves apart, just because their parents no, I will say it,  
because  
it's true just because their parents don't seem concerned? I've  
only  
ever had those boys' welfare at heart, you of all people should  
know  
that. They need help. I just walked past the bathroom and  
Magid is  
sitting in the bath with his jeans on. Yes. All right? Now," said  
Joyce, serene as a bovine, "I should think I know a  
traumatized child  
when I see one."

#### 17 Crisis Talks and Eleventh-hour Tactics

"Mrs. Iqbal? It's Joyce Chalfen. Mrs. Iqbal? I can see you  
quite  
clearly. It's Joyce. I really think we should talk. Could you . . .  
umm . . . open the door?"  
Yes, she could. Theoretically, she could. But in this  
atmosphere of  
extremity, with warring sons and disparate factions, Alsana  
needed a  
tactic of her own. She'd done silence, and word-strikes and  
food  
consumption (the opposite of a hunger-strike; one gets bigger  
in order

to intimidate the enemy), and now she was attempting a sit-down

protest.

“Mrs. Iqbal . . . just five minutes of your time. Magid’s really very

upset about all of this. He’s worried about Millat and so am I. Just

five minutes, Mrs. Iqbal, please.”

Alsana didn’t rise from her seat. She simply continued along the hem,

keeping her eye on the black thread as it shuttled from one cog to the

next and down into the PVC, pressing the pedal of the Singer furiously,

as if kicking the flank of a horse she wished to ride into the sunset.

“Well, you may as well let her in,” said Samad wearily, emerging from

the lounge, where Joyce’s persistence had disturbed his appreciation of

The Antiques Roadshow. (Aside from The Equalizer, starring that great

moral arbiter Edward Woodward, it was Samad’s favourite programme.

He

had spent fifteen long tele visual years waiting for some cockney

housewife to pull a trinket of Mangal Pande’s out of her handbag. Oh,

Mrs. Winterbottom, now this is very exciting. What we have here is

the barrel of the musket belonging to ... He sat with the phone under

his right hand so that in the event of such a scenario he could phone

the BBC and demand the said Winterbottom's address and asking price. So

far

only Mutiny medals and a pocket watch belonging to Havelock, but still

he watched.)

He peered down the hallway at the shadowy form of Joyce through the

glass and scratched his testicles, sadly. Samad was in his television

mode: garish V-neck, stomach swelling like a tight hot-water bottle

beneath it, long moth-eaten dressing gown, and a pair of paisley

boxer-shorts from which two stick legs, the legacy of his youth,

protruded. In his television mode action escaped him. The box in the

corner of the room (which he liked to think of as an antique of its

kind, encased in wood and on four legs like some Victorian robot)

sucked him in and sapped all energy.

“Well, why don't you do something, Mr. Iqbal? Make her go away.

Instead of standing there with your flabby gut and your tiny willy on

display.”

Samad grunted and tucked the cause of all his troubles, two huge hairy

balls and a defeated-looking limp prick, back into the inner lining of

his shorts.

“She won’t go away,” he murmured. “And if she does, she will only

return with reinforcements.”

“But why? Hasn’t she caused enough trouble?” said Alsana loudly, loud

enough for Joyce. “She has her own family, no? Why does she not go

and for a change mess them up? She has boys, four boys? How many

boys

does she want? How bloody many?”

Samad shrugged, went into the kitchen drawer and fished out the

earphones that could be plugged into the television and thus short-circuit the outside world. He, like Marcus, had disengaged.

Leave them, was his feeling. Leave them to their battles.

“Oh thank you,” said Alsana caustically, as her husband retreated to

his Hugh Scully and his pots and guns. “Thank you, Samad Miah, for

your oh so valuable contribution. This is what the men do. They make

the mess, the century ends, and they leave the women to clear up the

shit. Thank you, husband!”

She increased the speed of her sewing, dashing out the seam,

progressing down the inner leg, while the Sphinx of the letterbox

continued to ask unanswerable questions.

“Mrs. Iqbal.. . please can we talk? Is there any reason why we shouldn’t talk? Do we have to behave like children?”

Alsana began to sing.

“Mrs. Iqbal? Please. What can this possibly achieve?”

Alsana sang louder.

“I must tell you,” said Joyce, strident as ever, even through three

panels of wood and double glazing, “I’m not here for my health. Whether

you want me to be involved or not, I am, you see? I am.”

Involved. At least that was the right word, Alsana reflected, as she

lifted her foot off the pedal, and let the wheel spin a few times alone

before coming to a squeaky halt. Sometimes, here in England, especially at bus-stops and on the daytime soaps, you heard people say

“We’re involved with each other,” as if this were a most wonderful

state to be in, as if one chose it and enjoyed it. Alsana never thought of it that way. Involved happened over a long period of time,

pulling you in like quicksand. Involved is what befell the moon-faced

Alsana Begum and the handsome Samad Miah one week after they’d been

pushed into a Delhi breakfast room together and informed they were to

marry. Involved was the result when Clara Bowden met Archie Jones at the bottom of some stairs. Involved swallowed up a girl called Ambrosia and a boy called Charlie (yes, Clara had told her that sorry tale) the second they kissed in the larder of a guest house. Involved is neither good, nor bad. It is just a consequence of living, a consequence of occupation and immigration, of empires and expansion, of living in each other's pockets . . . one becomes involved and it is a long trek back to being uninvolved. And the woman was right, one didn't do it for one's health. Nothing this late in the century was done with health in mind. Alsana was no dummy when it came to the Modern Condition. She watched the talk shows, all day long she watched the talk shows My wife slept with my brother, My mother won't stay out of my boyfriend's life and the microphone holder, whether it be Tanned Man with White Teeth or Scary Married Couple, always asked the same damn silly question: But why do you feel the need . . . ? Wrong! Alsana had to explain it to



them through the screen. You blockhead; they are not wanting this,

they are not willing it they are just involved, see? They walk IN and

they get trapped between the revolving doors of those two v's.

Involved. The years pass, and the mess accumulates and here we are.

Your brother's sleeping with my ex-wife's niece's second cousin.

Involved. Just a tired, inevitable fact. Something in the way Joyce

said it, involved

wearied, slightly acid suggested to Alsana that the word meant the same

thing to her. An enormous web you spin to catch yourself.

“OK, OK, lady, five minutes, only. I have three cat suits to do this

morning come hell or high water.”

Alsana opened the door and Joyce walked into the hallway, and for a

moment they surveyed their opposite number, guessing each other's

weight like nervous prize fighters prior to mounting the scales. They

were definitely a match for Teach other. What Joyce lacked in chest,

she made up in bottom. Where Alsana revealed a weakness in delicate

features a thin and pretty nose, light eyebrows she compensated with

the huge pudge of her arms, the dimples of maternal power.

For, after

all, she was the mother here. The mother of the boys in question. She

held the trump card, should she be forced to play it.

“Okey-do key then,” said Alsana, squeezing through the narrow kitchen

door, beckoning Joyce to follow.

“Is it tea or is it coffee?”

“Tea,” said Joyce firmly. “Fruit if possible.”

“Fruit not possible. Not even Earl Grey is possible. I come from the

land of tea to this godawful country and then I can’t afford a proper

cup of it. P.G. Tips is possible and nothing else.”

Joyce winced. “P.G. Tips, please, then.”

“As you wish.”

The mug of tea plonked in front of Joyce a few minutes later was grey

with a rim of scum and thousands of little microbes flitting through

it, less micro than one would have hoped. Alsana gave Joyce a moment

to consider it.

“Just leave it for a while,” she explained gaily. “My husband hit a

water pipe when digging a trench for some onions. Our water is a

little funny ever since. It may give you the running shits or it may

not. But give it a minute and it clears. See?” Alsana gave it an unconvincing stir, sending yet larger chunks of unidentified matter

bubbling up to the surface. “You see? Fit for Shah Jahan himself!”

Joyce took a tentative sip and then pushed it to one side.

“Mrs. Iqbal, I know we haven’t been on the best of terms in the past,

but-

“Mrs. Chalfen,” said Alsana, putting up her long forefinger to stop

Joyce speaking. “There are two rules that everybody knows, from PM to

jinrickshaw-wallah. The first is, never let your country become a

trading post. Very important. If my ancestors had followed this advice, my situation presently would be very different, but such is

life. The second is, don’t interfere in other people’s family business. Milk?”

“No, no, thank you. A little sugar .. .”

Alsana dumped a huge heaped tablespoon into Joyce’s cup.

“You think I am interfering?”

“I think you have interfered.”

“But I just want the twins to see each other.”

“You are the reason they are apart.”

“But Magid is only living with us because Millat won’t live with him

here. And Magid tells me your husband can barely stand the sight of

him.”

Alsana, little pressure-cooker that she was, blew. “And why can’t he?”

Because you, you and your husband, have involved Magid in something so

contrary to our culture, to our beliefs,

that we barely recognize him! You have done that! He is at odds with

his brother now. Impossible conflict! Those green bow-tied bastards:

Millat is high up with them now. Very involved. He doesn't tell me,

but I hear. They call themselves followers of Islam, but they are

nothing but thugs in a gang roaming Kilburn like all the other lunatics. And now they are sending out the what are they called

folded-paper trouble.”

“Leaflets?”

“Leaflets. Leaflets about your husband and his ungodly mouse. Trouble

brewing, yes sir. I found them, hundreds of them under his bed.”

Alsana stood up, drew a key out of her apron pocket and opened a

kitchen cupboard stacked full of green leaflets, which cascaded on to

the floor. “He's disappeared again, three days. I have to put them

back before he finds out they are gone. Take some, go on, lady, take

them, go and read them to Magid. Show him what you have done. Two

boys driven to different ends of the world. You have made a war

between my sons. You are splitting them apart!”

A minute earlier Millat had turned the key ever so softly in the front

door. Since then he had been standing in the hallway, listening to the

conversation and smoking a fag. It was great! It was like listening

to two big Italian matriarchs from opposing clans battle it out. Millat

loved clans. He had joined KEVIN because he loved clans (and the

outfit and the bow tie), and he loved clans at war. Marjorie the analyst had suggested that this desire to be part of a clan was a

result of being, effectively, half a twin. Marjorie the analyst suggested that Millat’s religious conversion was more likely born out

of a need for sameness within a group than out of any intellectually

formulated belief in the existence of an all-powerful creator. Maybe.

Whatever. As far as he was concerned, you could analyse it until the

cows came home, but nothing beat being all dressed in black, smoking a

fag, listening to two mammas battle it out over you in operatic style:

442.

“You claim to want to help my boys, but you have done nothing but drive

a wedge between them. It is too late now. I have lost my family. Why

don’t you go back to yours and leave us alone?”

“You think it’s paradise over at my house? My family has been split by

this too. Joshua isn’t speaking to Marcus. Did you know that?  
And

those two were so close .. Joyce looked a bit weepy, and  
Alsana

reluctantly passed her the kitchen roll. “I’m trying to help all  
of

us. And the best way to start is to get Magid and Millat talking  
before this escalates any further than it has. I think we can  
both

agree on that. If we could find some neutral place, some  
ground where

they both felt no pressures or outside influence

“But there are no neutral places any more! I agree they should  
meet,

but where and how? You and your husband have made  
everything

impossible.”

“Mrs. Iqbal, with all due respect, the problems in your family  
began

long before either my husband or I had any involvement.”

“Maybe, maybe, Mrs. Chalfen, but you are the salt in the  
wound, yes?

You are the one extra chilli pepper in the hot sauce.”

Millat heard Joyce draw her breath in sharply.

“Again, with respect, I can’t believe that it is the case. I think  
this has been going on for a very long time. Millat told me that  
some

years ago you burnt all his things. I mean, it’s just an example,  
but

I don’t think you understand the trauma that kind of thing has

inflicted on Millat. He's very damaged."

"Oh, we are going to play the tit for the tat. I see. And I am to be

the tit. Not that it is any of your big-nose business, but I burnt those things to teach him a lesson to respect other people's lives!"

"A strange way of showing it, if you don't mind me saying."

"I do mind! I do mind! What do you know of it?"

"Only what I see. And I see that Millat has a lot of mental scars.

You may not be aware, but I've been funding sessions for Millat with my

analyst. And I can tell you, Millat's inner life his karma,

Magid, Mil Ut and Marcus 1992, 1999

I suppose you might call it in Bengali the whole world of his subconscious shows serious illness."

In fact, the problem with Millat's subconscious (and he didn't need

Marjorie to tell him this) was that it was basically split-level.

On

the one hand he was trying real hard to live as Hifan and the others

suggested. This involved getting his head around four main criteria.

1. To be ascetic in one's habits (cut down on the booze, thespliff, the women).

2. To remember always the glory of Muhammad (peace be upon Him!)

and

the might of the Creator.

3. To grasp a full intellectual understanding of KEVIN and the Qur'an.

4. To purge oneself of the taint of the West.

He knew that he was HE VIN 's big experiment, and he wanted to give it

his best shot. In the first three areas he was doing fine. He smoked

the odd fag and put away a Guinness on occasion (can't say fairer than

that), but he was very successful with both the evil weed and the

temptations of the flesh. He no longer saw Alexandra Andrusier, Polly

Houghton or Rosie Dew (though he paid occasional visits to one Tanya

Chapman, a very small redhead who understood the delicate nature of his

dilemma and would give him a thorough blow job without requiring Millat

to touch her at all. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement: she was

the daughter of a judge and delighted in horrifying the old goat, and

Millat needed ejaculation with no actual active participation on his

side). On the scriptural side of things, he thought Muhammad (peace be

upon Him!) was a right geezer, a great bloke, and he was in awe of the

Creator, in the original meaning of that word: dread, fear, really

shit-scared and Hifan said that was correct, that was how it should be.



He understood this idea that his religion was not one based on faith

not like

the Christians, the Jews, et al. but one that could be intellectually

proved by the best minds. He understood the idea. But, sadly, Millat

was far from possessing one of the best minds, or even a reasonable

mind; intellectual proof or disproof was beyond him. Still, he understood that to rely on faith, as his own father did, was contemptible. And no one could say he didn't give one hundred per cent

to the cause. That seemed enough for HE VIN. They were more than

happy with his real forte, which was the delivery of the thing. The

presentation. For instance, if a nervous-looking woman came up to the

KEVIN stall in Willesden Library and asked about the faith, Millat

would lean over the desk, grab her hand, press it and say: Not faith,

Sister. We do not deal in faith here. Spend five minutes with my

Brother Rakesh and he will intellectually prove to you the existence of

the Creator. The Qur'an is a document of science, a document of

rational thought. Spend five minutes, Sister, if you care for your

future beyond this earth. And to top it off, he could usually sell her

a few tapes (Ideological Warfare or Let the Scholars Beware),  
two quid

each. Or even some of their literature, if he was on top form.

Everyone at KEVIN was mightily impressed. So far so good.

As for

KEVIN's more unorthodox programmes of direct action,  
Millat was right

in there, he was their greatest asset, he was in the forefront, the  
first into battle come jihad, cool as fuck in a crisis, a man of  
action, like Brando, like Pacino, like Liotta. But even as Millat  
reflected on this with pride in his mother's hallway, his heart  
sank.

For therein lay the problem. Number four. Purging oneself of  
the

West.

Now, he knew, he knew that if you wanted an example of the  
moribund,

decadent, degenerate, over-sexed, violent state of Western  
capitalist

culture and the logical endpoint of its obsession with personal  
freedoms (Leaflet: Way Out West), you couldn't do much  
better than

Hollywood cinema. And he knew (how many times had he  
been through it

with Hifan?) that the 'gangster' movie, the Mafia genre, was  
the worst

example of that. And yet ... it was the

hardest thing to let go. He would give every spliff he'd ever  
smoked

and every woman he'd ever fucked to retrieve the films his  
mother had

burnt, or even the few he had purchased more recently which Hifan had

confiscated. He had torn up his Rocky Video membership and thrown

away

the Iqbal video recorder to distance himself from direct temptation,

but was it his fault if Channel 4 ran a De Niro season? Could he help

it if Tony Bennett's "Rags to Riches" floated out of a clothes shop and

entered his soul? It was his most shameful secret that whenever he

opened a door a car door, a car boot, the door of KEVIN's meeting hall

or the door of his own house just now the opening of GoodFdlas ran

through his head and he found this sentence rolling around in what he

presumed was his subconscious:

As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster.

He even saw it like that, in that font, like on the movie poster. And

when he found himself doing it, he tried desperately not to, he tried

to fix it, but Millat's mind was a mess and more often than not he'd

end up pushing upon the door, head back, shoulders forward, Liotta

style, thinking:

As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a

Muslim.

He knew, in a way, this was worse, but he just couldn't help it.

He

kept a white handkerchief in his top pocket, he always carried dice,

even though he had no idea what a crap game actually was, he loved long

camel jackets and he could cook a killer seafood linguine, though a

lamb curry was completely beyond him. It was all hara am he knew

that.

Worst of all was the anger inside him. Not the righteous anger of a

man of God, but the seething, violent anger of a gangster, a

juvenile delinquent, determined to prove himself, determined to run the

clan, determined to beat the rest. And if the game was God, if the

game was a fight against the West, against the presumptions of Western

science, against his brother or Marcus Chalfen, he was determined to

win it. Millat stubbed his fag out against the bannister. It pissed

him off that these were not pious thoughts. But they were in the right

ball park, weren't they? He had the fundamentals, didn't he?

Clean

living, praying (five times a day without fail), fasting, working for

the cause, spreading the message? And that was enough, wasn't it?

Maybe. Whatever. Either way, there was no going back now.  
Yeah, he'd

meet Magid, he'd meet him . . . they'd have a good face-off,  
he'd come

out of it the stronger; he'd call his brother a little cock-a-roach,  
and walk out of that tete-a-tete even more determined to fulfill  
his

destiny. Millat straightened his green bow-tie and slunk  
forward like

Liotta (all menace and charm) and pushed open the kitchen  
door (Ever

since I can remember. . . ), waiting for two pairs of eyes, like  
two of

Scorsese's cameras, to pan on to his face and focus.

"Millat!"

"Amma."

"Millat!"

"Joyce."

(Great, supwoib, so we all know each other, went Millat's  
inner

monologue in Paul Sorvino's voice, Now let's get down to  
business.)

"All right, gentlemen. There is no reason to be alarmed. It is  
simply

my son. Magid, Mickey. Mickey, Magid."

O'Connell's once more. Because Alsana had eventually  
conceded Joyce's

point, but did not care to dirty her hands. Instead, she  
demanded

Samad take Magid 'out somewhere' and spend an evening  
persuading him

into meeting with Millat. But the only 'out' Samad understood was

O'Connell's and the prospect of

taking his son there was repellent. He and his wife had a thorough

wrestle in the garden to settle the point, and he was confident of

success until Alsana fooled him with a dummy trip, then an armlock-knee-groin combination. So here he was: O'Connell's, and it

was as bad a choice as he'd suspected. When he, Archie and Magid

walked in, trying to make a low-key entrance, there had been widespread

consternation amongst both staff and clientele. The last stranger

anybody remembered arriving with Arch and Sam was Samad's

accountant, a

small rat-faced man who tried to talk to people about their savings (as

if people in O'Connell's had savings!) and asked not once but twice for

blood pudding, though it had been explained to him that pig was

unavailable. That had been around 1987 and nobody had enjoyed it. And

now what was this? A mere five years later and here comes another one,

this time all dressed in white insultingly clean for a Friday evening

in O'Connell's and way below the unspoken minimum age requirement

(thirty-six). What was Samad trying to do?

“Whattareya tryin’ to do to us, Sammy?” asked Johnny, a mournful-looking stick of an ex-Orangeman, who was leaning over the hot

plate to collect some bubble and squeak. “Overrun us, are ya or sum

thing

“Oo ‘im?” demanded Denzel, who had not yet died.

“Your batty bwoy?” inquired Clarence, who was also, by God’s grace,

hanging on in there.

“All right, gentlemen. There is no reason to be alarmed. It is simply

my son. Magid, Mickey. Mickey, Magid.”

Mickey looked a little dumbfounded by this introduction, and just stood

there for a minute, a soggy fried egg hanging off his spatula.

“Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal,” said Magid serenely. “It is a

great honour to meet you, Michael. I have heard such a great deal

about you.”

Which was odd, because Samad had never told him a thing.

Mickey continued to look over Magid’s shoulder to Samad for confirmation. “You what? You mean the one you, er, sent back ‘ome?

This is Magid?”

“Yes, yes, this is Magid,” replied Samad rapidly, pissed off by all the

attention the boy was getting. “Now, Archibald and I will have our

usuals and'

"Magid Iqbal," repeated Mickey slowly. "Well, I bloody never. You

know you'd never guess you was an Iqbal. You've got a very trusting,

well, kind of sympathetic face, if you get me."

"And yet I am an Iqbal, Michael," said Magid, laying that look of total

empathy on Mickey and the other dregs of humanity huddled around the

hot counter, 'though I have been gone a long time."

"Say that again. Well, this is a turn-up for the books. I've got your

... wait a minute, let me get this right ... your

great-great-grandfather up there, see?"

"I noticed it the moment I came in, and I can assure you, Michael, my

soul is very grateful for it," said Magid, beaming like an angel.

"It

makes me feel at home, and, as this place is dear to my father and his

friend Archibald Jones I feel certain it shall also be dear to me.

They

have brought me here, I think, to discuss important matters, and I for

one can think of no better place for them, despite your clearly debilitating skin condition."

Mickey was simply bowled over by that, and could not conceal his

pleasure, addressing his reply both to Magid and the rest of

O'Connell's.



“Speaks fuckin’ nice, don’t he? Sounds like a right fuckin’ Olivier.

Queen’s fucking English and no mistake. What a nice fella. You’re the

kind of clientele I could do wiv in here, Magid, let me tell you.

Civilized and that. And don’t you worry about my skin, it don’t get

anywhere near the food and it don’t give me much trouble.

Cor, what a

gentleman. You do feel like you should watch your mouth around him,

dontcha?”

“Mine and Archibald’s usual, then, please, Mickey,” said Samad.

Till leave my son to make up his mind. We will be over by the pinball.” J|

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mickey, not bothering or able to tun his \*5i gaze

from Magid’s dark eyes. IB

“Dat a lovely suit you gat dere,” murmured Denzel, stroking “IH the

white linen wistfully. “Dat’s what de Englishmen use taw ear back home

in Jamaica, remember dat, Clarence:1’

Clarence nodded slowly, dribbling a little, struck by the beatific.

“Go on, get out of it, the pair of you,” grumbled Mickey, shooin’ them

away, Till bring it over, all right? I want to talk to Magid here.

Growing boy, he’s got to eat. So: what is it I can get you, Magid?”

Mickey leant over the counter, all concern, like an over-attentive shop

girl “Eggs? Mushrooms? Beans? Fried sice?”

“I think,” replied Magid, slowly surveying the dusty chalkboard menus

on the wall, and then turning back to Mickey, his face illumined, “I

should like a bacon sandwich. Yes, that is it. I would love a juicy,

yet well-done, tomato ketchup-ed bacon sandwich. On brown.”

Oh, the struggle that could be seen on Mickey’s kisser at that moment!

Oh, the gargoylian contortions! It was a battle between the favour of

the most refined customer he had ever had and the most hallowed, sacred

rule of O’Connell’s Pool House. no pork.

Mickey’s left eye twitched.

“Don’t want a nice plate of scrambled? I do a lovely scrambled eggs,

don’t I, Johnny?”

“I’d be a liar if I said ya didn’t,” said Johnny loyally from his table, even though Mickey’s eggs were famously grey and stiff, I’d be a

terrible liar, on my mother’s life, I would.”

Magid wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

“All right what about mushrooms and beans? Omelette and chips? No

better chips in the Finchley Road. Come on, son,” he pleaded, desperate. “You’re a Muslim, int ya? You don’t want to break your

father's heart with a bacon sandwich.”

“My father's heart will not be broken by a bacon sandwich. It is far more likely that my father's heart will break from the result of

a build-up of saturated fat which is in turn a result of eating in your

establishment for fifteen years. One wonders,” said Magid evenly, ‘if

a case could be made, a legal case, you understand, against individuals

in the food service industry who fail to label their meals with a clear

fat content or general health warning. One wonders.”

All this was delivered in the sweetest, most melodious voice, and with

no hint of threat. Poor Mickey didn't know what to make of it.

“Well, of course,” said Mickey nervously, ‘hypothetically that is an

interesting question. Very interesting.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

Mickey fell silent and spent a minute elaborately polishing the top of

the hot plate, an activity he indulged in about once every ten years.

“There. See your face in that. Now. Where were we?”

“A bacon sandwich.”

At the sound of the word ‘bacon’, a few ears began to twitch at the

front tables.

“If you could keep your voice down a little

“A bacon sandwich,” whispered Magid.

“Bacon. Right. Well, I’ll have to nip next door, ‘cos I ain’t got none at present . . . but you just sit down wiv your dad and I’ll bring

it over. It’ll cost a bit more, like. What wiv the extra effort, you

know. But don’t worry, I’ll bring it over. And tell Archie not to worry if he ain’t got the cash. A Luncheon Voucher will do.”

“You are very kind, Michael. Take one of these.” Magid reached into

his pocket and pulled out a piece of folded paper.

“Oh, fuck me, another leaflet? You can’t fucking move pardon my French

but you can’t move for leaflets in Norf London these days. My brother

Abdul-Colin’s always loading me wiv ‘em an’ all. But seem’ as it’s you

... go on, hand it over.”

45i

“It’s not a leaflet,” said Magid, collecting his knife and fork from

the tray. “It is an invitation to a launch.”

“You what?” said Mickey excitedly (in the grammar of his daily

tabloid, launch meant lots of cameras, expensive-looking birds with

huge tits, red carpets). “Really?”

Millat passed him the invite. “Incredible things are to be seen and

heard there.”

“Oh,” said Mickey, disappointed, eyeing the expensive piece of card.

“I’ve heard about this bloke and his mouse.” He had heard about this

bloke and his mouse in this same tabloid; it was a kind of filler between the tits and the more tits and it was underneath the byline:

one bloke and his mouse.

“Seems a bit dodgy to me, messing wiv God an’ all that.

“Sides I ain’t

that scientifically minded, you see. Go right over my head.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. One just has to look at the thing from a perspective that interests you personally. Take your skin, for example.”

“I wish somebody would fuckin’ take it,” joked Mickey amiably. “I’ve

‘ad a-fucking-nuff of it.”

Magid did not smile.

“You suffer from a serious endocrine disorder. By which I mean, it is

not simply adolescent acne caused by the over-excretion of sebum, but a

condition that comes from a hormonal defect. I presume your family

share it?”

“Er . . . yeah, as it happens. All my brothers. And my son, Abdul-Jimmy. All spotty bastards.”

“But you would not like it if your son were to pass on the condition to

his sons.”

“Obviously, no. I ‘ad terrible trouble in school. I carry a knife to this day, Magid. But I can’t see how that can be avoided, to be honest with you. Been goin’ on for decades.”

“But you see,” said Magid (and what an expert he was at the personal interest angle!), ‘it can certainly be avoided. It would be perfectly simple and much misery would be saved. That is the kind of thing we will be discussing at the launch.”

“Oh, well, if that’s the case, you know, count me in. I thought it was just some bloody mutant-mouse or som mink you see. But if that’s the case .. .”

“Thirty-first of December,” said Magid, before walking down the aisle to his father. “It will be wonderful to see you there

“You took your time,” said Archie, as Magid approached their table.

“Did you come by way of the Ganges?” inquired Samad irritably, shifting up to make space for him.

“Pardon me, please. I was just speaking with your friend, Michael. A

very decent chap. Oh, before I forget, Archibald, he said that it would be perfectly acceptable to pay in Luncheon Vouchers this evening.”

Archie almost choked on a little toothpick he was chewing on. “He said

what"? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. Now, Abba, shall we begin?"

"There's nothing to begin," growled Samad, refusing to look him in the

eye. "I am afraid we are already far into whatever diabolic plot fate

has in store for me. And I want you to know, that I am not here of my

own volition but because your mother begged me to do this and because I

have more respect for that poor woman than either you or your brother

ever had."

Magid released a wry, gentle smile. "I thought you were here because

Amma beat you in the wrestling."

Samad scowled. "Oh yes, ridicule me. My own son. Do you never read

the Qur'an? Do you not know the duties a son owes to his father? You

sicken me, Magid Mubtasim."

"Oi, Sammy, old man," said Archie, playing with the ketchup, trying to

keep things light. "Steady on."

"No, I will not steady on! This boy is a thorn in my foot."

"Surely "side"?"

"Archibald, stay out of this."

Archie returned his attention to the pepper and salt cellars, IB trying to pour the former into the latter. tjlj

"Right you are, Sam." 3

“I have a message to deliver and I will deliver it and no more.  
\*B

Magid, your mother wants you to meet with Millat. The woman Chalfen

will arrange it. It is their opinion that the two of you must talk

“And what is your opinion, Abba?”

“You don’t want to hear my opinion.”

“On the contrary, Abba, I would very much like to hear it.”

“Simply, I think it is a mistake. I think you two can do no possible

good for each other. I think you should go to opposite corners of the

earth. I think I have been cursed with two sons more dysfunctional

than Mr. Cain and Mr. Abel.”

“I am perfectly willing to meet with him, Abba. If he will meet with me.”

“Apparently he is willing, this is what I am told. I don’t know. I

don’t talk with him any more than I talk with you. I am too busy at

the moment trying to make my peace with God.”

“Er.. .” said Archibald, crunching on his toothpick out of hunger and

nerves, and because Magid gave him the heebiejeebies, Till go and see

if the food is ready, shall I? Yes. I’ll do that. What am I picking

up for you, Madge?”

“A bacon sandwich, please, Archibald.”



“Bac -? Er . . . right. Right you are.”

Samad’s face blew up like one of Mickey’s fried tomatoes. “So you mean

to mock me, is that it? In front of my face you wish to show me the

kaffir that you are. Go on, then! Munch on your pig in front of me!

You are so bloody clever, aren’t you? Mr. Smarty-pants. Mr. white-trousered Englishman with his stiff upper-lip and his big white

teeth. You know everything, even enough to escape your own judgement

day.”

“I am not so clever, Abba.”

“No, no, you are not. You are not half as clever as you think. I don’t know why I bother to warn you, but I do: you are on a direct

collision course with your brother, Magid. I keep my ear to the ground, I hear Shiva talking in the restaurant. And there are others:

Mo Hussein-Ishmael, Mickey’s brother, Abdul-Colin, and his son,

Abdul-Jimmy these are only a few, there are many more, and they are

organizing against you. Millat is with them. Your Marcus Chalfen has

stirred a great deal of anger and there are some, these green-ties, who

are willing to act. Who are crazy enough to do what they believe is

right. Crazy enough to start a war. There aren’t many people like

that. Most of us just follow along once war has been announced. But

some people wish to bring things to a head. Some people march on to

the parade ground and fire the first shot. Your brother is one of them.”

All through this, as Samad’s face contorted from anger, to despair, to

near-hysterical grins, Magid had remained blank, his face an unwritten

page.

“You have nothing to say? This news does not surprise you?”

“Why don’t you reason with them, Abba,” said Magid after a pause. “Many

of them respect you. You are respected in the community. Reason with

them.”

“Because I disapprove as strongly as they do, for all their lunacies.

Marcus Chalfen has no right. No right to do as he does. It is not his

business. It is God’s business. If you meddle with a creature, the

very nature of a creature, even if it is a mouse, you walk into the

arena that is God’s: creation. You infer that the wonder of God’s

creation can be improved upon. It cannot. Marcus Chalfen presumes.

He expects to be worshipped when the only thing in the universe that

warrants worship is Allah. And you are wrong to help him.  
Even his  
own son has disowned him. And so,” said Samad, unable to  
suppress the  
drama queen deep within his soul, “I must disown you.”  
“Ah, now, one chips, beans, egg and mushroom for you,  
Sammy-my-good-man,” said Archibald, approaching the table  
and passing  
the plate. “And one omelette and mushrooms for me . . .”  
“And one bacon sandwich,” said Mickey, who had insisted on  
breaking  
fifteen years of tradition in bringing this one dish over himself,  
‘for  
the young professor.”  
“He will not eat that at my table.”  
“Oh, come on, Sam,” began Archie gingerly. “Give the lad a  
break.”  
“I say he will not eat that at my table!”  
Mickey scratched his forehead. “Stone me, we’re getting a bit  
fundamentalist in our old age, ain’t we?”  
“I said ‘  
“As you wish, Abba,” said Magid, with that same infuriating  
smile of  
total forgiveness. He took his plate from Mickey, and sat down  
at the  
adjacent table with Clarence and Denzel.  
Denzel welcomed him with a grin, “Clarence, look see! It de  
young  
prince in white. “Im come to play domino. I jus’ look in his  
eye and  
I and I knew ‘im play domino. “Im an hex pert

“Can I ask you a question?” said Magid.

“Def-net-lee. Gwan.”

“Do you think I should meet with my brother?”

“Hmm. I don’ tink me can say,” replied Denzel, after a spell of thought in which he laid down a five-domino set.

“I would say you look like a young fellow oo can make up ‘im own mind,”

said Clarence cautiously.

“Do I?”

Magid turned back to his previous table, where his father was trying

studiously to ignore him, and Archie was toying with his omelette.

“Archibald! Shall I meet with my brother or not?”

Archie looked guiltily at Samad and then back at his plate.

“Archibald! This is a very significant question for me. Should I or not?”

“Go on,” said Samad sourly. “Answer him. If he’d rather advice from

two old fools and a man he barely knows than from his own father, then

let him have it. Well? Should he?”

Archie squirmed. “Well... I can’t... I mean, it’s not for me to say

... I suppose, if he wants ... but then again, if you don’t think Samad thrust his fist into Archie’s mushrooms so hard the omelette

slithered off the plate altogether and slipped to the floor.

“Make a decision, Archibald. For once in your pathetic little life,

make a decision.”

“Urn . . . heads, yes,” gasped Archie, reaching into his pocket for a

twenty pence piece. “Tails, no. Ready?”

The coin rose and flipped as a coin would rise and flip every time in a

perfect world, flashing its light and then revealing its dark enough

times to mesmerize a man. Then, at some point in its triumphant

ascension, it began to arc, and the arc went wrong, and Archibald

realized that it was not coming back to him at all but going behind

him, a fair way behind him, and he turned with the others to watch it

complete an elegant swoop towards the pinball machine and somersault

straight into the slot. Immediately the huge old beast lit up; the

ball shot off and began its chaotic, noisy course around a labyrinth of

swinging doors, automatic bats, tubes and ringing bells, until, with no

one to assist it, no one to direct it, it gave up the ghost and dropped

back into the swallowing hole.

“Bloody hell said Archibald, visibly chuffed. “What are the chances of

that, eh?”

A neutral place. The chances of finding one these days are slim, maybe

even slimmer than Archie's pinball trick. The sheer quantity of  
shit

that must be wiped off the slate if we are to start again as new.  
Race.

Land. Ownership. Faith. Theft. Blood. And more blood. And  
more.

And not only must the place be neutral, but the messenger who  
takes you

to the place, and the messenger who sends the messenger.  
There are no

people or places like that

left in North London. But Joyce did her best with what she  
had. First

she went to Clara. In Clara's present seat of learning, a red-  
brick

university, South-West by the Thames, there was a room she  
used for

study on Friday afternoons. A thoughtful teacher had loaned  
her the

key. Always empty between three and six. Contents: one  
blackboard,

several tables, some chairs, two angle poise lamps, an  
overhead

projector, a filing cabinet, a computer. Nothing older than  
twelve

years, Clara could guarantee that. The university itself was  
only

twelve years old. Built on empty waste land no Indian burial  
grounds,

no Roman viaducts, no interred alien spacecraft, no  
foundations of a

long-gone church. Just earth. As neutral a place as anywhere.  
Clara

gave Joyce the key and Joyce gave it to Me.

“But why me? I’m not involved.”

“Exactly, dear. And I’m too involved. But you are perfect.  
Because

you know him but you don’t know him,” said Joyce  
cryptically. She

passed Irie her long winter coat, some gloves and a hat of  
Marcus’s

with a ludicrous bobble on the top. “And because you love  
him, though

he doesn’t love you.”

“Yeah, thanks, Joyce. Thanks for reminding me.”

“Love is the reason, Me.” “No, Joyce, Love’s not the fucking  
reason.”

Irie was standing on the Chalfen doorstep, watching her own  
substantial

breath in the freezing night air. It’s a four-letter word that sells  
life insurance and hair conditioner. It’s fucking cold out here.  
You

owe me one.”

“Everybody owes everybody,” agreed Joyce and closed the  
door.

Irie stepped out into streets she’d known her whole life, along  
a route

she’d walked a million times over. If someone asked her just  
then what

memory was, what the purest definition of memory was, she  
would say

this: the street you were on when you first jumped in a pile of  
dead

leaves. She was walking it right now. With every fresh crunch  
came

the memory of previous crunches.

She was permeated by familiar smells: wet wood chip and gravel around

the base of the tree, newly laid turd underneath the cover of soggy

leaves. She was moved by these sensations. Despite opting for a life

of dentistry, she had not yet lost all of the poetry in her soul, that

is, she could still have the odd Proustian moment, note layers upon

layers, though she often experienced them in periodontal terms. She

got a twinge as happens with a sensitive tooth, or in a 'phantom

tooth', when the nerve is exposed she felt a twinge walking past the

garage, where she and Millat, aged thirteen, had passed one hundred and

fifty pennies over the counter, stolen from an Iqbal jam-jar, in a

desperate attempt to buy a packet of fags. She felt an ache (like a

severe malocclusion, the pressure of one tooth upon another) when she

passed the park where they had cycled as children, where they smoked

their first joint, where he had kissed her once in the middle of a

storm. Me wished she could give herself over to these past-present

fictions: wallow in them, make them sweeter, longer, particularly the



kiss. But she had in her hand a cold key, and surrounding her  
lives  
that were stranger than fiction, funnier than fiction, crueller  
than  
fiction, and with consequences fiction can never have. She  
didn't want  
to be involved in the long story of those lives, but she was, and  
she  
found herself dragged forward by the hair to their denouement,  
through  
the high road Mali's Kebabs, Mr. Cheungs, Raj's, Malkovich  
Bakeries  
she could reel them off blindfold; and then down under  
pigeon-shit  
bridge and that long wide road that drops into Gladstone Park  
as if  
it's falling into a green ocean. You could drown in memories  
like  
these, but she tried to swim free of them. She jumped over the  
small  
wall that fringed the Iqbal house, as she had a million times  
over, and  
rang the doorbell. Past tense, future imperfect.  
Upstairs, in his bedroom, Millat had spent the past fifteen  
minutes  
trying to get his head around Brother Hifan's written  
instructions  
concerning the act of prostration (leaflet: Correct Worship):  
SAJDA: prostration. In the sajda, fingers must be closed,  
pointing  
towards the qibla in line with the ears, and the head must be  
between

hands. It is hard to put the forehead on something clean, such as a

stone, some earth, wood, cloth, and it is said (by savants) that it is

wa jib to put the nose down, too. It is not permissible to put only

the nose on the ground without a good excuse. It is makruh to put only

the forehead on the ground. In the sajda you must say Subhana rabbiyal-ala at least thrice. The Shiis say that it is better to make

the sajda on a brick made from the clay of Karbala. It is either fard

or wa jib to put two feet or at least one toe of each foot on the ground. There are also some savants who say that it is sun That That

is, if two feet are not put on the ground, nam az will either not be

accepted or it will become makruh. If, during the sajda, the forehead,

nose or feet are raised from the ground for a short while, it will cause no harm. In the sajda, it is sun That to bend the toes and turn

them towards the qibla. It is written in Raddulmukhtar that those who

say

That's as far as he got, and there were three more pages. He was in a

cold sweat from trying to recall all that was hal al or hara am fard or

sun That makruh-tahrifa (prohibited with much stress) or makruh-tanzihi

(prohibited, but to a lesser degree). At a loss, he had ripped off his

t-shirt, tied a series of belts at angles over his spectacular upper

body, stood in the mirror and practised a different, easier routine,

one he knew in intimate detail:

You lookin' at me? You lookin' at me?

Well, who the fuck else are you looking at, huh?

I can't see anybody else in here.

You lookin' at me?

He was in the swing of it, revealing his invisible sliding guns and

knives to the wardrobe door, when Me walked in.

“Yes/ said Me, as he stood there sheepish. Tm looking at you.”

Quickly

and quietly she explained to him about the neutral

place, about the room, about the date, about the time. She made her

own personal plea for compromise, peace and caution (everybody was

doing it) and then she came up close and put the cold key in his warm

hand. Almost without meaning to, she touched his chest. Just at the

point between two belts where his heart, constricted by the leather,

beat so hard she felt it in her ear. Lacking experience in this field,

it was natural that Irie should mistake the palpitations that come with

blood restriction for smouldering passion. As for Millat, it had been

a very long time since anybody touched him or he touched anybody. Add

to that the touch of memory, the touch often years of love unreturned,

the touch of a long, long history the result was inevitable.

Before long their arms were involved, their legs were involved, their

lips were involved, and they were tumbling on to the floor, involved at

the groin (hard to get more involved than that), making love on a

prayer mat. But then as suddenly and feverishly as it had begun it was

over; they released each other in horror for different reasons, Irie

springing back into a naked huddle by the door, embarrassed and ashamed

because she could see how much he regretted it; and Millat grabbing his

prayer mat and pointing it towards the Kaba, ensuring the mat was no

higher than floor level, resting on no books or shoes, his fingers

closed and pointing to the quibla in line with his ears, ensuring both

forehead and nose touched the floor, with two feet firmly on the ground

but ensuring the toes were not bent, prostrating himself in the direction of the Kaba, but not for the Kaba, but for Allahu ta'ala

alone. He made sure he did all these things perfectly, while Irie wept

and dressed and left. He made sure he did all these things perfectly

because he believed he was being watched by the great camera in the

sky. He made sure he did all these things perfectly because they were

fard and 'he who wants to change worships becomes a disbeliever'

(leaflet: The Straight Path).

Hell hath no fury et cetera, et cetera. Irie walked hot-faced from the

Iqbal house and headed straight for the Chalfens with revenge on her

mind. But not against Millat. Rather in defence of Millat, for she had always been his defender, his blacky-white knight. -=>j

You see, Millat did not love her. And she thought Millat didn't —'

love her because he couldn't. She thought he was so damaged, he couldn't love anybody any more. She wanted to find whoever had

damaged him like this, damaged him so terribly; she wanted to find

whoever had made him unabl to love her.

It's a funny thing about the modern world. You hear girls in the

toilets of clubs saying, "Yeah, he fucked off and left me. He didn't

love me. He just couldn't deal with love. He was too fucked up to

know how to love me.” Now, how did that happen? What was it about

this unlovable century that convinced us we were, despite everything,

eminently lovable as a people, as a species? What made us think that

anyone who fails to love us is damaged, lacking, malfunctioning in some

way? And particularly if they replace us with a god, or a weeping

madonna, or the face of Christ in a ciabatta roll then we call them

crazy. Deluded. Regressive. We are so convinced of the goodness of

ourselves, and the goodness of our love, we cannot bear to believe that

there might be something more worthy of love than us, more worthy of

worship. Greetings cards routinely tell us everybody deserves love.

No. Everybody deserves clean water. Not everybody deserves love all

the time.

Millat didn't love Irie, and Irie was sure there must be somebody she

could blame for that. Her brain started ticking over. What was the

root cause? Millat's feelings of inadequacy. What was the root cause

of Millat's feelings of inadequacy? Magid. He had been born second

because of Magid. He was the lesser son because of Magid.

Joyce opened the door to her and Irie marched straight upstairs,  
maliciously determined to make Magid the second-son for once, this time  
by twenty-five minutes. She grabbed him, kissed him and made love to him angrily and furiously, without conversation or affection. She rolled him around, tugged at his hair, dug what fingernails she had into his back and when he came she was gratified to  
note it was with a little sigh as if something had been taken from him.

But she was wrong to think this a victory. It was simply because he  
knew immediately where she had been, why she was here, and it saddened  
him. For a long time they lay in silence together, naked, the autumn  
light disappearing from the room with every minute that passed.

“It seems to me,” said Magid finally, as the moon became clearer than  
the sun, ‘that you have tried to love a man as if he were an island and  
you were shipwrecked and you could mark the land with an X. It seems to  
me it is too late in the day for all that.’”

Then he gave her a kiss on the forehead that felt like a baptism and  
she wept like a baby.

3 p.m.” 5 November 1992. The brothers meet (at last) in a blank room

after a gap of eight years and find that their genes, those prophets of

the future, have reached different conclusions. Millat is astounded by

the differences. The nose, the line of the jaw, the eyes, the hair.

His brother is a stranger to him and he tells him so.

“Only because you wish me to be,” says Magid with a crafty look.

But Millat is blunt, not interested in riddles, and in a single shot

asks and answers his own question. “So you’re going through with it,

yeah?”

Magid shrugs. “It is not mine to stop or start, brother, but yes, I

intend to help where I can. It is a great project.”

“It is an abomination.” (leaflet: The Sanctity of Creation)

Millat pulls out a chair from one of the desks and sits on it

backwards, like a crab in a trap, legs and arms splayed either side.

“I see it rather as correcting the Creator’s mistakes.”

“The Creator doesn’t make mistakes.”

“So you mean to continue?”

“You’re damn right.”

“And so do I.”

“Well, that’s it, then, isn’t it? It’s already been decided.

KEVIN

will do whatever is necessary to stop you and your kind. And that’s

the fucking end of it.”



But contrary to Millat's understanding, this is no movie and there is no fucking end to it, just as there is no fucking beginning to it. The brothers begin to argue. It escalates in moments, and they make a mockery of that idea, a neutral place; instead they cover the room with history past, present and future history (for there is such a thing) they take what was blank and smear it with the stinking shit of the past like excitable, excremental children. They cover this neutral room in themselves. Every gripe, the earliest memories, every debated principle, every contested belief. Millat arranges the chairs to demonstrate the vision of the solar system which is so clearly and remarkably described in the Qur'an, centuries before Western science (leaflet: The Qur'an and the Cosmos); Magid draws Pande's parade ground on one blackboard with a detailed reconstruction of the possible path of bullets, and on the other board a diagram depicting a restriction enzyme cutting neatly through a sequence of nucleotides; Millat uses the computer as television, a chalk rubber as the picture of Magid-and-goat, then single-handedly

impersonates every dribbling babba, great aunt and cousin's  
accountant

who came that year for the blasphemous business of  
worshipping an icon;

Magid utilizes the overhead projector to illuminate an article  
he has

written, taking his brother point-by-point through his  
argument,

defending the patents of genetically altered organisms; Millat  
uses the

filing cabinet as a substitute for another one he despised, fills  
it

with imaginary letters between a scientist Jew and an

unbelieving Muslim; Magid puts three chairs together and  
shines two

angle poise lamps and now there are two brothers in a car,  
shivering

and huddled together until a few minutes later they are  
separated for

ever and a paper plane takes off.

It goes on and on and on.

And it goes to prove what has been said of immigrants many  
times before

now; they are resourceful; they make do. They use what they  
can when

they can.

Because we often imagine that immigrants are constantly on  
the move,

footloose, able to change course at any moment, able to  
employ their

legendary resourcefulness at every turn. We have been told of  
the

resourcefulness of Mr. Schmutter, or the foot loosity of Mr. Banajii,  
who sail into Ellis Island or Dover or Calais and step into their  
foreign lands as blank people, free of any kind of baggage,  
happy and  
willing to leave their difference at the docks and take their  
chances  
in this new place, merging with the oneness of this  
greenandpleasantlibertarianlandofthefree.  
Whatever road presents itself, they will take, and if it happens  
to  
lead to a dead end, well then, Mr. Schmutter and Mr. Banajii  
will  
merrily set upon another, weaving their way through Happy  
Multicultural  
Land. Well, good for them. But Magid and Millat couldn't  
manage it.  
They left that neutral room as they had entered it: weighed  
down,  
burdened, unable to waver from their course or in any way  
change their  
separate, dangerous trajectories. They seem to make no  
progress. The  
cynical might say they don't even move at all that Magid and  
Millat are  
two of Zeno's head fuck arrows, occupying a space equal to  
themselves  
and, what is scarier, equal to Mangal Pande's, equal to Samad  
Iqbal's.  
Two brothers trapped in the temporal instant. Two brothers  
who pervert  
all attempts to put dates to this story, to track these guys, to  
offer

times and days, because there isn't, wasn't and never will be any

duration. In fact, nothing moves.

Nothing changes. They are running at a standstill. Zeno's Paradox.

But what was Zeno's deal here (everybody's got a deal), what was his

angle"? There is a body of opinion that argues his paradoxes are part

of a more general spiritual programme. To

(a) first establish multiplicity, the Many, as an illusion, and (b)

thus prove reality a seamless, flowing whole. A single, indivisible

One.

Because if you can divide reality inexhaustibly into parts, as the

brothers did that day in that room, the result is insupportable paradox. You are always still, you move nowhere, there is no progress.

But multiplicity is no illusion. Nor is the speed with which those-in-the-simmering-melting-pot are dashing towards it. Paradoxes

aside, they are running, just as Achilles was running. And they will

lap those who are in denial just as surely as Achilles would have made

that tortoise eat his dust. Yeah, Zeno had an angle. He wanted the

One, but the world is Many. And yet still that paradox is alluring.

The harder Achilles tries to catch the tortoise, the more eloquently

the tortoise expresses its advantage. Likewise, the brothers will race towards the future only to find they more and more eloquently express their past, that place where they have just been. Because this is the other thing about immigrants ('fugees, emigres, travellers): they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow.

### i8 The End of History versus The Last Man

“Look around you\ And what do you see? What is the result of this

so-called democracy, this so-called^reedom, this so-called liberty?

Oppression, persecution, slaughter. Brothers, you can see it on national television every day, every evening, every night! Chaos,

disorder, confusion. They are not ashamed or embarrassed or self-conscious! They don't try to hide, to conceal, to disguise. They

know as we know: the entire world is in a turmoil!  
Everywhere men

indulge in prurience, promiscuity, profligacy, vice, corruption and

indulgence. The entire world is affected by a disease known as Kufr

the state of rejection of the oneness of the Creator refusing to acknowledge the infinite blessings of the Creator. And on this day, i

December 1992, I bear witness that there is nothing worthy of worship

besides the sole Creator, no partner unto Him. On this day we should

know that whosoever the Creator has guided cannot be misguided, and

whosoever he has misguided from the straight path shall not return to

the straight path until the Creator puts guidance in his heart and

brings him to the light. I will now begin my third lecture, which I

call "Ideological Warfare", and that means I will explain for those

that don't understand the war of these things . . . these ideologies,

against the Brothers of KEVIN . . . ideology means a kind of brainwashing . and we are being indoctrinated, fooled and brainwashed,

my Brothers! So I will try to elucidate, explain and expound

No one in the hall was going to admit it, but Brother Ibrahim ad-Din

Shukrallah was no great speaker, when you got down to it. Even if you

overlooked his habit of using three words where one would do, of

emphasizing the last word of such triplets with his see-saw Caribbean

inflections, even if you ignored these as

everybody tried to, he was still physically disappointing. He had a

small sketchy beard, a hunched demeanour, a repertoire of tense, inept

gesticulations and a vague look of Sidney Poitier about him which did

not achieve quite the similitude to command any serious respect. And

he was short. On this point, Millat felt most let down. There was a

tangible dissatisfaction in the hall when Brother Hifan finished his

fulsome introductory speech and the famous but diminutive Brother

Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah crossed the room to the podium. Not that

anyone would require an alim of Islam to be a towering height, or

indeed for a moment dare to suggest that the Creator had not made

Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah precisely the height that He, in all

his holy omnipotence, had selected. Still, one couldn't help thinking,

as Hifan awkwardly lowered the microphone and the Brother Ibrahim

awkwardly stretched to meet it, you couldn't help thinking, in the

Brother's very own style of third-word emphasis: five foot Jive.

The other problem with Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah, the biggest

problem perhaps, was his great affection for tautology. Though he

promised explanation, elucidation and exposition, linguistically he put

one in mind of a dog chasing its own tail: “Now there are many types of warfare ... I will name a few. Chemical warfare is the warfare where them men kill each other chemically with warfare. This can be a terrible warfare. Physical warfare! That is the warfare with physical weapons in which people kill each other physically. Then there is germ warfare in which a man, he knows that he’s carrying the virus of HIV and he goes to the country and spreads his germ on the loose women of that country and creates germ warfare. Psychological warfare, that is one of the most evil, the war where they try to psychologically defeat you. This is called psychological warfare. But ideological warfare! That is the sixth warfare which is the worst warfare And yet Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah was no less than The End of History versus The Last Man the founder of KEVIN, an impressive man with a formidable reputation. Born Monty Clyde Benjamin in Barbados in 1960, the son of two poverty-stricken barefoot Presbyterian dypsomaniacs, he converted to Islam after a Vision’ at the age of fourteen. Aged eighteen he fled the lush green of his homeland for the desert surrounding Riyadh and



the books that line the walls of Al-Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic

University. There he studied Arabic for five years, became disillusioned with much of the Islamic clerical establishment, and

first expressed his contempt for what he called ‘religious secularists’, those foolish ula ma who attempt to separate politics

from religion. It was his belief that many radical modern political

movements were relevant to Islam and moreover were to be found in the

Qur’an if one looked closely enough. He wrote several pamphlets on

this matter, only to find that his own radical opinions were not welcome in Riyadh. He was considered a troublemaker and his life

threatened ‘numerous, countless, innumerable times’. So in 1984,

wishing to continue his study, Brother Ibrahim came to England, locked

himself in his aunt’s Birmingham garage and spent five more years in

there, with only the Qur’an and the fascicles of Endless Bliss for

company. He took his food in through the cat-flap, deposited his shit

and piss in a Coronation biscuit tin and passed it back out the same

way, and did a thorough routine of press-ups and sit-ups to prevent

muscular atrophy. The Selly Oak Reporter wrote regular bylines on him

during this period, nicknaming him “The Guru in the Garage’ (in view of

the large Birmingham Muslim population, this was thought preferable to

the press-desk favoured suggestion, “The Loony in the Lock-Up’) and had

their fun interviewing his bemused aunt, one Carlene Benjamin, a

devoted member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

These articles, cruel, mocking and offensive, had been written by one

Norman Henshall and were now classics of their kind, distributed

amongst KB VIN members throughout England as an example (if example

were needed) of the virulent, anti-KEVIN

element that bred in the press from even this foetal stage of their

movement. Note KEVIN members were advised note how Henshall’s

articles

end halfway through May ‘87, the very month that Brother Ibrahim ad-Din

Shukrallah succeeded in converting his aunt Carlene through the

cat-flap using nothing else but the pure truth as it was delivered by

the final prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him!). Note how Henshall

fails to document the queues of people who came to speak with Brother

Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah, so many they stretched three blocks round  
the centre of Selly Oak, from the cat-flap to the bingo hall!  
Note the  
failure of this same Mr. Henshall to publish the 637 separate rules  
and laws that the Brother had spent five years gleaning from the Qur'an  
(listing them in order of severity, and then in subgroups according to  
their nature, i.e." Regarding Cleanliness and Specific Genital and  
Oral Hygiene). Note all this, brothers and sisters, and then marvel at  
the power of word of mouth. Marvel at the dedication and commitment of  
the young people of Birmingham!  
Their eagerness and enthusiasm was so remarkable (extraordinary,  
outstanding, unprecedented) that almost before the Brother emerged from  
his confinement and announced it himself, the idea of KEVIN had been  
born within the black and Asian community. A radical new movement  
where politics and religion were two sides of the same coin. A group  
that took freely from Garveyism, the American Civil Rights movement  
and  
the thought of Elijah Muhammed, yet remained within the letter of the

Qur'an. The Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation. By

1992 they were a small but widespread body, with limbs as far-flung as

Edinburgh and Land's End, a heart in Selly Oak and a soul in the

Kilburn High Road. KEVIN: an extremist faction dedicated to direct,

often violent action, a splinter group frowned on by the rest of the

Islamic community; popular with the sixteen to twenty-five age group;

feared and ridiculed in the press; and gathered tonight in the Kilburn

Hall, standing on chairs

and packed to the rafters, listening to the speech of their founder.

"There are three things," continued Brother Ibrahim, looking briefly at

his notes, "that the colonial powers wish to do to you, brothers of

KEVIN. Firstly, they wish to kill you spiritually . . . oh yes, they

value nothing higher than your mental slavery. There are too many of

you to fight hand-to-hand! But if they have your minds, then "Hey,"

went a fat man's attempt at a whisper. "Brother Millat."

It was Mohammed Hussein-Ishmael, the butcher. He was sweating

profusely as ever, and had forced his way through a long line of people

apparently to sit next to Millat. They were distantly related,  
and

these past few months Mo had been rapidly nearing the inner  
circle of

KEVIN (Hifan, Millat, Tyrone, Shiva, Abdul-Colin and  
others) by virtue

of the money he had put forward and his stated interest in the  
more

‘active’ sides of the group. Personally, Millat was still a little  
suspicious of him and objected to his big slobbery face, the  
great

quiff emerging from his toki and his chicken-breath.

“Late. I have to close up shop. But I been standing at the back  
for

while. Listening. Brother Ibrahim is a very impressive man,  
hmm?”

“Hmm.”

“Very impressive,” repeated Mo, patting Millat’s knee  
conspiratorially,

‘a very impressive Brother.’ Mo Hussein was partly funding  
Brother

Ibrahim’s tour around England, so it was in his interest (or at  
least

it made him feel better about donating two thousand quid) to  
find the

Brother impressive. Mo was a recent convert to KEVIN (he  
had been a

reasonably good Muslim for twenty years), and his enthusiasm  
for the

group was two pronged. Firstly, he was just flattered,  
downright

flattered, that he should be considered sufficiently successful a

Muslim businessman to ponce money off. In normal circumstances he

would have shown them the door and where they could stuff a freshly

bled chicken, but the truth was, Mo was feeling a bit vulnerable

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at the time, his stringy-legged Irish wife, Sheila, having just left

him for a publican; he was feeling a little emasculated, so when KEVIN

asked Ardashir for five grand and got it, and Nadir from the rival hal

al place put up three, Mo came over all macho and put up his own

stake.

The second reason for Mo's conversion was more personal. Violence.

Violence and theft. For eighteen years Mo had owned the most famous

hal al butchers in North London, so famous that he had been able to buy

the next door property and expand into a sweetshop butchers And in

this period in which he ran the two establishments, he had been a

victim of serious physical attacks and robbery, without fail, three

times a year. Now, that figure doesn't include the numerous punches to

the head, quick smacks with a crowbar, shifty kicks in the groin or

anything else that failed to draw blood. Mo didn't even phone his wife, no matter the police, to report those. No: serious violence. Mo had been knifed a total of five times (Ah), lost the tips of three fingers (Eeeesh), had both legs and arms broken (Oaooow), his feet set on fire (jiii), his teeth kicked out (ka-too of and an air-gun bullet (ping) embedded in his thankfully fleshy posterior. Boof. And Mo was a big man. A big man with attitude. The beatings had in no way humbled him, made him watch his mouth or walk with a stoop. He gave as good as he got. But this was one man against an army. There was nobody who could help. The very first time, when he received a hammer blow to his ribs in January 1970, he naively reported it to the local constabulary and was rewarded by a late-night visit from five policemen who gave him a thorough kicking. Since then, violence and theft had become a regular part of his existence, a sad spectator sport watched by the old Muslim men and young Muslim mothers who came in to buy their chicken, and hurried out shortly afterwards, scared they might be next.

Violence and theft. The culprits ranged from secondary school children

coming in the corner shop side to buy sweets (which is why Mo only

allowed one child from Glenard Oak in

at a time. Of course it made no difference, they just took turns beating the shit out of him solo), decrepit drunks, teenage thugs, the

parents of teenage thugs, general fascists, specific neo-Nazis, the

local snooker team, the darts team, the football team and huge posses

of mouthy, white-skirted secretaries in deadly heels. These various

people had various objections to him: he was a Paki (try telling a huge

drunk Office Superworld check-out boy that you're Bangladeshi); he gave

half his corner shop up to selling weird Paki meat; he had a quiff; he

liked Elvis ("You like Elvis, then? Do yer? Eh, Paki? Do yer?"); the

price of his cigarettes; his distance from home ("Why don't you go back

to your own country?" "But then how will I serve you cigarettes?"

Boo/); or just the look on his face. But they all had one thing in

common, these people. They were all white. And this simple fact had

done more to politicize Mo over the years than all the party

broadcasts, rallies and petitions the world could offer. It had



brought him more securely within the fold of his faith than even a visitation from the angel Jabrail could have achieved. The last straw, if it could be called that, came a month before joining KEVIN, when three white 'youths' tied him up, kicked him down the cellar steps, stole all his money and set fire to his shop. Double-jointed hands (the result of many broken wrists) got him out of that one. But he was tired of almost dying. When KEVIN gave Mo a leaflet that explained there was a war going on, he thought: no shit. At last someone was speaking his language. Mo had been in the front line of that war for eighteen years. And KEVIN seemed to understand that it wasn't enough his kids doing well, going to a nice school, having tennis lessons, too pale skinned to ever have a hand laid on them in their lives. Good. But not good enough. He wanted a little payback. For himself. He wanted Brother Ibrahim to stand on that podium and dissect Christian culture and Western morals until it was dust in his hands. He wanted the degenerate nature of these people explained to him. He wanted to know the history of it and the politics of it and the

root cause. He wanted to see their art exposed and their science

exposed, and their tastes exposed and their distastes. But words would

never be enough; he'd heard so many words (If you could just file a

report.. . If you wouldn't mind telling us precisely what the attacker

looked like), and they were never as good as action. He wanted to know

why these people kept on beating the shit out of him. And then he

wanted to go and beat the shit out of some of these people.

“Very impressive, Millat, hey? Everything we hope for.”

“Yeah,” said Millat, despondent. “I s’pose. Less talk, more action,

though, if you ask me. The infidel are everywhere.”

Mo nodded vigorously. “Oh definitely, Brother. We are two birds from

the same bush on that matter. I hear there are some others,” said Mo,

lowering his voice and putting his fat, sweaty lips by Millat’s ear,

‘who are very keen on action. Immediate action. Brother Hifan spoke

to me. About the 31st of December. And Brother Shiva and Brother

Tyrone

“Yes, yes. I know who they are. They are the beating heart of KEVIN.”

“And they say you know the man himself this scientist. You in good

position. I hear you are his friend.”

“Was. Was.”

“Brother Hifan says you have the tickets to get in, that you are organizing’

“Shhh,” said Millat irritably. “Not everyone can know. If you want to

get near the centre, you’ve got to keep shtoom.”

Millat looked Mo up and down. The kurta-pyjamas that he somehow

managed to make look like a late seventies Elvis flared jumpsuit. The

huge stomach he rested on his knee like a friend.

Sharply, he asked, "You're a bit old aren't you?"

"You rude little bastard. I'm strong as a bloody bull."

"Yeah, well, we don't need strength," said Millat tapping his temple,

'we need a little of the stuff upstairs. We've got to get in the place

discreetly first, in nit The first evening. It'll be crawling."

Mo blew his nose in his hand. "I can be discreet."

"Yeah, but that means keeping shtoom."

"And the third thing," said Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah, interrupting them, suddenly louder and buzzing the PA system, 'the

third thing they will try to do, is to convince you that it is human

intellect and not Allah that is omnipotent, unlimited, all-powerful.

They will try to convince you that your minds are not to be used to

pronounce the greater glory of the Creator but to raise yourselves up

equal to or beyond the Creator! And now we approach the most serious

business of this evening. The greatest evil of the infidel is here, in

this very borough of Brent. I will tell you, and you will not believe

it, Brothers, but there is a man in this very community who believes that he can improve upon the creation of Allah. There is a man who presumes to change, adjust, modify what has been decreed. He will take an animal an animal that Allah has created and presume to change that creation. To create a new animal that has no name but is simply an abomination. And when he has finished with that small animal, a mouse, Brothers, when he has finished he will move to sheep, and cats and dogs. And who in this lawless society will stop him from one day creating a man? A man born not of woman but from a man's intellect alone! And he will tell you that it is medicine . . . but KEVIN makes no complaint against medicine. We are a sophisticated community who count many doctors amongst us, my Brothers. Don't be misled, deluded, fooled. This is not medicine. And my question to you, Brothers of KEVIN, is who will make the sacrifice and stop this man? Who will stand up alone in the name of the Creator, and show the modernists that the Creator's laws still exist and are eternal? Because they will try

and tell you, the modernists, the cynics, the Orientalists, that there

are no more beliefs, that our history, our culture, our world is over.

So thinks this scientist. That is why he so confidently presumes. But

he will soon understand what is truly meant by last days. So who will

show him ‘

“Yes, shtoom, yes, I understand,” said Mo, speaking to Millat, but

looking straight ahead as in a spy movie.

Millat looked around the room and saw that Hifan was giving him the

eye, so he gave it to Shiva, who gave it to Abdul-Jimmy and Abdul-Colin, to Tyrone and the rest of the Kilburn crew, who were

stationed by the walls as stewards at particular points in the room.

Hifan gave Millat the eye once more, then he looked at the back room.

Discreet movement began.

“Something is happening?” whispered Mo, spotting the men with the

green steward sashes, making their way through the crowds.

“Come into the office,” said Millat.

“OK, so, I think the key thing here is to come at the issue from two

sides. Because it is a matter of straight laboratory torture and we

can certainly play that to the gallery, but the central emphasis has to

go to the anti-patent argument. Because that's really an angle we can

work. And if we lay our emphasis there, then there are a number of

other groups we can call upon the NCGA, the OHNO, etc.” and Crispin's

been in touch with them. Because, you know, we haven't really dealt in

this area extensively before, but it's clearly a key issue I think

Crispin's going to talk to us about that in more depth in a minute but

for now, I just want to talk about the public support we have here. I

mean, particularly the recent press, even the tabloid element have

really come up trumps on this . . . there's a lot of bad feeling regarding the patenting of living organisms . . . I think people feel

very uncomfortable, rightly, with that concept, and it's really up to F

A The E to play on that, and really get a comprehensive campaign

together, so if.. .”

Ah, Joely.Joely' Joely' Joefy. Joshua knew he should be listening, but

looking was so good. Looking at Joely was great. The way she sat (on

a table, knees pulled up to chest), the way she looked up

from her notes (kittenishly!), the way the air whistled between her

gappy front teeth, the way she continuously tucked her straggly blonde

hair behind her ear with one hand and tapped out a rhythm on her huge

Doc Martens with the other. Blonde hair aside, she looked a lot like

his mother when young: those fulsome English lips, ski-jump nose, big

hazel eyes. But the face, spectacular as it might be, was mere decoration to top off the most luxurious body in the world.

Long in

all its lines, muscular in the thigh and soft in the stomach, with breasts that had never known a bra but were an utter delight, and a

bottom which was the platonic ideal of all English bottomreys, flat yet

peachy, wide but welcoming. Plus she was intelligent. Plus she was

devoted to her cause. Plus she despised his father. Plus she was ten

years older (which suggested to Joshua all kinds of sexual expertise he

couldn't even imagine without getting an enormous hard-on right now

right here in the middle of the meeting). Plus she was the most wonderful woman Joshua had ever met. Oh, Joely!

“As I see it, what we have to impress upon people is this idea of

setting a precedent. You know, the “What next?” kind of argument and

I understand Kenny's PO V, that that's way too simplistic a take on it

but I have to argue, I think it's necessary, and we'll put it to a vote



in a minute. Is that all right, Kenny? If I can just get on ...  
right? Right. Where was I ... precedent. Because, if it can be  
argued that the animal under experimentation is owned by any  
group of  
people, i.e.” it is not a cat but effectively an invention  
with-cat-like-qualities, then that very cleverly and very  
dangerously  
short-circuits the work of animal rights groups and that leads  
to a  
pretty fucking scary vision of the future. Umm ... I want to  
bring  
Crispin in here, to talk a little more about that.”  
Of course the cunt of it was, Joely was married to Crispin.  
And the  
double-cunt of it was, theirs was a marriage of true love, total  
spiritual bonding and dedicated political union. Fan-  
fuckingtastic.  
Even worse, amongst the members of FATE, Joely’s and  
Crispin’s marriage served as a kind of cosmogony, an  
originating myth  
that explained succinctly what people could and should be,  
how the  
group began and how it should proceed in the future. Though  
Joely and  
Crispin didn’t encourage ideas of leadership or any kind of  
icon  
worship, it had happened anyway, they were worshipped. And  
they were  
indivisible. When Joshua first joined the group, he had tried to  
sniff  
out a little information on the couple, get the low-down on his

chances. Were they wobbly? Had the harsh nature of their business

driven them apart? Fat chance. He was told the whole depressing fable

by two seasoned FATE activists over some pints in the Spotted Dog: a

psychotic ex-postal worker called Kenny who as a child had witnessed

his father kill his puppy, and Paddy, a sensitive life-time dole collector and pigeon-fancier.

“Everyone begins wanting to shagjoely,” Kenny had explained,

sympathetically, ‘but you get over it. You realize the best thing you

can do for her is dedicate yourself to the struggle. And then the second thing you realize, is that Crispin’s just this incredible dude-‘

“Yeah, yeah, get on with it.”

Kenny got on with it.

It seemed Joely and Crispin met and fell in love at the University of

Leeds the winter of 1982, two young student radicals, with Che Guevara

on their walls, idealism in their hearts and a mutual passion for all

the creatures that fly, trot, crawl and slime across the earth. At the

time, they were both active members of a great variety of far-left

groups, but political in-fighting, back-stabbing and endless factionalizing soon disillusioned them as far as the fate of homo

erectus was concerned. At some point they grew tired of speaking up for this species of ours who will so often organize a coup, bitch behind your back, choose another representative and throw it all back in your face. Instead they turned their attention to our mute animal friends. Joely and Crispin upgraded their vegetarianism to veganism, dropped out of college, got married and formed Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation in 1985. Crispin's magnetic personality and Joely's natural charm attracted other political drifters, and soon they had become a commune of twenty-five (plus ten cats, fourteen dogs, a garden full of wild rabbits, a sheep, two pigs and a family of foxes) living and working from a Brixton bed sit which backed on to a large expanse of unused allotment. They were pioneers in many senses. Recycling before it became the fashion, making a tropical biosphere of their bathroom, and dedicating themselves to organic food production. Politically they were equally circumspect. From the very beginning their extremist credentials were impeccable, FATE being to the RSPCA

what Stalinism is to the Liberal Democrats. For three years  
FATE

conducted a terror campaign against animal testers, torturers  
and

exploiters, sending death threats to personnel at make-up  
firms,

breaking into labs, kidnapping technicians and chaining  
themselves to

hospital gates. They also ruined fox-hunts, filmed battery  
chickens,

burnt down farms, fire-bombed food outlets and smashed up  
circus tents.

Their brief being so broad and so fanatical (any animal in any  
level of

discomfort), they were kept seriously busy, and life for FATE  
members

was difficult, dangerous and punctuated by frequent  
imprisonment.

Through all of this, Joely's and Crispin's relationship grew  
stronger

and served as an example to them all, a beacon in the storm,  
the ideal

example of love between activists ("Yada yada yada. Get on  
with it').

Then in 1987 Crispin went to jail for three years for his part in  
fire-bombing a Welsh laboratory and releasing 40 cats, 350  
rabbits and

1,000 rats from their captivity. Before being taken down to  
Wormwood

Scrubs, Crispin generously informed Joely that she had his  
permission

to go to other FATE members if she was in need of sexual  
satisfaction

while he was gone (“And did she?” asked Joshua. “Did she fuck,”

replied Kenny sadly).

During Crispin’s captivity, Joely devoted herself to transforming FATE

from a small gang of highly strung friends to a viable underground political force. She began to put less emphasis on terror

tactics and, after reading Guy Debord, grew interested in situationism

as a political tactic, which she understood to mean the increased use

of large banners, costumes, videos and gruesome re-enactments. By the

time Crispin emerged from jail, FATE had grown four-fold, and Crispin’s

legend (lover, fighter, rebel, hero) had grown with it, fuelled by

Joely’s passionate interpretation of his life and works and a carefully

chosen photo of him circa 1980 in which he looked a bit like Nick

Drake. But though his image had been airbrushed, Crispin appeared to

have lost none of his radicalism. His first act as a free citizen was

to mastermind the release of several hundred voles, an event that

received widespread newspaper coverage, though Crispin delegated

responsibility for the actual act to Kenny, who was sent down for four

months of high security (“Greatest moment of my life’). And then last

summer, ‘91, Joely persuaded Crispin to go to California with her to

join the other groups fighting the patent on transgenic animals.

Though courtrooms weren’t Crispin’s scene (“Crispin’s a front-line

dude’), he succeeded in sufficiently disrupting proceedings to officially warrant a mistrial. The couple flew back to England, elated

but with funds perilously low, to find they had been turfed out of

their Brixton pad and Well, Joshua could take the narrative from here.

He met them a week later, wandering up and down the Willesden High

Road, looking for a suitable squat. They looked lost, and Joshua,

emboldened by the summer vibe and Joely’s beauty, went up to talk to

them. They ended up going for a pint. They drank, as everybody in

Willesden drank, in the aforementioned Spotted Dog, a famous Willesden

landmark, described in 1792 as ‘being a well accustomed Publick house’

(Willesden Past, by Len Snow), which became a favourite resort for

mid-Victorian Londoners wishing a day out ‘in the country’, then the

meeting point for the horse-buses; later still, a watering hole for

local Irish builders. By 1992 it had transformed again, this time into

the focal point

of the huge Australian immigrant population of Willesden, who, for the

last five years, had been leaving their silky beaches and emerald seas

and inexplicably arriving in NW2. The afternoon Joshua walked in with

Joely and Crispin, this community was in a state of high excitement.

After a complaint of a terrible smell above Sister Mary's Palm Readers

on the high road, the upper flat had been raided by Health Officers and

found to be sheltering sixteen squatting Aussies who had dug a huge

hole in the floor and roasted a pig in there, apparently trying to re-create the effect of a South Seas underground kiln. Thrown out on

the street, they were presently bemoaning their fate to the publican, a

huge bearded Scotsman who had little sympathy for his Antipodean

clientele ("Is there some fuckin' sign in fuckin' Sydney that says come

to fuckin' Willesden?"). Overhearing the story, Joshua surmised the

flat must now be empty and took Joely and Crispin to look at it, his

mind already ticking over ... if / can get her to live near by ...

It was a beautiful, crumbling Victorian building, with a small balcony,

a roof garden and a large hole in the floor. He advised them to lie

low for a month and then move in. They did, and Joshua saw more and

more of them. A month later he experienced a 'conversion' after hours

of talk with Joely (hours of examining her breasts underneath those

threadbare t-shirts), which felt, at the time, as if somebody had taken

his little closed Chalfenist head, stuck two cartoon sticks of dynamite

through each ear, and just blown a big mutherfucking hole in his

consciousness. It became clear to him in a blinding flash that he

loved Joely, that his parents were assholes, that he himself was an

asshole, and that the largest community of earth, the animal kingdom,

were oppressed, imprisoned and murdered on a daily basis with the full

knowledge and support of every government in the world. How much of

the last realization was predicated and reliant upon the first was

difficult to say, but he had given up Chalfenism and had no interest in

taking things apart to see how they fitted

together. Instead he gave up all meat, ran off to Glastonbury, got a

tattoo, became the kind of guy who could measure an eighth with his



eyes closed (so fuck you, Millat) and generally had a ball .  
until

finally his conscience pricked him. He revealed himself to be  
the son

of Marcus Chalfen. This horrified Joely (and, Joshua liked to  
think,

slightly aroused her sleeping with the enemy and all that).  
Joshua was

sent away, while FATE had a two-day summit meeting along  
the lines of:

But he's the very thing we're . Ah, but we could use .. .

It was a protracted process with votes and subclauses and  
objections

and provisos, but in the end it couldn't really come down to  
anything

more sophisticated than: Whose side are you on? Joshua said  
yours, and

Joely welcomed him with open arms, pressing his head to her  
exquisite

bosom. He was paraded at meetings, given the role of  
secretary and was

generally the jewel in their crown: the convert from, the other  
side.

Since then and for six months, Joshua had indulged his  
growing contempt

for his father, seen plenty of his great love and set about a  
long-term

plan of insinuating himself between the famous couple (he  
needed

somewhere to stay anyway; the Joneses' hospitality was  
growing thin).

He ingratiated himself with Crispin, deliberately ignoring  
Crispin's

suspicion of him. Joshua acted like his best mate, did all the  
shit  
jobs for him (photocopying, poste ring leafleting), kipped on  
his  
floor, celebrated his seventh wedding anniversary and  
presented him  
with a hand-made guitar plectrum for his birthday; while all  
the time  
hating him intensely, coveting his wife as no man's wife has  
ever been  
coveted before, and dreaming up plots for his downfall with a  
green-eyed jealousy that would make Iago blush.  
All this had distracted Joshua from the fact that FATE were  
busy  
plotting his own father's downfall. He had approved it in  
principle  
when Magid returned, when his rage was hottest and the idea  
itself  
seemed hazy just some big talk to impress new members. Now  
the 31st  
was three weeks away, and Joshua had  
so far failed to question himself in any coherent way, in any  
Chalfenist fashion, regarding the consequences of what was  
about to  
happen. He wasn't even clear precisely what -was going to  
happen there  
had been no final decision; and now as they argued it, the core  
members  
of FATE cross-legged and spaced out around the great hole in  
the floor,  
now as he should, have been listening to these fundamental  
decisions,

he had lost the thread of his attention down Joely's t-shirt,  
down

along the athletic dip and curve of her torso, down further to  
her

tie-dyed pants, down "Josh, mate, could you just read me the  
minutes

for a couple of minutes ago, if you get my drift?"

"Huh?"

Crispin sighed and tutted. Joely reached down from her  
tabletop and

kissed Crispin on the ear. Cunt.

"The minutes, Josh. After the stuff Joely was saying about  
protest

strategy. We'd moved on to the hard part. I want to hear what  
Paddy

was saying a few minutes ago about Punishment versus  
Release."

Joshua looked at his blank clipboard and placed it over his de  
tumescent erection.

"Umm ... I guess I missed that."

"Er, well that was actually really fucking important, Josh.  
You've got

to keep up. I mean, what's the point of doing all this talking  
Cunt,

cunt, cunt.

"He's doing his best," Joely interceded, reaching down from  
her

table-top once more, this time to ruffle Joshua's Jewfro. "This  
is

probably quite hard for Joshi, you know? I mean this is quite  
personal

to him." She always called him Joshi like that. Joshi and Joely.

Joely and Joshi.

Crispin frowned. “Well, you know, I’ve said many times if Joshua

doesn’t want to be personally involved in this job, because of personal

sympathies, if he wants out, then ‘

“I’m in,” snapped Josh, barely restraining the aggression. “I’ve no

intention of wimping out.”

“That’s why Joshi’s our hero,” said Joely, with an enormous, supportive

smile. “Mark my words, he’ll be the last man standing.”

Ah, Joely!

“All right, well, let’s get on. Try to keep minutes from now on, all

right? OK. Paddy, can you just repeat what you were saying, so

everyone can take it in, because I think what you said perfectly sums

up the key decision we have to make now.”

Paddy’s head shot up and he fumbled through his notes.

“Umm, well

basically . . . basically, it’s a question of . . . of what our real flints

are. If it’s to punish the perpetrators and educate the public . . .

then, well, that involves one sort of approach an attack directly on,

umm, the person in question,” said Paddy, flashing a nervous glance at

Joshua. “But if our interest is the animal itself, as I think it

should be, then it’s a question of an anti-campaign, and if that

doesn't succeed, then the forceful release of the animal.”

“Right,” said Crispin hesitantly, unsure where the Crispin-role of-glory would fit into freeing one mouse. “But surely the mouse in

this case is a symbol, i.e.” this guy's got a lot more of them in his

lab so we have to deal with the bigger picture. We need someone to

bust in there ‘

“Well, basically . . . basically, I think that's the mistake that OHNO

make for example. Because, they take the animal itself as simply a

symbol. . . and to me that's absolutely the opposite of what FATE is

about. If this were a man trapped in a little glass box for six years,

he wouldn't be a symbol, you know? And I don't know about you, but

there's no difference between mice and men, you know, in my opinion.”

The gathered members of FATE murmured their assent, because this was

the kind of sentiment to which they routinely murmured assent.

Crispin was miffed. “Right, well, obviously I didn't mean that, Paddy. I just meant there is a bigger picture here, just like choosing

between one man's life and many men's lives, right?”

“Point of order!” said Josh, putting his hand in the air for a chance

to make Crispin look stupid. Crispin glared.

“Yes, Joshi,” said Joely sweetly. “Go on.”

“It’s just there aren’t any more mice. I mean, yeah, there are lots of

mice, but he hasn’t got any exactly like this one. It’s an incredibly

expensive process. He couldn’t afford loads. Plus, the press goaded

him that if the Future Mouse died while on display he could just

secretly replace it with another so he got cocky. He wants to prove

that his calculations are correct in front of the world. He’s only going to do one and bar code it. There are no others.”

Joely beamed and reached down to massage Josh’s shoulders.

“Right, yes, well, I guess that makes sense. So Paddy, I see what

you’re saying it is a question of whether we’re going to devote our

attentions to Marcus Chalfen or to releasing the actual mouse from its

captivity in front of the world’s press.”

“Point of order!”

“Yes, Josh, what?”

“Well, Crispin, this isn’t like the other animals you bust out. It won’t make any difference. The damage is done. The mouse carries

around its own torture in its genes. Like a time-bomb. If you release

it, it’ll just die in terrible pain somewhere else.”

“Point of order!”

“Yes, Paddy, go on.”

“Well, basically . . . would you not help a political prisoner to escape from jail just because he had a terminal disease?”

The multiple heads of FATE nodded vigorously.

“Yes, Paddy, yes, that’s right. I think Joshua’s wrong there and I think Paddy has presented to us the choice we have to make. It’s one we’ve come up against many times before and we’ve made different choices in different circumstances. We have, in the past, as you know, gone for the perpetrators. Lists have been made and punishments dealt out. Now, I know in recent years we have been moving away from some of our previous tactics, but I think even Joely would agree this is really our biggest, most fundamental test of that. We are dealing with seriously disturbed individuals. Now, on the other side of things, we have also staged large-scale peaceful protests and supervised the release of thousands of animals held captive by this state. In this case, we just won’t have the time or opportunity to employ both strategies. It’s a very public place and well, we’ve been over that. As Paddy said, I think the choice we have on the 31st is quite simple. It’s between the mouse and the man. Has

anyone got any problem with taking a vote on that? Joshua?”

Joshua sat on his hands to lift himself up and give Joely better purchase on his upper back massage. “No problem at all,” he said.

On the 20th of December at precisely 00:00 hours, the phone rang in the

Jones house. Me shuffled downstairs in her nightdress and picked up

the receiver.

“Erhummmm. I would like you yourself to make a mental note of both the

date and the time when I have chosen to ring you.”

“What? Er . . . what? Is that Ryan? Look, Ryan, I don’t mean to be

rude, but it’s midnight, yeah? Is there something you wanted or ‘

The? Pickney? You dere?”

“You granmuwer is on the telephone extension. She wished to talk to

you also.”

“Irie,” said Hortense excitably. “You gwan have to speak up, me kyan

hear nuttin’ ‘

The, I repeat: have you noted the date and the time of our call?”

“What? Look, I can’t . . . I’m really tired . . . could this wait until

“The 20th, Irie. At O hundred hours. Twos and zeros . . .”

“You lissnin’, pickney? Mr. Topps tryin’ to explain so meting very

im-par-tent.”



“Gran, you’re going to have to talk one at a time . . . you just hauled

me out of bed . . . I’m, like, totally knackered.”

“Twos and zeros, Miss Jones. Signifying the year 2000. And do you

know the month of my call?”

“Ryan, it’s December. Is this really ‘

“The twelfth month, Me. Corresponding to the twelve tribes of the

children of Israel. Of which each woz sealed twelve thousand. Of the

tribe of Judah woz sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Reuben woz

sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Gad-‘

“Ryan, Ryan . . . I get the picture.”

“There are certain days when the Lord wishes us to act certain pre-warning days, designated days ‘

“Where we must be savin’ de souls of de lost. Warnin’ dem ahead of time.”

“We are warning you, Irie.”

Hortense began softly weeping. “We only tryin’ to warn you, darling’.”

“OK. Great. I stand warned. Goodnight, all.”

“That is not the end of our warning,” said Ryan solemnly.

“That is

simply the first warning. There are more.”

“Don’t tell me eleven more.”

“Oh!” cried Hortense, dropping the phone but still distantly audible.

“She have been visited by de Lord! She know before she be tol’!”

“Look. Ryan. Could you somehow condense the other eleven warnings

into one or at least, tell me the most important one? Otherwise, I’m

afraid I’m going to have to go back to bed.”

There was a silence for a minute. Then: “Erhuuummm. Very well. Do

not get involved with this man.”

“Oh, Irie! Please lis sen to Mr. Topps! Please lis sen to ‘imf”

“With what man?”

“Oh, Miss Jones. Please do not pretend you ‘ave no knowledge of your

great sin. Open your soul. Let the Lord let myself reach out for yourself, and wash you free of-“

“Look, I’m really fucking tired. What man?”

“The scientist, Chalfen. The man you call “friend” when in truth he is

an enemy of all humanity.”

“Marcus? I’m not involved with him. I just answer his phone and do

his paperwork.”

“And thus are you made the secretary of the devil,” said Ryan, prompting Hortense into more and louder tears, “thus is you yourself

laid low.”

“Ryan, listen to me. I haven’t got time for this. Marcus Chalfen is

simply trying to come up with some answers to shit like shit like

cancer. O K? I don't know where you've been getting your information,

but I can assure you he ain't the devil incarnate."

"Only one of 'im minions!" protested Hortense. "Only one of 'im front

line troops!"

"Calm yourself, Mrs. B. I am afraid your granddaughter is too far gone

for us. As I expected, since leaving us, she 'as joined the dark side."

"Fuck you, Ryan, I'm not Darth Vader. Gran .. ."

"Don't tawk to me, pickney, don't tawk to me. I and I is bitterly disappointed."

"It appears we will be seem' you on the 31st, then, Miss Jones."

"Stop calling me Miss Jones, Ryan. The .. . what?"

"The 31st. The event will provide a platform for the Witness message.

The world's press will be there. And so will we. We intend '

"We gwan warn all a dem!" broke in Hortense. "And we gat it all plan

out nice, see? We gwan sing hymns with Mrs. Dobson on de accordion,

'cos you kyan shif a piano all de way dere. An' we gwan hunger-strike

until dat hevil man stop messin' wid de Lord's beauteous creation an'

-'

"Hunger-strike? Gran, when you go without elevenses you get nauseous. You've never gone without food for more than three hours in

your life. You're eighty-five."

"You forget," said Hortense with chilling curtness, "I was born in

strife. Me a survivor. A little no-food don' frighten me."

"And you're going to let her do that, are you, Ryan? She's eighty-five, Ryan. Eighty-five. She can't go on a hunger-strike."

"I'm tellin' you, Me," said Hortense, speaking loudly and clearly into

the mouthpiece, "I want to do dis. I'm That boddered by a little lack

of food. De Lord giveth wid 'im right hand and taketh away wid 'im

left."

Me listened to Ryan drop the phone, walk to Hortense's room and slowly

ease the receiver from her, persuading her to go to bed. Me could hear

her grandmother singing as she was led down the hallway, repeating the

phrase to no one in particular and setting it to no recognizable tune:

De Lord, giveth wid. 'im right hand. and. taketh away wid 'im left!

But most of the time, thought Me, he's simply a thief in the night. He

just taketh away. He just taketh the fuck away.

Magid was proud to say he witnessed every stage. He witnessed the

custom design of the genes. He witnessed the germ injection. He

witnessed the artificial insemination. And he witnessed the  
birth, so  
different from his own. One mouse only. No battle down the  
birth  
canal, no first and second, no saved and unsaved. No pot-luck.  
No  
random factors. No you have your father's snout and your  
mother's love  
of cheese. No mysteries lying in wait. No doubt as to when  
death will  
arrive. No hiding from illness, no running from pain. No  
question  
about who was pulling the strings. No doubtful omnipotence.  
No shaky  
fate. No question of a journey, no question of greener grass,  
for  
wherever this mouse went, its life would be precisely the  
same. It  
would not travel through time (and Time's a bitch, Magid  
knew that much  
now. Time is the bitch), because its future was equal to its  
present  
Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1999 JB  
which was equal to its past. A Chinese box of a mouse. No 9|  
other roads, no missed opportunities, no parallel possibilities.  
No  
JL  
second-guessing, no what-ifs, no might-have-be ens Just  
certainty.  
'^g  
Just certainty in its purest form. And what more, thought  
Magid life

once the witnessing was over, once the mask and gloves were  
^P removed,  
once the white coat was returned to its hook what more is God  
than  
that?

## 19 The Final Space

Thursday, 31 December 1992

So said the banner on the top of the newspaper. So proclaimed  
the

revellers who danced through early evening streets with their  
shrill

silver whistles and Union Jacks, trying to whip up the feeling  
that

goes with the date; trying to bring on the darkness (it was only  
five

o'clock) so that England might have its once-a-year party; get  
fucked

up, throw up, snog, grope and impale; stand in the doorways  
of trains

holding them open for friends; argue with the sudden  
inflationary

tactics of Somalian minicab drivers, jump in water or play  
with fire,

and all by the dim, disguising light of the street lamps. It was  
the

night when England stops saying  
pleasethankyoupleasesorrypleasedidl?

And starts saying pleasefuckmefuckyoumotherjucker (and we  
never say

that; the accent is wrong; we sound silly). The night England  
gets

down to the fundamentals. It was New Year's Eve. But Joshua  
was

having a hard time believing it. Where had the time gone? It had  
seeped between the crack in Joely's legs, run into the secret  
pockets  
of her ears, hidden itself in the warm, matted hair of her  
armpits. And  
the consequences of what he was about to do, on this the  
biggest day of  
his life, a critical situation that three months ago he would  
have  
dissected, compartmentalized, weighed up and analysed with  
Chalfenist  
vigour that too had escaped him into her crevices. He had  
made no real  
decisions this New Year's Eve, no resolutions. He felt as  
thoughtless  
as the young men tumbling out of pubs, looking for trouble; he  
felt as  
light as the child sitting astride his father's shoulders heading  
for a  
family party. Yet he was not with them, out there in the streets,  
having fun he was here, in here, careening into the centre of  
town,  
making a direct line for the  
Ferret Institute like a heat-seeking missile. He was here,  
cramped in  
a bright red minibus with ten jumpy members of FATE,  
hurtling out of  
Willesden towards Trafalgar Square, half listening to Kenny  
read his  
father's name out loud for the benefit of Crispin who was up  
front,  
driving.

“When Dr. Marcus Chalfen puts his Future Mouse on public display this evening he begins a new chapter in our genetic future.””

Crispin threw his head back for a loud, “Ha!”

“Yeah, right, exactly,” continued Kenny, trying unsuccessfully to scoff

and read simultaneously, ‘like, thanks for the objective reporting.

Umm, where was I ... all right: “More significantly, he opens up this traditionally secretive, rarefied and complex branch of science to an unprecedented audience. As the Ferret Institute prepares to open its doors around-the-clock for seven years, Dr. Chalfen promises a national event which will be ‘crucially unlike the Festival of Britain in 1951 or the 1924 British Empire Exhibition because it has no political agenda’.”

“Ha!” snorted Crispin once more, this time turning right around in his seat so the FATE minibus (which wasn’t officially the FATE minibus; it still had ken sal rise family services unit in ten-inch yellow letters on either side; a loan from a social worker with furry animal sympathies) only narrowly missed a gaggle of pissed-up high-heeled girls who were tottering across the road. “No political agenda? Is he



taking the fucking piss?

“Keep your eyes on the road, darling,” said Joely, blowing him a kiss.

“We want to at least try to get there in one piece. Umm, left here ..

. down the Edgware Road.”

“Fucker,” said Crispin, glowering at Joshua and then turning back.

“What ajucker he is.”

““By 1999,” read Kenny, following the arrow from the front to page

five, “the year experts predict recombinant DNA procedure will come

into its own approximately fifteen million

people will have seen the Future Mouse exhibition, and many more

worldwide will have followed the progress of the Future Mouse in the

international press. By then, Dr. Chalfen will have succeeded in his

aim of educating a nation, and throwing the ethical ball into the

people’s court.””

“Pass. Me. The. Fuck. Ing. Buck. Et,” said Crispin, as if the very words were vomit. “What do the other papers say?”

Paddy held up Middle England’s bible so Crispin could see it in the

rear-view. Headline: mouse mania

“It comes with a free Future Mouse sticker,” said Paddy, shrugging his

shoulders and slapping the sticker on his beret. “Pretty cute,

actually.”

“The tabloids are a surprise winner, though,” said Minnie.

Minnie was

a brand-new convert: a seventeen-year-old Crusty, with matted blonde

dreads and pierced nipples, whom Joshua had briefly considered becoming

obsessed with. He tried for a while, but found he just couldn’t do it;

he just couldn’t leave his miserable little psychotic world-of-Joely

and go out seeking life on a new planet. Minnie, to her credit, had

spotted this straight off and gravitated towards Crispin. She wore as

little as the winter weather would allow and took every opportunity to

thrust her perky pierced nipples into Crispin’s personal space, as she

did now, reaching over to the driver’s cab to show him the front page

of the daily rag in question. At one and the same time Crispin tried

unsuccessfully to take the Marble Arch roundabout, avoid elbowing

Minnie in the tits, and look at the paper.

“I can’t see it properly. What is it?”

“It’s Chalfen’s head with mouse ears, attached to a goat’s torso, which

is attached to a pig’s arse. And he’s eating from a trough that says

“Genetic Engineering” at one end and “Public Money” at the other.

Headline: chalfen chows down.”

“Nice. Every little helps.”

Crispin went round the roundabout again, and this time got the turning he required. Minnie reached over him and propped the paper on the dashboard.

“God, he looks more fucking Chalfenist than ever!”

Joshua bitterly regretted telling Crispin about this little idiosyncrasy of his family, their habit of referring to themselves as

verbs, nouns and adjectives. It had seemed a good idea at the time;

give everybody a laugh; confirm, if there was any doubt, whose side he

was on. But he never felt that he’d betrayed his father the weight of

what he was doing never really hit him until he heard Chalfenism

ridiculed out of Crispin’s mouth.

“Look at him Chalfening around in that trough. Exploit everything and

everybody, that’s the Chalfen way, eh Josh?”

Joshua grunted and turned his back on Crispin, in favour of the window

and a view of the frost over Hyde Park.

“That’s a classic photo, there, see? The one they’ve used for the

head. I remember it; that was the day he gave evidence in the California trial. That look of total fucking superiority. Very Chalfenesque!”

Joshua bit his tongue. don’t rise to it. if you don’t rise

TO IT, YOU GAIN HER SYMPATHY.

“Don’t, Crisp,” said Joely firmly, touching Joshua’s hair. “Just try

to remember what we’re about to do. He doesn’t need that tonight.”

BINGO.

“Yeah, well

Crispin put his foot down on the accelerator. “Minnie, have you and

Paddy checked that everyone’s got everything they need? Balaclavas and

that?”

“Yeah, all done. It’s cool.”

“Good.” Crispin pulled out a small silver box filled with all the

necessaries to roll a fat joint and threw it in Joely’s direction, catching Joshua painfully on the shin.

“Make us one, love.”

CUNT.

Joely retrieved the box from the floor. She worked crouching with the

Rizla resting on Joshua’s knee, her long neck exposed, her breasts

falling forward until they were practically in his hands.

“Are you nervous?” she asked him, flicking her head back once the

joint was rolled.

“How d’you mean, nervous?”

“About tonight. I mean, talk about conflict of loyalties.”

“Conflict?” murmured Josh hazily, wishing he were out there with the

happy people, the conflict-free people, the New Year people.

“God, I really admire you. I mean, FATE are dedicated to extreme

action . . . And you know, even now, I find some of the stuff we do ...

difficult. And we’re talking about the most firmly held principle in

my life, you know? I mean, Crispin and FATE.. . that’s my whole

life.”

OH GREAT, thought Joshua, OH FANTASTIC.

“And I’m still shit scared about tonight.”

Joely sparked the joint and inhaled. She passed it straight to Joshua,

as the minibus took a right past Parliament. “It’s like that quote:

“If I had to choose between betraying my friend or my country, I hope I

should have the guts to betray my country.” The choice between a duty

or a principle, you know? You see, I don’t feel torn like that. I

don’t know if I could do what I do if I did. I mean, if it was my

father. My first commitment is to animals and that’s Crispin’s first

commitment too, so there’s no conflict. It’s kind of easy for us. But

you, Joshi, you’ve made the most extreme decision out of us all ... and

you just seem so calm. I mean, it’s admirable . . . and I think you’ve

really impressed Crispin, because you know, he was a little unsure

about whether

Joely kept on talking, and Josh kept on nodding in the necessary

places, but the hardcore Thai weed he was smoking had lassoed one word

of hers calm and reined it in as a question. Why so calm, Joshi?

You're about to get into some pretty serious shit why so calm?

Because he imagined he seemed calm from the outside, preternaturally

calm, his adrenalin enjoying an inverse relationship with the rising

New Year sap, with the jittery nerves of the FATE posse; and the effect

of the skunk on top of it all ... it was like walking under water, deep

under water, while children played above. But it wasn't calm so much

as inertia. And he couldn't work out, as the van progressed down

Whitehall, whether this was the right reaction to let the world wash

over him, to let events take their course or whether he should be more

like those people, those people out there, whooping, dancing, fighting,

fucking ... whether he should be more what was that horrible late

twentieth-century tautology? Proactive. More proactive in the face of

the future.

But he took another deep hit on the joint and it sent him back to

twelve, being twelve; a precocious kid, waking up each morning fully expecting a twelve hours until nuclear apocalypse announcement, that old cheesy end-of-the-world scenario. Round that time he had thought a lot about extreme decisions, about the future and its deadlines. Even then it had struck him that he was unlikely to spend those last twelve hours fucking Alice the fifteen-year-old babysitter next door, telling people that he loved them, converting to orthodox Judaism, or doing all the things he wanted and all the things he never dared. It always seemed more likely to him, much more likely, that he would just return to his room and calmly finish constructing Lego Medieval Castle. What else could you do? What other choice could you be certain about? Because choices need time, the fullness of time, time being the horizontal axis of morality you make a decision and then you wait and see, wait and see. And it's a lovely fantasy, this fantasy of no time (TWELVE HOURS LEFT TWELVE HOURS LEFT), the point at which consequences disappear and any action is allowable (I'm mad I'm fucking mad for it' came the cry from the street). But twelve-year-old Josh

was too neurotic, too anal, too Chalfenist to enjoy it, even the thought of it. Instead he was there thinking: but what if the world

doesn't end and what if I fucked Alice Rodwell and she became pregnant

and what if

It was the same now. Always the fear of consequences. Always this

terrible inertia. What he was about to do to his father was so huge,

so colossal, that the consequences were inconceivable he couldn't

imagine a moment occurring after that act. Only blankness.

Nothingness. Something like the end of the world. And facing the end

of the world, or even just the end of the year, had always given Josh a

strangely detached feeling.

Every New Year's Eve is impending apocalypse in miniature. You fuck

where you want, you puke when you want, you glass who you want to

glass

the huge gatherings in the street; the television round-ups of the

goodies and baddies of time past; the frantic final kisses; the 10! 9!

8!

Joshua glared up and down Whitehall, at the happy people going about

their dress rehearsal. They were all confident that it wouldn't happen



or certain they could deal with it if it did. But the world happens to

you, thought Joshua, you don't happen to the world. There's nothing

you can do. For the first time in his life, he truly believed that.

And Marcus Chalfen believed the direct opposite. And there in a

nutshell, he realized, is how I got here, turning out of Westminster,

watching Big Ben approach the hour when I shall topple my father's

house. That is how we all got here. Between rocks and hard places.

The frying pan and the fire.

Thursday, December 31 at 1992, New Year's Eve

Signalling problems at Baker Street

No Southbound Jubilee Line Trains from Baker Street

Customers are advised to change on to the Metropolitan Line at Finchley

Road

Or Change at Baker Street on to the Bakerloo There is no alternative

bus service Last Train 02.00 hours

All London Underground staff wish you a safe and happy New Year!

Willesden Green Station Manager, Richard Daley

Brothers Millat, Hifan, Tyrone, Mo Hussein-Ishmael, Shiva, Abdul-Colin

and Abdul-Jimmy stood stock-still like maypoles in the middle of the

station while the dance of the New Year went on around them.

“Great,” said Millat. “What do we do now?”

“Can’t you read?” inquired Abdul-Jimmy.

“We do what the board suggests, Brothers,” said AbdulColin, short-circuiting any argument with his deep, calming baritone.

“We

change at Finchley Road. Allah provides.”

The reason Millat couldn’t read the writing on the wall was simple. He

was stoned. It was the second day of Ramadan and he was cained Every

synapse in his body had clocked out for the evening and gone home. But

there was still some conscientious worker going round the treadmill of

his brain, ensuring one thought circulated in his skull: Why? Why get

stoned, Millat? Why? Good question.

At midday he’d found an ageing eighth of hash in a drawer, a little

bundle of cellophane he hadn’t had the heart to throw away six months

ago. And he smoked it all. He smoked some of it out of his bedroom

window. Then he walked to Gladstone Park and smoked some more. He

smoked the great majority of it in the car park of Willesden Library.

He finished it off in the student kitchen of one Warren Chapman, a

South African skateboarder he used to hang with back in the day. And

as a result, he was so calmed now, standing on the platform with the rest, so calmed that he could not only hear sounds within sounds but sounds within sounds within sounds. He could hear the mouse scurrying along the tracks, creating a higher level of harmonious rhythm with the crackle of the tannoy and the off-beat sniff of an elderly woman twenty feet away. Even when the train pulled in, he could still hear these things beneath the surface. Now, there is a level of calmed that you can be, Millat knew, that is just so very very calmed that you reach a level of Zen-like sobriety and come out the other side feeling absolutely tip-top as if you'd never sparked up in the first place. Oh, Millat longed for that. He only wished he'd got that far.

But there just wasn't quite enough.

"Are you all right, Brother Millat?" asked Abdul-Colin with concern as

the tube doors slid open. "You have gone a nasty colour."

"Fine, fine," said Millat, and did a credible impression of being fine

because hash just isn't like drink; no matter how bad it is, you can

always, at some level, pull your shit together. To prove this theory

to himself, he walked in a slow but confident fashion down the carriage

and took a seat at the very end of the line of Brothers, between Shiva

and some excitable Australians heading for the Hippodrome.

Shiva, unlike Abdul-Jimmy, had had his share of wild times and could

spot the tell-tale red-eye from a distance of fifty yards.

“Millat, man,” he said under his breath, confident he couldn’t be heard by the rest of the Brothers above the noise of the train.

“What have you been doing to yourself?” g|

Millat looked straight ahead and spoke to his reflection in the ljp

train window. “I’m preparing myself “|p

“By getting messed up?” hissed Shiva. He peered at the photocopy of

Sura 52. he hadn’t quite memorized. “Are you crazy? It’s hard enough

to remember this stuff without being on the planet Mars while you’re

doing it.”

Millat swayed slightly, and turned to Shiva with a mistimed lunge. “I’m

not preparing myself for that. I’m preparing myself for action.

Because no one else will do it. We lose one man and you all betray the

cause. You desert. But I stand firm.”

Shiva fell silent. Millat was referring to the recent ‘arrest’ of Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah on trumped up charges of tax evasion

and civil disobedience. No one took the charges seriously, but everybody knew it was a not-so gentle warning from the Metropolitan

Police that they had their eye trained on KEVIN activities. In the

light of this, Shiva had been the first one to beat a retreat from the

agreed Plan A, quickly followed by Abdul-Jimmy and Hussein-Ishmael,

who, despite his desire to wreak violence upon somebody, anybody, had

his shop to think about. For a week the argument raged (with Millat

firmly defending Plan A), but on the 26th Abdul-Colin, Tyrone and

finally Hifan conceded that Plan A might not be in KEVIN'S long-term

interest. They could not, after all, put themselves in an imprisonment

situation unless they were secure in the knowledge that KEVIN had

leaders to replace them. So Plan A was off. Plan B was hastily improvised. Plan B involved the seven KEVIN representatives standing

up halfway through Marcus Chalfen's press conference and quoting Sura

52, "The Mountain", first in Arabic (Abdul-Colin alone would do this)

and then in English. Plan B made Millat sick.

"And that's it? You're just going to read to him? That's his punishment?"

What happened to revenge? What happened to just desserts, retribution, jihad?

“Do you suggest,” Abdul-Colin solemnly inquired, “that the word of

Allah as given to the Prophet Muhammad Salla Allahu “Alaihi Wa Sallam

is not sufficient?”

Well, no. And so even though it sickened him, Millat had to step

aside. In place of the questions of honour, sacrifice, duty, the life

and death questions that came with the careful plotting of clan warfare, the very reasons Millat joined KEVIN in place of these, came

the question of translation. Everybody agreed that no translation of

the Qur’an could claim to be the word of God, but at the same time

everybody conceded that Plan B would lose something in the delivery if

no one could understand what was being said. So the question was which

translation and why. Would it be one of the un trusty but clear

Orientalists: Palmer (1880), Bell (1937-9), Arberry (1955), Dawood

(1956)? The eccentric but poetic J. M. Rodwell (1861)? The old

favourite, passionate, dedicated Anglican convert par excellence

Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (1930)? Or one of the Arab brothers,

the

prosaic Shakir or the flamboyant Yusuf Ali? Five days they argued it.

When Millat walked into the Kilburn Hall of an evening he had only to

squint to mistake this talkative circle of chairs, these supposed fanatic fundamentalists, for an editorial meeting at the London Review

of Books.

“But Dawood is a plod!” Brother Hifan would argue vehemently. “I

refer you to 52:44: If they saw a part of heaven falling down, they

would still say: “It is but a mass of clouds!” Mass of clouds? It is

not a rock concert. At least with Rodwell there is some attempt to

capture the poetry, the remarkable nature of the Arabic: And should

they see a fragment of the heaven falling down, they would say, “It is

only a dense cloud.” Fragment, dense the effect is far stronger, accha?”

And then, haltingly, Mo Hussein-Ishmael: “I am just a butcher stroke-corner shop-owner. I can’t claim to know much about it. But I

like very much this last line; it is Rodwell . . . er, I think,

yes, Rodwell. 52:49: And in the night-season: Praise him when the

stars are setting. Night-season. I think that is a lovely phrase. It sounds like an Elvis ballad. Much better than the other one, the

Pickthall one: And in the night-time also hymn His praise, and at the

setting of the stars. Night-season is very much lovelier.”

“And is this what we are here for?” Millat had yelled at all of them.

“Is this what we joined KEVIN for? To take no action? To sit around

on our arses playing with words?”

But Plan B stuck, and here they were, whizzing past Finchley Road,

heading to Trafalgar Square to carry it out. And this was why Millat

was stoned. To give him enough guts to do something else.

“I stand firm,” said Millat, in Shiva’s ear, slurring his words, ‘that

is what we’re here for. To stand firm. That is why I joined. Why did

you join?”

Well, in fact Shiva had joined KEVIN for three reasons. First, because

he was sick of the stick that comes with being the only Hindu in a

Bengali Muslim restaurant. Secondly, because being Head of Internal

Security for KEVIN beat the hell out of being second waiter at the

Palace. And thirdly, for the women. (Not the KEVIN women, who were

beautiful but chaste in the extreme, but all the women on the outside

who had despaired of his wild ways and were now hugely impressed by



his

new asceticism. They loved the beard, they dug the hat, and told Shiva

that at thirty-eight he had finally ceased to be a boy. They were massively attracted by the fact that he had renounced women and the

more he renounced them, the more successful he became. Of course this

equation could only work so long, and now Shiva was getting more pussy

than he ever had as a kaffir.) However, Shiva sensed that the truth was

not what was required here, so he said: "To do my duty."

"Then we are on the same wavelength, Brother Shiva," said Millat, going

to pat Shiva's knee but just missing it. "The only question is: will

you do it?"

"Pardon me, mate," said Shiva, removing Millat's arm from where it had

fallen between his legs. "But I think, taking into account your . . .

umm . . . present condition . . . the question is, will you?"

Now there was a question. Millat was half sure that he was possibly

maybe going to do something or not that would be correct and very silly

and fine and un-good.

"Mill, we've got a Plan B," persisted Shiva, watching the clouds of

doubt cross Millat's face. "Let's just go with Plan B, yeah? No point

in causing trouble. Man. You are just like your dad. Classic Iqbal.

Can't let things go. Can't let sleeping cats die or whatever the fuck

the phrase is."

Millat turned from Shiva and looked at his feet. He had been more

certain when he began, imagining the journey as one cold sure dart on

the Jubilee Line: Willesden Green-" Charing Cross, no changing of

trains, not this higgledy-piggledy journey; just a straight line to

Trafalgar, and then he would climb the stairs into the square, and come

face to face with his great-great-grandfather's enemy, Henry Havelock

on his plinth of pigeon-shat stone. He would be emboldened by it; and

he would enter the Perret Institute with revenge and revisionism in his

mind and lost glory in his heart and he would and he would and he

"I think," said Millat, after a pause, "I am going to vomit."

"Baker Street!" cried Abdul-Jimmy. And with the discreet aid of

Shiva, Millat crossed the platform to the connecting train.

Twenty minutes later the Bakerloo Line delivered them into the icy cold

of Trafalgar Square. In the distance, Big Ben. In the square, Nelson.

Havelock. Napier. George IV. And then the National Gallery, back

there near St. Martin's. All the statues facing the clock.  
"They do love their false icons in this country," said  
AbdulColin, with  
his odd mix of gravity and satire, unmoved by the considerable  
New Year  
crowd who were presently spitting at,  
dancing round and crawling over the many lumps of grey  
stone. "Now,  
will somebody please tell me: what is it about the English that  
makes  
them build their statues with their backs to their culture and  
their  
eyes on the time?" He paused to let the shivering KEVIN  
Brothers  
contemplate the rhetorical question. IH  
"Because they look to their future to forget their past.  
Sometimes you  
almost feel sorry for them, you know?" he continued, turning  
full  
circle to look around at the inebriated crowd.  
"They have no faith, the English. They believe in what men  
make, but  
what men make crumbles. Look at their empire. This is all  
they have.  
Charles II Street and South Africa House and a lot of stupid-  
looking  
stone men on stone horses. The sun rises and sets on it in  
twelve  
hours, no trouble. This is what is left."  
"I'm bloody cold," complained Abdul-Jimmy, clapping his mit-  
tened hands

together (he found his uncle's speeches a big pain in the arse).

"Let's

get going," he said, as a huge beer-pregnant Englishman, wet from the

fountains, collided into him, 'out of this bloody madness. It's on

Chandos Street."

"Brother?" said Abdul-Colin to Millat, who was standing some distance

from the rest of the group. "Are you ready?"

"Till be along in a minute." He shoed them away weakly.

"Don't worry,

I'll be there."

There were two things he wanted to see first. The first of which was a

particular bench, that bench over there, by the far wall. He walked

over to it, a long, stumbling journey, trying to avoid an unruly conga

line (so much hashish in his head; lead weights on each foot); but he

made it. He sat down. And there it was.

Five-inch letters, between one leg of the bench and the other. iq bal

It wasn't clear, and the colour of it was a murky rust, but it was

there. The story of it was old.

A few months after his father arrived in England, he had sat on this

bench nursing a bleeding thumb, the top sliced off by a careless,

doddering stroke from one of the older waiters. When it first

happened, in the restaurant, Samad couldn't feel it because it was his  
dead hand. So he just wrapped it in a handkerchief to stem the flow  
and continued work. But the material had become soaked in blood, he  
was putting the customers off their food and eventually Ardashir sent  
him home. Samad took his open thumb out of the restaurant, past  
theatre land and down St. Martin's Lane. When he reached the square  
he stuck it in the fountain and watched his red insides spill out into  
the blue water. But he was making a mess and people were looking. He  
resolved instead to sit on the bench, gripping it at the root until it  
stopped. The blood kept on coming. After a while, he gave up holding  
his thumb upright and let it hang down to the floor like hal al meat,  
hoping it would quicken the bleeding process. Then, with his head  
between his legs, and his thumb leaking on to the pavement, a primitive  
impulse had come over him. Slowly, with the dribbling blood, he wrote  
iq bal from one chair leg to the next. Then, in an attempt to make it  
more permanent, he had gone over it again with a pen knife, scratching  
it into the stone.

“A great shame washed over me the moment I finished,” he explained to his sons years later. “I ran from it into the night; I tried to run from myself. I knew I had been depressed in this country . . . but this was different. I ended up clinging on to the railings in Piccadilly Circus, kneeling and praying, weeping and praying, interrupting the buskers. Because I knew what it meant, this deed. It meant I wanted to write my name on the world. It meant I presumed. Like the Englishmen who named streets in Kerala after their wives, like the Americans who shoved their flag in the moon. It was a warning from Allah. He was saying: Iqbal, you are becoming like them. That’s what it meant. No, thought Millat, the first time he heard this, no, that’s not what it meant. It just meant you’re nothing. And looking at it now, Millat felt nothing but contempt. All his life he wanted a Godfather, and all he got was Samad. A faulty, broken, stupid, one-handed waiter of a man who had spent eighteen years in a strange land and made no more mark than this. It just means you’re nothing, repeated Millat, working his way through the premature vomit (girls drinking doubles since three

o'clock) over to Havelock, to look Havelock in his stony eye.  
It means

you're nothing and he's something. And that's it. That's why  
Pande

hung from a tree while Havelock the executioner sat on a  
chaise longue

in Delhi. Pande was no one and Havelock was someone. No  
need for

library books and debates and reconstructions. Don't you see,  
Abba?

whispered Millat. That's it. That's the long, long history of us  
and

them. That's how it was. But no more.

Because Millat was here to finish it. To revenge it. To turn that  
history around. He liked to think he had a different attitude, a  
second generation attitude. If Marcus Chalfen was going to  
write his

name all over the world, Millat was going to write it BIGGER.  
There

would be no misspelling his name in the history books.  
There'd be no

forgetting the dates and times. Where Pande mis footed he  
would step

sure. Where Pande chose A, Millat would choose B. Yes,  
Millat was

stoned. And it may be absurd to us that one Iqbal can believe  
the

breadcrumbs laid down by another Iqbal, generations before  
him, have

not yet blown away in the breeze. But it really doesn't matter  
what we

believe. It seems it won't stop the man who thinks this life is  
guided

by the life he thinks he had before, or the gypsy who swears  
by the  
queens in her tarot pack. And it's hard to change the mind of  
the  
high-strung woman who lays responsibility for all her actions  
at the  
feet of her mother, or the lonely guy who sits in a fold-up chair  
on a  
hill  
in the dead of night waiting for the little green men. Amidst  
the  
strange landscapes that have replaced our belief in the efficacy  
of the  
stars, Millat's is not such odd terrain. He believes the decisions  
that are made, come back. He believes we live in circles. His is  
a  
simple, neat fatalism. What goes around comes around.  
"Ding, ding," said Millat out loud, tapping Havelock's foot,  
before  
turning on his heel to make his hazy way to Chandos Street.  
"Round  
two."

December 31st 1992

He that increase th knowledge increase th sorrow

Eccles. ch. 1, v. 18

When Ryan Topps was asked to assemble the Lambeth  
Kingdom Hall's

Thought for the Day desk calendar for 1992, he took especial  
care to

avoid the mistakes of his predecessors. Too often in the past,  
Ryan



noted, when the assembler came to choose quotations for entirely famous, secular days, he let sentiment get the better of him, so that on Valentine's Day 1991 we find there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, I John 4:18, as if John were thinking of the paltry feeling that prompts people to send each other Milk Tray and cheap teddy bears rather than the love of Jesus Christ, which surpasseth. Ryan took very much the opposite approach. On a day like New Year's Eve, for example, when everybody was running around making their New Year resolutions, assessing their past year and plotting their success for the next, he felt it necessary to bring them to earth with a bump. He wanted to offer a little reminder that the world is cruel and pointless, all human endeavour ultimately meaningless, and no advancement in this world worth making besides gaining God's favour and an entry ticket into the better half of the after-life. And having completed the calendar the previous year and forgotten much of what he'd done, he was pleasantly surprised when he ripped off the 30th and

looked at the crisp white page of the 31st at just how effective the

reminder was. No thought could have been more apt for the day ahead.

No warning more propitious. He ripped it from the calendar, squeezed

it into the tight leather of his trousers and told Mrs. B. to get in the side car.

“He who -would valiant be, ‘against all disaster!” sang Mrs. B. as

they zipped along Lambeth Bridge, heading for Trafalgar Square. “Let

‘im in constancy, follow de master!”

Ryan made sure to signal a good minute before turning left so that the

Kingdom ladies in the minibus behind wouldn’t get confused. He made a

quick mental inventory of the things he’d put in the van: song books,

instruments, banners, Watchtower leaflets. All present and correct.

They had no actual tickets, but they would make their protest outside,

in the cold, suffering like true Christians. Praise be to God! What a

glorious day! All portents were good. He even had a dream last night

that Marcus Chalfen was the devil himself and they were standing nose

to nose. Ryan had said: Myself and yourself are at war. There can be

only one winner. Then he had quoted the same piece of scripture at him

(he couldn't recall precisely what it was now, but it was something from Revelation) over and over and over again, until the devil Marcus had become smaller and smaller, grown ears and a long forked tail, and finally scurried away, a tiny satanic mouse. As in this vision, so it would be in life. Ryan would remain unbending, unmoving, absolutely constant, and, in the end, the sinner would repent. That was how Ryan approached all theological, practical and personal conflicts. He didn't move, "not an inch. But then, that had always been his talent; he had a mono-intelligence; an ability to hold on to a single idea with phenomenal tenacity, and he never found anything that suited it as well as the church of Jehovah's Witnesses. Ryan thought in black and white. The problem with his antecedent passions scootering and pop music was there were always shades of grey (though possibly the two closest things in secular life to a Witness preacher are boys who send letters to the New Musical Express and those enthusiasts who pen articles for Scooters Today). There were always the difficult questions of whether one should dilute one's appreciation

of the Kinks with a little Small Faces, or whether Italy or Germany were the best manufacturers of spare engine parts. That life seemed so alien to him now he hardly remembered living it. He pitied those who suffered under the weight of such doubts and dilemmas. He pitied Parliament as he and Mrs. B. scooted past it; he pitied it because the laws made in there were provisional where his were eternal. . . . “There’s no discouragement, shall make ‘im once relent, his first avowed intent, to be a Pilgrim!” trilled Mrs. B. “Who so besets him round, with dismal stories. . . do but themselves confound, his strength the more is . . .” He relished it. He relished standing nose to nose with evil and saying, “You yourself: prove it to me. Go on, prove it.” He felt he needed no arguments like the Muslims or the Jews. No convoluted proofs or defences. Just his faith. And nothing rational can fight faith. If Star Wars (secretly Ryan’s favourite film. The Good! The Evil! The Force! So simple. So true) is truly the sum of all archaic myths and the purest allegory of life (as Ryan believed it was), then faith, unadulterated, ignorant faith, is the biggest fuck-off light sabre in the universe. Go on, prove it. He did that every Sunday on the

doorsteps and he would do precisely the same to Marcus Chalfen. Prove

to me that you are right. Prove to me that you are more right than

God. Nothing on earth would do it.

Because Ryan didn't believe in or care about anything on earth.

"We almost there?"

Ryan squeezed Mrs. B.'s frail hand and sped across the Strand, then

wound his way round the back of the National Gallery.

"No foe shall stay his might, though he with giants fight, he will make

good his right, to be a Pilgrim!"

Well said Mrs. B.! The right to be a pilgrim! Who does not presume

and yet inherits the earth! The right to be right, to teach others, to

be just at all times because God has ordained that you will be, the

right to go into strange lands and alien places and talk to the ignorant, confident that you speak nothing but the truth. The right to

be always right. So much better than the rights he once held dear: the

right to liberty, freedom of expression, sexual freedom, the right to

smoke pot, the right to party, the right to ride a scooter sixty-five

miles an hour on a main road without a helmet. So much more than all

those, Ryan could claim. He exercised a right so rare, at this the  
fag-end of the century, as to be practically obsolete. The most  
fundamental right of all. The right to be the good guy.

On: 31/12/1992 London Transport Buses

Route 98

From: Willesden Lane To: Trafalgar Square

At: 17:35

Fare: Adult Single 0 pounds 70 pence Retain Ticket for  
Inspection

Cor (thought Archie) they don't make 'em like they used to.  
That's not

to say they make them any worse. They just make them very,  
very

different. So much information. The minute you tore one from  
the

perforation you felt stuffed and pinned down by some

all-seeing taxidermist, you felt freeze-framed in time, you felt

caught. Didn't use to be, Archie remembered. Many years ago  
he had a

cousin, Bill, who worked the old 32 route through Oxford  
Street. Good

sort, Bill. Smile and a nice word for everyone. Used to tear off  
a

ticket from one of those chug-chug big-handled mechanical  
things (and

where have they gone? Where's the smudgy ink?) on the sly,  
like; no

money passed over; there you go, Arch. That was Bill, always  
helping

you out. Anyway, those tickets, the old ones, they didn't tell  
you

where you were going, much less where you came from. He couldn't remember seeing any dates on them either, and there was certainly no mention of time. It was all different now, of course. All this information. Archie wondered why that was. He tapped Samad on the shoulder. He was sitting directly ahead of him, in the front-most seat of the top deck. Samad turned round, looked at the ticket he was being shown, listened to the question and gave Archie a funny look. "What is it, precisely, that you want to know?" He looked a bit testy. Everyone was a little testy right now. There'd been a bit of a ding-dong earlier in the afternoon. Neena had demanded that they all go to the mouse thing, seeing as how Me was involved and Magid was involved and the least they could do was go and support family because whatever they thought of it a lot of work had gone into it and young people need affirmation from their parents and she was going to go even if they weren't and it was a pretty poor show if family couldn't turn up for their big day and . . . well, it went on and on. And then the emotional fall-out. Me burst into tears (What was wrong with Irie? She was always a bit weepy these days), Clara accused

Neena of emotional blackmail, Alsana said she'd go if Samad went, and

Samad said he'd spent New Year's Eve at O'Connell's for eighteen years

and he wasn't going to stop now. Archie, for his part, said he was

buggered if he was going to listen to this racket all evening he'd

rather sit on a quiet hill by himself.

5”

They'd all looked at him queerly when he said that. Little did they

know he was taking prophetic advice he'd received from Ibelgaufts the

day before:

28 December 1992 My dearest Archibald,

“Tis the season to be jolly . . . so it has been claimed, but from my

window I see only turmoil. At present six felines, hungry for territory, are warring in my garden. Not content with their autumnal

hobby of drenching their plots in urine, the winter has brought oufa

more fanatical urge in them . . . it is down to claws and flying far.. .

the screeching keeps me up all through the night! I cannot help but

think that my own cat, Gabriel, has the right idea, sat atop my shed,

having given up his land claims in exchange for a quiet life.

But in the end, Alsana laid down the law. Archie and the rest were



going whether they liked it or not. And they didn't. So now they were

taking up half the bus in their attempts to sit alone: Clara behind

Alsana who was behind Archie who was behind Samad who was sitting

across from Neena. Me was sitting next to Archie, but only because

there wasn't any more space.

"I was just saying . . . you know," said Archie, attempting the first

conversation to broach the frosty silence since they left Willesden.

"It's quite interesting, the amount of information they put on bus

tickets these days. Compared with, you know, the old days. I was just

wondering why. It's quite interesting."

"I have to be honest, Archibald," said Samad with a grimace, "I find it

singularly uninteresting. I find it terminally dull."

"Oh, right," said Archie. "Right you are."

The bus did one of those arching corners where it feels the merest

breath will topple it over.

"Umm . . . so you wouldn't know why "

"No, Jones, I have no intimate friends at the bus garage nor any inside

knowledge of the progressive decisions that are no doubt made daily

within London Transport. But if you are asking me for my uneducated

guess, then I imagine it is part of some huge government monitoring

process to track the every movement of one Archibald Jones, to

ascertain where and what he is doing on all days and at every moment'

"Jesus," Neena cut in irritably, 'why do you have to be such a bullyr

"Excuse me? I was not aware you and I, Neena, were having a conversation."

"He was just asking a question and you have to come over all arsey. I

mean, you've been bullying him for half a century. Haven't you had

enough? Why don't you just leave him alone?"

"Neena Begum, I swear if you give me one more instruction today I will

personally tear your tongue out at the root and wear it as a necktie."

"Steady on, Sam," said Archie, perturbed at the fuss he had inadvertently caused, "I was just'

"Don't you threaten my niece," Alsana chimed in from further down the

bus. "Don't you take it out on her just because you'd rather be eating

your beans and chips' Ah! (thought Archie, wistfully) Beans and chips!

- 'than going to see your own son actually achieving something and '

"I can't remember you being all that keen," said Clara, adding her

twopence worth. "You know, you have a very convenient way, Alsi, of

forgetting what happened two minutes ago."

"This from the woman who lives with Archibald Jones!" scoffed Samad.

"I might remind you that people in glass houses "

"No, Samad," Clara protested. "Don't even begin to start on me.

You're the one who had all the real objections about coming ..  
. but

you never stick to a decision, do you? Always Pandying  
around. At

least Archie's, well, you know .. ." stumbled Clara, unused to  
defending her husband and unsure of the necessary

adjective, 'at least he makes a decision and sticks by it. At  
least

Archie's consistent."

"Oh surely, yes," said Alsana acidly. "The same way that a  
stone is

consistent, the same way my dear babba is consistent for very  
simple

reason that she's been buried underground for "

"Oh, shut up," said Irie.

Alsana was silenced for a moment, and then the shock  
subsided and she

found her tongue. The Jones, don't you tell me "

"No, I will tell you," said Irie, going very red in the face,

'actually. Yeah, I will. Shut up. Shut up, Alsana. And shut up  
the

lot of you. All right? Just shut up. In case you didn't notice,

there are, like, other people on this bus and, believe it or not,  
not  
everyone in the universe wants to listen to you lot. So shut it.  
Go  
on. Try it. Silence. Ah.” She reached into the air as if trying to  
touch the quiet she had created. “Isn’t that something? Did you  
know  
this is how other families are? They’re quiet. Ask one of these  
people sitting here. They’ll tell you. They’ve got families. This  
is  
how some families are all the time. And some people like to  
call these  
families repressed, or emotionally stunted or whatever, but do  
you know  
what I say?”  
The Iqbals and the Joneses, astonished into silence along with  
the rest  
of the bus (even the loud-mouthed Ragga girls on their way to  
a Brixton  
dance hall New Year ting), had no answer.  
“I say, lucky fuckers. Lucky, lucky fuckers.”  
The Jones!” cried Clara. “Watch your mouth!” But Irie  
couldn’t be  
stopped.  
“What a peaceful existence. What a joy their lives must be.  
They open  
a door and all they’ve got behind it is a bathroom or a lounge.  
Just  
neutral spaces. And not this endless maze of present rooms  
and past  
rooms and the things said in them years ago and everybody’s  
old

historical shit all over the place. They're not constantly making the same old mistakes. They're not always hearing the same old shit. They don't do public performances of angst on public transport. Really, these people exist. I'm telling

5i4

you. The biggest traumas of their lives are things like re carpeting Bill-paying. Gate-fixing. They don't mind what their kids do in life as long as they're reasonably, you know, healthy. Happy. And every single fucking day is not this huge battle between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be. Go on, ask them. And they'll tell you. No mosque. Maybe a little church. Hardly any sin. Plenty of forgiveness. No attics. No shit in attics. No skeletons in cupboards. No great-grandfathers. I will put twenty quid down now that Samad is the only person in here who knows the inside bloody leg measurement of his great-grandfather. And you know why they don't know? Because it doesn't fucking matter. As far as they're concerned, it's the past. This is what it's like in other families. They're not self-indulgent. They don't run around, relishing,

relishing the fact that they are utterly dysfunctional. They don't

spend their time trying to find ways to make their lives more complex.

They just get on with it. Lucky bastards. Lucky motherfuckers.”

The enormous adrenalin rush that sprang from this peculiar outburst

surged through Irie's body, increased her heart-beat to a gallop and

tickled the nerve ends of her unborn child, for Me was eight weeks

pregnant and she knew it. What she didn't know, and what she realized

she may never know (the very moment she saw the ghostly pastel blue

lines materialize on the home test, like the face of the madonna in the

zucchini of an Italian housewife), was the identity of the father. No

test on earth would tell her. Same thick black hair. Same twinkling

eyes. Same habit of chewing the tops of pens. Same shoe size. Same

deoxyribonucleic acid. She could not know her body's decision, what

choice it had made, in the race to the gamete, between the saved and

the unsaved. She could not know if the choice would make any

difference. Because whichever brother it was, it was the other one

too. She would never know.

At first this fact seemed ineffably sad to Me; instinctively she sentimentalized the biological facts, adding her own invalid  
Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1999 \*

syllogism: if it was not somebody's child, could it be that it was

nobody's child? She thought of those elaborate fictional cartograms

that folded out of Joshua's old sci-fi books, his Fantasy Adventures.

That is how her child seemed. A perfectly plotted thing -with no real

coordinates. A map to an imaginary fatherland. But then, after weeping and pacing and rolling it over and over in her mind, she

thought: whatever, you know? Whatever. It was always going to turn

out like this, not precisely like this, but involved like this. This was the Iqbals we were talking about, here. This was the Joneses. How

could she ever have expected anything less?

And so she calmed herself, putting her hand over her palpitating chest

and breathing deeply as the bus approached the square and the pigeons

circled. She would tell one of them and not the other; she - would

decide which; she would do it tonight.

"You all right, love?" Archie asked her, after a long period of silence had set in, putting his big pink hand on her knee, dotted with

liver-spots like tea stains. "A lot on your chest, then."

“Fine, Dad. I’m fine.”

Archie smiled at her, and tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

“Dad.”

“Yes?”

“The thing about the bus tickets.” “Yes?”

“One theory goes it’s because so many people pay less than they should

for their journey. Over the past few years the bus companies have been

suffering from larger and larger deficits. You see where it says

Retain for Inspection! That’s so they can check later. It’s got all

the details there, so you can’t get away with it.”

And in the past, Archie wondered, was it just that fewer people cheated? Were they more honest, and did they leave their front doors

open, did they leave their kids with the neighbours, pay social calls,

run up tabs with the butcher? The funny thing about getting old in a

country is people always want to hear that from you. They want to hear

it really was once a green and pleasant land. They need it.

Archie

wondered if his daughter needed it. She was looking at him funny. Her

mouth down-turned, her eyes almost pleading. But what could he tell

her? New Years come and go, but no amount of resolutions seem to

change the fact that there are bad blokes. There were always plenty of



bad blokes.

“When I was a kid,” said Irie softly, ringing the bell for their stop,

“I used to think they were little alibis. Bus tickets. I mean, look:

they’ve got the time. The date. The place. And if I was up in court,

and I had to defend myself, and prove I wasn’t where they said I was,

doing what they said I did, when they said I did it, I’d pull out one

of those.”

Archie was silent and Irie, assuming the conversation was over, was

surprised when several minutes later, after they had struggled through

the happy New Year crowd and tourists standing round aimlessly, as they

were walking up the steps of the Ferret Institute, her father said,

“Now, I never thought of that. I’ll remember that. Because you never

know, do you? I mean, do you? Well. There’s a thought. You should

pick them up off the street, I suppose. Put ‘em all in a jar. An alibi for every occasion.”

And all these people are heading for the same room. The final space. A

big room, one of many in the Perret Institute; a room separate from the

exhibition yet called an Exhibition Room; a corporate place, a clean

slate; white/chrome/pure/plain (this was the design brief) used for the

meetings of people who want to meet somewhere neutral at the end of the

twentieth century; a virtual place where their business (be that re

branding lingerie or re branding lingerie) can be done in an emptiness,

an uncontaminated cavity; the logical endpoint of a thousand years of

spaces too crowded and bloody. This one is pared down, sterilized,

made new every day by a Nigerian cleaning lady with an industrial

Hoover and guarded through the night by Mr. De Winter, a Polish night

watchman (that's what he calls himself his job title is Asset Security

Coordinator); he can be seen protecting the space, walking the borders

of the space with a Walkman playing Polish folk-tunes; you can see him,

you can see it through a huge glass front if you walk by the acres of

protected vacuity and a sign with the prices per square foot of these

square feet of space of space of space longer than it is wide and tall

enough to fit head-to-toe three Archies and at least half an Alsana and

tonight there are (there will not be tomorrow) two huge, matching

posters, slick across two sides of the room like wallpaper and the text

says MILLENNIAL SCIENCE COMMISSION in a wide variety of fonts

ranging

from the deliberate archaism of vfKfoq to the modernity of Impact in

order to get a feel of a thousand years in lettering (this was the brief), and all of it in the alternate colours grey, light blue and dark green because these are the colours research reveals people

associate with ‘science and technology’ (purples and reds denote the

arts, royal blue signifies ‘quality and/or approved merchandise’),

because fortunately after years of corporate synaesthesia (salt &

vinegar blue cheese & onion green people can finally give the answers

required when a space is being designed, or when something is being re

branded a room/furniture/Britain (that was the brief: a new British

room, a space for Britain, Britishness, space of Britain, British industrial space cultural space space); they know what is meant when

asked how matt chrome makes them feel; and they know what is meant by

national identity? symbols? paintings? maps? music?

air-conditioning? smiling black children or smiling Chinese children

or [tick the box]? world music? shag or pile? tile or floorboards?

plants? running water?

they know what they want, especially those who've lived this century,

forced from one space to another like Mr. De Winter one

Wojciech), renamed, re branded the answer to every questionnaire

nothing nothing space please just space nothing please nothing space

20 Of Mice and Memory

It's just like on TV! And that is the most superlative compliment

Archie can think of for any real-life event. Except this is just like

on TV but better. It's very modern. It's so well designed you wouldn't want to breathe in it, no matter fart in it. There's these

chairs, plastic but without legs, curved like an S; they seem to work

by means of their own fold; and they fit together, about two hundred of

them in ten rows; and they snake around you when you sit in them soft

yet supportive! Comfy! Modern! And you've got to admire folding like

that, Archie thinks, lowering himself into one, a far higher level of

folding than he'd ever been involved with. Very nice.

The other thing that makes it all better than TV is it's full of people

Archie knows. There's Millboid at the very back (scoundrel),  
with  
Abdul-Jimmy and Abdul-Colin; Josh Chalfen nearer the  
middle, and  
Magid's sitting up at the front with the Chalfen woman  
(Alsana won't  
look at her, but Archie waves anyway because it'd be rude not  
to) and  
facing them all (near Archie Archie's got the best seat in the  
house)  
sits Marcus at a long long table, just like on The V, with  
microphones  
all over it, like a bloody swarm, the huge black abdomens of  
killer  
bees. Marcus is sitting next to four other blokes, three his age  
and  
one really old bloke, dry-looking desiccated, if that's the word.  
And  
they've all got glasses to a man, the way scientists do on the  
telly.  
No white coats, though. All very casual: V-necks, ties, loafers.  
Bit  
disappointing.  
Now he's seen a lot of these press conference larks, Archie has  
(weeping parents, missing child, or, conversely, if it was a  
foreign-orphan-scenario, weeping child, missing parents), but  
this is  
miles better because in the centre of the table is something  
Of Mice and Memory  
quite interesting (which you don't usually get on TV, just the  
weeping

people): a mouse. Quite a plain mouse, brown, and not with any other

mice, but it's very active, scurrying around in this glass box that's

about as big as a television with air holes Archie was a bit worried

when he first saw it (seven years in a glass box!), but it turns out

it's temporary, just for the photographs. Irie explained there's this

huge thing for it in the Institute, full of pipes and secret places, space upon space, so it won't get too bored, and it'll be transferred

there later. So that's all right. He's a cunning-looking little blinder too, this mouse. He looks like he's pulling faces a lot of the

time. You forget how alert looking mice are. Terrible trouble to look

after, of course. That's why he never got one for Irie when she was

small. Goldfish are cleaner with shorter memories. In Archie's experience anything with a long memory holds a grievance and a pet with

a grievance (that time you got the wrong food, that time you bathed me)

just isn't what you want.

"Oh, you're right there," agrees Abdul-Mickey, plonking himself down in

the seat next to Archie, betraying no reverence for the legless chair.

"You don't want some resentful fucking rodent on your hands."

Archie smiles. Mickey's the kind of guy you want to watch the footie

with, or the cricket, or if you see a fight in the street you want him

to be there, because he's kind of a commentator on life. Kind of a

philosopher. He's quite frustrated in his daily existence because he

doesn't get much opportunity to show that side of himself. But get him

free of his apron and away from the oven, give him space to manoeuvre

he really comes into his own. Archie's got a lot of time for Mickey. A

lot of time.

"When they gonna get on wiv it, then?" he says to Archie.

"Taking

their time, eh? Can't look at a mouse all bloody night, can you? I

mean, you get all these people here on New Year's Eve, you want

something resembling entertainment."

"Yeah, well," says Archie, not disagreeing but not completely

Magid, Milht and Marcus 1992, 1999

agreeing either, "I spe ct they've got to go through their notes and

that.. Snot like just getting up and telling a few howlers, is it? I

mean, it's not just about pleasing all the people all of the time, now,

is it? It's Science." Archie says Science the same way he says

Modern, as if someone has lent him the words and made him swear not to

break them. "Science," Archie repeats, handling it more firmly, 'is a

different kettle offish."

Mickey nods at this, seriously considering the proposition, trying to

decide how much weight he should allow this counter argument Science,

with all its connotations of expertise and higher planes, of places in

thought that neither Mickey nor Archie has ever visited (answer: none),

how much respect he should give it in the light of these connotations

(answer: fuck all. University of Life, in nit and how many seconds he

should leave before tearing it apart (answer: three).

"On the contrary, Archibald, on the bloody contrary. Speeshuss

argument, that is. Common fucking mistake, that is. Science ain't no

different from nuffink else, is it? I mean, when you get down to it.

At the end of the day, it's got to please the people, you know what I

mean?"

Archie nods. He knows what Mickey means. (Some people Samad for

example will tell you not to trust people who overuse the phrase at the

end of the day football managers, estate agents, salesmen of all kinds

but Archie's never felt that way about it. Prudent use of said phrase



never failed to convince him that his interlocutor was getting to the

bottom of things, to the fundamentals.)

“And if you think there’s any difference between a place like this and

my cafe,” Mickey continues, somehow full throated and yet never

increasing above a whisper in terms of decibel, ‘you’re having a laugh.

“Sail the same in the end. “Sail about the customer in the end.

Exempli frickin’ gratia: it’s no good me putting Duck a.

I’orange on

the menu if nobody wants it. Vis-a-vis, there’s no point this lot

spending a lot of money on some clever ideas if they’re

not going to do some nicking good for someone. Think about it,” says

Mickey, tapping his temple, and Archie follows the instruction as best

he can.

“But that don’t mean you don’t give it a bloody chance,”

continues

Mickey, warming to his theme. “You’ve got to give these new ideas a

chance. Otherwise you’re just a philistine, Arch. Now, at the end of

the day, you know I’ve always been your cutting-edge type of geezer.

That’s why I introduced Bubble and Squeak two years ago.”

Archie nods

sagely. The Bubble and Squeak had been a revelation of sorts.

“Same goes here. You’ve got to give these things a chance.

That’s

what I said to Abdul-Colin and my Jimmy. I said: before you  
jump the  
gun, come along and give it a chance. And here they are.”  
Abdul-Mickey flicked his head back, a vicious tick of  
recognition in  
the direction of his brother and son, who responded in kind.  
They  
might not like what they hear, of course, but you can’t account  
for  
that, can you? But at least they’ve come along with an open  
mind. Now,  
me personally, I’m here on good authority from that Magid  
Ick-Ball and  
I trust him, I trust his judgement. But, as I say, we shall wait  
and  
see. We live and fucking learn, Archibald,” says Mickey, not  
to be  
offensive, but because the F-word acts like padding to him; he  
can’t  
help it; it’s just a filler like beans or peas, ‘we live and fucking  
learn. And I can tell you, if anything said here tonight  
convinces me  
that my Jimmy might not have sprogs wiv skin like the surface  
of the  
fucking moon, then I’m converted, Arch. I’ll say it now. I’ve  
not the  
fucking foggiest what some mouse’s got to do with the old  
Yusuf skin,  
but I tell you, I’d put my life in that Ick-Ball boy’s hands. I  
just  
get a good feeling off that lad. Worth a dozen of his brother,”  
adds

Mickey slyly, lowering his voice because Sam's behind them.

"A dozen

easy. I mean, what the fuck was he thinking, eh? I know which one

I'd've sent away. No fear."

Magid, Mittat and Marcus 1992, 1999

Archie shrugs. "It was a tough decision."

Mickey crosses his arms and scoffs, "No such thing, mate.

You're

either right or you ain't. And as soon as you realize that, Arch,

suddenly your life becomes a lot fucking easier. Take my word for

it."

Archie takes Mickey's words gratefully, adding them to the other pieces

of sagacity the century has afforded him: You're either right or you

ain't. The golden age of Luncheon Vouchers is over. Can't say fairer

than that. Heads or tails?

"Oi-oi, what this?" says Mickey with a grin. "Here we go. Movement.

Microphone in action. One-two, one-two. Looks like the man neth begin

neth

uy> I

'.. . and this work is pioneering, it is something that deserves "public money and public attention, and it is work the significance of

which overrides, in any rational person's mind, the objections that

have been levied against it. What we need  
What we need, thinks Joshua, are seats closer to the front.  
Typical  
cuntish planning on the part of Crispin. Crispin asked for seats  
in  
the thick of it, so FATE could kind of merge with the crowd  
and slip  
the balaclavas on at the last minute, but it was clearly a  
rubbish idea  
which relied upon some kind of middle aisle in the seating,  
which just  
isn't here. Now they are going to have to make an ungainly  
journey to  
the side aisles, like terrorists looking for their seat in the  
cinema,  
slowing down the whole operation, when speed and shock  
tactics are the  
whole fucking point. What a performance. The whole plan  
pisses Josh  
off. So elaborate and absurd, all designed for the greater glory  
of  
Crispin. Crispin gets to do a bit of shouting, Crispin gets to do  
some  
waving-of-gun, Crispin does some pseudo-Jack Nicholson-  
psycho  
twitches  
just for the drama of it. FANTASTIC. All Josh gets to say is  
Dad,  
please. Give them what they want, though privately he figures  
he'll  
have some room for improvisation: Dad, phase. I'm  
so fucking young. I want to live. Give them what they want,  
for

Chrissake. It's just a mouse . . . I'm your son, and then possibly a

phoney faint in response to a phoney pistol-whip if his father proves

to be hesitant. The whole plan's so high on the cheese factor it's

practically Stilton. But it will work (Crispin had said), that stuff

always works. But having spent so much time in the animal kingdom,

Crispin is like Mowgli: he doesn't know about the motivations of

people. And he knows more about the psychology of a badger than he

will ever know about the inner workings of a Chalfen. So looking at

Marcus up there with his magnificent mouse, celebrating the great

achievement of his life and maybe of this generation, Joshua can't stop

his own perverse brain from wondering whether it is just possible that

he and Crispin and FATE have misjudged completely. That they have all

royally messed up. That they have underestimated the power of

Chalfenism and its remarkable commitment to the Rational. For it is

quite possible that his father will not simply and unreflectingly save

the thing he loves like the rest of the plebs. It is quite possible

that love doesn't even come into it. And just thinking about that

makes Joshua smile.

‘... and I’d like to thank you all, particularly family and friends

who have sacrificed their New Year’s Eve ... I’d like to thank you all

for being here at the outset of what I’m sure everybody agrees is a

very exciting project, not just for myself and the other researchers

but for a far wider ...”

Marcus begins and Millat watches the Brothers of KEVIN exchange

glances. They’re figuring about ten minutes in. Maybe fifteen.

They’ll take their cue from Abdul-Colin. They’re following

instructions. Millat, on the other hand, is not following

instructions, at least not the kind that are passed from mouth to mouth

or written on pieces of paper. His is an imperative secreted in the

genes and the cold steel in his inside pocket is the answer

to a claim made on him long ago. He’s a Pandy deep down.

And there’s

mutiny in his blood.

As for the practicalities, it had been no biggie: two phone calls to

some guys from the old crew, a tacit agreement, some KEVIN money, a

trip to Brixton and hey presto it was in his hand, heavier than he had

imagined, but, aside from that, not such a head fuck of an object. He

almost recognized it. The effect of it reminded him of a small

car-bomb he saw explode, many years ago, in the Irish section of

Kilburn. He was only nine, walking along with Samad. But where Samad

was shaken, genuinely shaken, Millat hardly blinked. To Millat, it was

so familiar. He was so unfazed by it. Because there aren't any alien

objects or events any more, just as there aren't any sacred ones. It's

all so familiar. It's all on TV. So handling the cold metal, feeling

it next to his skin that first time: it was easy. And when things come

to you easily, when things click effortlessly into place, it is so tempting to use the four-letter F-word. Fate. Which to Millat is a

quantity very much like TV: an unstoppable narrative, written, produced

and directed by somebody else.

Of course, now that he's here, now that he's stoned and scared, and it

doesn't feel so easy, and the right-hand side of his jacket feels like

someone put a fucking cartoon anvil in there now he sees the great

difference between TV and life, and it kicks him right in the groin.

Consequences. But even to think this is to look to the movies for

reference (because he's not like Samad or Mangal Pande; he didn't get a

war, he never saw action, he hasn't got any analogies or anecdotes), is

to remember Pacino in the first Godfather, huddled in the restaurant

toilet (as Pande was huddled in the barracks room), considering for a

moment what it means to burst out of the men's room and blast the hell

out of the two guys at the checkered table. And Millat remembers. He

remembers rewinding and freeze-framing and slow-playing that scene

countless times over the years. He remembers that no matter how long

you pause the split-second of Pacino reflecting, no matter how often you replay the doubt that seems to cross his face, he never does

anything else but what he was always going to do.

'... and when we consider that the human significance of this technology ... which will prove, I believe, the equal of this century's discoveries in the field of physics: relativity, quantum

mechanics ... when we consider the choices it affords us ... not

between a blue eye and a brown eye, but between eyes that would be

blind and those that might see ..."

But Me now believes there are things the human eye cannot detect, not

with any magnifying glass, binocular or microscope. She should know,



she's tried. She's looked at one and then the other, one and then the other so many times they don't seem like faces any more, just brown canvases with strange protrusions, like saying a word so often it ceases to make sense. Magid and Millat. Millat and Magid. Majlat. Milljid.

She's asked her unborn child to offer some kind of a sign, but nothing.

She's had a lyric from Hortense's house going through her head Psalm 63

early will I seek thee: my soul thirtieth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee . . . But it asks too much of her. It requires her to go back, back, back to the root, to the fundamental moment when sperm met egg, when egg met sperm so early in this history it cannot be traced.

Irie's child can never be mapped exactly nor spoken of with any certainty. Some secrets are permanent. In a vision, Me has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won't matter any more because they can't because they mustn't because they're too long and they're too tortuous and they're just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it. to"

“He who would most valiant be. ‘Gainst all disaster  
For a few minutes now, beneath Marcus’s talk and the shutters  
of  
cameras, another sound (Millat in particular has been attuned  
to it), a faint singing sound, has been audible. Marcus is doing  
his  
best to ignore it and continue, but it has just got considerably  
louder. He has begun to pause between his words to look  
around, though  
the song is clearly not in the room.

“Let him with constancy, follow the master ...”

“Oh God,” murmurs Clara, leaning forward to speak in her  
husband’s ear.

“It’s Hortense. It’s Hortense. Archie, you’ve got to go and sort  
it

out. Please. It’s easiest for you to get out of your seat.”

But Archie is thoroughly enjoying himself. Between Marcus’s  
talk and

Mickey’s commentary, it’s like watching two TVs at once.

Very

informative.

“Ask Irie.”

“I can’t. She’s too far in to get out. Archie,” she growls,  
lapsing

into a threatening patois, ‘you kyan jus led dem sing trew de  
whole

ting!”

“Sam,” says Archie, trying to make his whisper travel, “Sam,  
you go.

You don’t even want to be in here. Go on. You know Hortense.  
Just

tell her to keep it down. “Sjust I’d quite like to listen to the rest of this, you know. Very informative.”

“With pleasure,” hisses Samad, getting out of his seat abruptly, and

not troubling to excuse himself as he steps firmly on Neena’s toes. “No

need, I think, to save my place.”

Marcus, who is now a quarter of the way through a detailed description

of the mouse’s seven years, looks up from his paper at the disturbance,

and stops to watch the disappearing figure with the rest of the audience.

“I think somebody realized this story doesn’t have a happy ending.” As

the audience laughs lightly and settles back into silence, Mickey

nudges Archibald in his ribs. “Now you see, that’s a bit more like

it,” he says. “A bit of a comic touch liven things up a bit. Layman’s

terms, in nit Not everybody went to the bloody Oxbridge. Some of us

went to the ‘

“University of Life,” agrees Archie, nodding, because they were both

there, though at different times. “Can’t beat it.”

Outside: Samad feels his resolve, strong when the door slammed behind

him, weaken as he approaches the formidable Witness ladies, ten of

them, all ferociously be-wigged, standing on the front steps,  
banging  
away at their percussion as if they wish to beat out something  
more  
substantial than rhythm. They are in full voice. Five security  
guards  
have already admitted defeat, and even Ryan Topps seems  
slightly in awe  
of his choral Frankenstein's monster, preferring to stand at a  
distance  
on the pavement, handing out copies of the Watchtower to the  
great  
crowd heading for Soho.  
“Do I get a concession?” inquires one drunken girl, inspecting  
the  
kitschy painting of heaven on the cover, adding it to her  
handful of  
New Year club fliers. “Has it got a dress code?”  
With misgivings, Samad taps the triangle-player on her rugby  
forward  
shoulders. He tries the full range of vocabulary available to an  
Indian man addressing potentially dangerous elderly Jamaican  
women  
(if I could please sorry possibly please sorry you learn it at bus  
stops),  
but the drums proceed, the kazoo buzzes, the cymbals crash.  
The ladies  
continue to crunch their sensible shoes in the frost. And  
Hortense  
Bowden, too old for marching, continues to sit on a fold-up  
chair,  
resolutely eyeballing the mass of dancing people in Trafalgar  
Square.

She has a banner between her knees that states, simply,

THE TIME IS AT HAND Rev. 1:3

“Mrs. Bowden?” says Samad, stepping forward in a pause between

verses. “I am Samad Iqbal. A friend of Archibald Jones.”

Because Hortense does not look at him or betray any twinge of recognition, Samad feels bound to delve deeper into the intricate web of their relations. “My wife is a very good friend of

your daughter; my step-niece also. My sons are friends with your’

Hortense kisses her teeth. “I know fe who you are, man. You know me,

I know you. But at dis point, dere are only two kind of people in de

world.”

“It is just that we were wondering,” Samad interrupts, spotting a

sermon and wanting to sever it at the root, ‘if you could possibly

reduce the noise somewhat... if only ‘

But Hortense is already overlapping him, eyes closed, arm raised,

testifying to the truth in the old Jamaican fashion: Two kind of people: dem who sing for de Lord and dem who rejek ‘im at de peril of

dem souls.”

She turns back. She stands. She shakes her banner furiously in the

direction of the drunken hordes moving up and down as one in the

Trafalgar fountains, and then she is asked to do it again for a cynical

photo-journalist with a waiting space to fill on page six.

“Bit higher with the banner, love,” he says, camera held up, one knee

in the snow. “Come on, get angry, that’s it. Lovely Jubbly.”

The Witness women raise their voices, sending song up into the

firmament. “Early will I seek thee,” sings Hortense. “My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is . . .” Samad watches it all and finds himself,

to his surprise, unwilling to silence her. Partly because he is tired.

Partly because he is old. But mostly because he would do the same,

though in a different name. He knows what it is to seek. He knows the

dryness. He has felt the thirst you get in a strange land horrible,

persistent the thirst that lasts your whole life.

Can’t say fairer than that, he thinks, can’t say fairer than that.

Inside: “But I’m still waiting for him to get to the bit about my skin.

Ain’t heard nothing yet, have you, Arch?”

“No, nothing yet. I spe ct he’s got a lot to get through.

Revolutionary, all this.”

“Yeah, naturally . . . But you pays your money, you gets your choice.”

“You didn’t pay for your ticket, did you?”

“No. No, I didn’t. But I’ve still got expectations. The principle’s

the same, in nit Oi-oi, shut it a minute ... I thought I heard skin

just then

Mickey did hear skin. Papillomas on the skin, apparently. A good five

minutes’ worth. Archie doesn’t understand a word of it. But at the

end of it, Mickey looks satisfied, as if he’s got all the information

he’s been looking for.

“Mmm, now that’s why I came, Arch. Very interesting. Great medical

breakthrough. Fucking miracle workers, these doctors.”

‘... and in this,’ Marcus is saying, ‘he was elemental and indispensable. Not only is he a personal inspiration, but he laid the

foundations for so much of this work, particularly in his seminal

paper, which I first heard in ...”

Oh, that’s nice. Giving the old bloke some credit. And you can tell,

he’s chuffed to hear it. Looks a bit tearful. Didn’t catch his name.

Still, nice not to take all the glory for yourself. But then again, you don’t want to overdo it. The way Marcus is going on, sounds like

the old bloke did everything.

“Blimey,” says Mickey, thinking the same thing, ‘fulsome praise, eh? I

thought you said it was this Chalfen who was the Mr. Big.”

“Maybe they’re partners in crime,” suggests Archie.

‘. . . pushing the envelope, when work in this area was seriously

underfunded and looked to remain in the realms of science fiction. For

that reason alone he has been the guiding spirit, if you like, behind

the research group, and is, as ever, my mentor, a position he has

filled for twenty years now

“You know who my mentor is?” says Mickey. “Muhammad All. No

question. Integrity of mind, integrity of spirit, integrity of  
53i

body. Top bloke. Wicked fighter. And when he said he was the greatest, he didn’t just say “the greatest”.”

Archie says, “No?”

“Nah, mate,” says Mickey, solemn. “He said he was the greatest of all

times. Past, present, future. He was a cocky bastard, All.

Definitely my mentor.”

Mentor . . . thinks Archie. For him, it’s always been Samad. You can’t

tell Mickey that, obviously. Sounds daft. Sounds queer. But it’s the

truth. Always Sammy. Through thick and thin. Even if the world were

ending. Never made a decision without him in forty years. Good old

Sam. Sam the man.

‘. . . and so if any one person deserves the lion’s share of



recognition for the marvel you see before you, it is Dr. Marc  
Pierre

Perret. A remarkable man and a very great.. .”

Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are  
two

different histories. Archie does recognize the name, faintly,  
somewhere inside, but he is already twisting in his seat by  
then,

trying to see if Samad is returning. He can't see Samad.  
Instead he

spots Millat, who looks funny. Who looks decidedly funny.  
Peculiar

rather than ha-ha. He's swaying ever so slightly in his seat, and  
Archie can't catch his eye for a you-allright-mate look because  
his

eyes are locked on to something and when Archie follows the  
path of

this stare, he finds himself looking at the same peculiar thing:  
an old

man weeping tiny tears of pride. Red tears. Tears Archie  
recognizes.

But not before Samad recognizes them; Captain Samad Miah,  
who has just

stepped soundlessly through the modern door with its silent  
mechanism;

Captain Samad Miah, who pauses for a moment on the  
threshold, peers

through his reading glasses, and realizes that he has been lied  
to by

his only friend in the world for fifty years. That the  
cornerstone of

their friendship was made of nothing more firm than  
marshmallow and

soap bubbles. That there is far, far more to Archibald Jones  
than he

had ever imagined. He realizes everything at once like the  
climax of a

bad

Hindi musical. And then, with a certain horrid glee, he gets to  
the

fundamental truth of it, the anagnorisis: This incident alone  
will keep

us two old boys going for the next forty years. It is the story to  
end

all stories. It is the gift that keeps on giving.

“Archibald!” He turns from the doctor towards his Lieutenant  
and

releases a short, loud, hysterical laugh; he feels like a new  
bride

looking at her groom with perfect recognition just at the  
moment when

everything between the two of them has changed. “You two-  
faced

buggering bastard trickster misa mata, bhain chute, shora-  
baicha,

syut-mo rani hara am jadda .. .”

Samad tumbles into the Bengali vernacular, so colour fully  
populated by

liars, sister-fuckers, sons and daughters of pigs, people who  
give

their own mothers oral pleasure .. .

But even before this, or at least simultaneous with this, while  
the

audience looks on, bemused by this old brown man shouting at this old

white man in a foreign tongue, Archie senses something else going on,

some movement in this space, potential movement all over the room (the

Indian guys at the back, the kids sitting near Josh, Me looking from

Millat to Magid, Magid to Millat, like an umpire) and sees that Millat

will get there first; and Millat is reaching like Pande; and Archie has

seen TV and he has seen real-life and he knows what such a reach means,

so he stands. So he moves.

So as the gun sees the light, he is there, he is there with no coin to

help him, he is there before Samad can stop him, he is there with no

alibi, he is there between Millat Iqbal's decision and his target, like

the moment between thought and speech, Like the split-second intervention of memory or regret.

At some point in the darkness, they stopped walking through the

flatlands and Archie pushed the Doctor forward, made him stand just in

front, where he could see him.

“Stay there,” he said, as the Doctor stepped inadvertently into a

moonbeam. “Stay right bloody there.”

Because he wanted to see evil, pure evil; the moment of the great recognition, he needed to see it and then he could proceed as previously arranged. But the Doctor was stooping badly and he looked weak. His face was covered in pale red blood as if the deed had already been done. Archie'd never seen a man so crumpled, so completely vanquished. It kind of took the wind out of his sails. He was tempted to say You look like I feel, for if there was an embodiment of his own pounding headache, of the alcoholic nausea rising from his belly, it was standing opposite him now. But neither man spoke; they just stood there for a while, looking at each other across the loaded gun. Archie had the funny sensation that he could fold this man instead of killing him. Fold him up and put him in his pocket. "Look, Tm sorry about it," said Archie desperately, after thirty long seconds of silence. "War's over. I've nothing against you personal .. . but my friend, Sam .. . well, I'm in a bit of a situation. So there it is."

The Doctor blinked several times and seemed to be struggling to control his breathing. Through lips red with his own blood he said, "When we

were walking . . . you said that I might plead . . . ?”

Keeping his hands behind his head, the Doctor made a move to get on his

knees, but Archie shook his head and groaned. “I know what I said . . .

but there’s no . . . it’s just better if I -‘ said Archie sadly, miming

the pull of the trigger and the kick-back of the gun. “Don’t you think? I mean, easier . . . all round?”

The Doctor opened his mouth as if to say something, but Archie shook

his head again. “I’ve never done this before and I’m a bit . . . well,

pissed, frankly . . . I drank quite a bit . . . and it wouldn’t help . . .

you’d be there talking and I probably wouldn’t make head nor tail of

it, you know, so . . .”

Archie lifted his arms until they were in line with the Doctor’s forehead, closed his eyes, and cocked the gun.

The Doctor’s voice jumped an octave. “A cigarette?”

And it was at that moment that it started to go wrong. Like it went

wrong for Pande. He should have shot the bloke then and there.

Probably. But instead he opened his eyes to see his victim struggling

to pull out a battered cigarette packet and a box of matches from his

top pocket like a human being.

“Could I please? Before . . .”

Archie let all the breath he had summoned up to kill a man  
come out  
through his nose. “Can’t say no to a last request,” said Archie,  
because he’d seen the movies. “I’ve got a light, if you like.”  
The Doctor nodded, Archie struck a match, and the Doctor  
leaned forward  
to light up.  
“Well, get on with it,” said Archie, after a moment; he never  
could  
resist a pointless debate, ‘if you’ve got something to say, say  
it. I  
haven’t got all night.”  
“I can speak? We are to have a conversation?”  
“I didn’t say we were going to have a conversation,” said  
Archie  
sharply. Because this was a tactic of Movie Nazis (and Archie  
should  
have known; he spent the first four years of the war watching  
flickering Movie Nazis at the Brighton Odeon), they try to talk  
their  
way out of stuff. “I said you were going to talk and then I was  
going  
to kill you.”  
“Oh yes, of course.”  
The Doctor used his sleeve to wipe his face, and looked at the  
boy  
curiously, double-checking to see if he were serious. The boy  
looked  
serious.  
“Well, then ... If I may say so .. .” The Doctor’s mouth hung  
open,

waiting for Archie to insert a name but none came.

“Lieutenant... if I

may say so, Lieutenant, it appears to me you are in something of a ...

a ... moral quandary.”

Archie didn't know what quandary meant. It reminded him of coal, metal

and Wales, somewhere between quarry and foundry. At a loss, he said

what he always said in these situations. “I should cocoa!”

“Er . . . Yes, yes,” said Dr. Sick, gaining some confidence; he had not

yet been shot and a whole minute had so far passed. “It seems to me

you have a dilemma. On the one hand ... I do not believe you wish to

kill me’

Archie squared his shoulders. “Now look, sunshine ‘

“And on the other, you have promised your overzealous friend that you

will. But it is more than that

The Doctor's shaking hands tapped his own cigarette inadvertently, and

Archie watched the ash fall like grey snow on to his boots.

“On the one hand, you have an obligation to to your country and to what

you believe is right. On the other hand, I am a man. I am speaking to

you. I breathe and I bleed as you do. And you do not know, for certain, what type of a man I am. You have only hearsay. So, I understand your difficulty.”

“I don’t have a difficulty. You’re the one with the difficulty, sunshine.”

“And yet, though I am not your friend, you have a duty to me, because I

am a man. I think you are caught between duties. I think you find

yourself in a very interesting situation.”

Archie stepped forward, and put the muzzle two inches from the Doctor’s

forehead. “You finished?”

The Doctor tried to say yes but nothing came except a stutter.

“Good.”

“Wait! Please. Do you know Sartre?”

Archie sighed, exasperated. “No, no, no we haven’t any friends in

common I know that, because I’ve only got one friend and he’s called

Ick-Ball. Look, I’m going to kill you. I’m sorry about it but ‘

“Not a friend. Philosopher. Sartre. Monsieur J. P.”

“Who?” said Archie, agitated, suspicious. “Sounds French.”

“He is French. A great Frenchman. I met him briefly in ‘41, when he

was imprisoned. But when I met him he posed a problem, which is

similar, I think, to yours.”

“Go on,” said Archie slowly. The fact was he could do with some

help.

“The problem,” continued Dr. Sick, trying to control his

hyperventilation, sweating so much there were two little pools in the



hollows at the base of his neck, ‘is that of a young French student who

ought to care for his sick mother in Paris but at the same time ought

to go to England to help the Free French fight the National Socialists.

Now, remembering that there are many kinds of ought one ought to give

to charity, for example, but one doesn’t always do so; it is ideal, but

it is not required remembering this, what should he do?”

Archie scoffed, “That’s a bloody stupid question. Think about it.” He

gesticulated with the gun, moving it from the Doctor’s face and tapping

his own temple with it. “At the end of the day, he’ll do the one he

cares about more. Either he loves his country or his old mum.”

“But what if he cares about both options, equally? I mean, country and

“old mum”. What if he is obligated to do both?”

Archie was unimpressed. “Well, he better just do one and get on with

it.”

“The Frenchman agrees with you,” said the Doctor, attempting a smile.

“If neither imperative can be overridden, then choose one, and as you

say, get on with it. Man makes himself, after all. And he is responsible for what he makes.”

“There you are, then. End of conversation.”

Archie placed his legs apart, spread his weight, ready to take the  
kick-back and cocked the gun once more.  
“But but think please, my friend try to think’ The Doctor fell to his  
knees, sending up a cloud of dust that rose and fell like a sigh.  
“Get up,” gulped Archie, horrified by the streams of eye-blood, the  
hand on his leg and then the mouth on his shoe. “Please there’s no  
need for ‘  
But the Doctor grabbed the back of Archie’s knees. “Think  
537  
please anything may happen ... I may yet redeem myself in your eyes ...  
or you may be mistaken your decision may come back to you as Oedipus’s  
returned to him, horrible and mutilated! You cannot say for sure!”  
Archie grabbed the Doctor by his skinny arm, hauled him upright and  
began yelling, “Look, mate. You’ve upset me now. I’m not a bloody  
fortune-teller. The world might end tomorrow for all I know. But I’ve  
got to do this now. Sam’s waiting for me. Please,” said Archie, because his hand was shaking and his resolve was doing a runner,  
‘please stop talking. I’m not a fortuneteller.”  
But the Doctor collapsed once more, like a jack-in the-box.  
“No ... no

... we are not fortune-tellers. I could never have predicted my life would end up in the hands of a child ... Corinthians I, chapter thirteen, verse eight: Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. But when will it come? For myself, I became tired of waiting. It is such a terrible thing, to know only in part. A terrible thing not to have perfection, human perfection, when it is so readily available.” The Doctor lifted himself up, and tried to reach out to Archie just as Archie backed away. “If only we were brave enough to make the decisions that must be made ... between those worth saving and the rest ... Is it a crime to want ‘

“Please, please,” said Archie, ashamed to find himself crying, not red tears like the Doctor’s, but thick and translucent and salty. “Stay there. Please stop talking. Please.”

“And then I think of the perverse German, Friedrich. Imagine the world with no beginning or end, boy.” He spat this last word, boy, and it

was a thief that changed the balance of power between them, stealing

whatever strength was left in Archie and dispersing it on the wind.

“Imagine, if you can, events in the world hap538

pening repeatedly, endlessly, in the way they always have . . .”

“Stay where you fucking are!”

“Imagine this war over and over a million times

“No thanks,” said Archie, choking on snot. “Sbad enough the first

time.”

“It is not a serious proposition. It is a test. Only those who are sufficiently strong and well disposed to life to affirm it even if it

will just keep on repeating have what it takes to endure the worst

blackness. I could see the things I have done repeated infinitely. I

am one of the confident ones. But you are not one of them . . .”

“Please, just stop talking, please, so I can ‘

“The decision you make, Archie,” said Dr. Sick, betraying a knowledge

that he had possessed from the start, the boy’s name, which he had been

waiting to employ when it would have the most power, ‘could you see it

repeated again and again, through eternity? Could you?”

“I’ve got a coin!” yelled Archie, screamed it with joy, because he had

just remembered it. “I’ve got a coin!”

Dr. Sick looked confused, and stopped his stumbling steps forward.

“Ha! I have a coin, you bastard. Ha! So balls to you!”

Then another step. His hands reaching out, palms up, innocent.

“Stay back. Stay where you are. Right. This is what we’re going to

do. Enough talking. I’m going to put my gun down here . . . slowly ..

. here.”

Archie crouched and placed it on the floor, roughly between the two of

them. “That’s so you can trust me. I’ll stand by my word. And now

I’m going to throw this coin. And if it’s heads, I’m going to kill

you.”

“But’ said Dr. Sick. And for the first time Archie saw something like

real fear in his eyes, the same fear that Archie felt so thoroughly he

could hardly speak.

“And if it’s tails, I won’t. No, I don’t want to talk about it. I’m not much of a thinker, when you get down to it. That’s the best I can

offer. All right, here goes.”

The coin rose and flipped as a coin would rise and flip every time in a

perfect world, flashing its light and then revealing its dark enough

times to mesmerize a man. Then, at some point in its triumphant

ascension, it began to arc, and the arc went wrong, and Archibald

realized that it was not coming back to him at all but going behind

him, a fair way behind him, and he turned round to watch it fall in the

dirt. He was bending to pick it up when a shot rang out, and he felt a

blistering pain in his right thigh. He looked down. Blood. The bullet had passed straight through, just missing the bone, but leaving

a shard of the cap embedded deep in the flesh. The pain was excruciating and strangely distant at the same time. Archie turned

back round to see Dr. Sick, half bent over, the gun hanging weakly in

his right hand.

“For fucks sake why did you do that?” said Archie furious, grabbing

the gun off the Doctor, easily and forcefully. “It’s tails. See? It’s tails. Look. Tails. It was tails.”

So Archie is there, there in the trajectory of the bullet, about to do

something unusual, even for TV: save the same man twice and with no

more reason or rhyme than the first time. And it’s a messy business,

this saving people lark. Everybody in the room watches in horror as he

takes it in the thigh, right in the femur, spins round with some melodrama and falls right through the mouse’s glass box.

Shards of

glass all over the gaff. What a performance. If it were TV you would

hear the saxophone around now; the credits would be rolling.

But first the end games Because it seems no matter what you think of

them, they must be played, even if, like the independence of India or

Jamaica, like the signing of peace treaties or the docking of passenger

boats, the end is simply the beginning of an

even longer story. The same focus group who picked out the colour of

this room, the carpet, the font for the posters, the height of the table, would no doubt tick the box that asks to see all these things

played to their finish . . . and there is surely a demographic pattern

to all those who wish to see the eyewitness statements that identified

Magid as many times as Millat, the confusing transcripts, the videotape

of an cooperating victim and families, a court case so impossible the

judge gave in and issued four hundred hours community service to both

twins, which they served, naturally, as gardeners in Joyce's new

project, a huge millennial park by the banks of the Thames . . .

And is it young professional women aged eighteen to thirty two who

would like a snapshot seven years hence of Irie, Joshua and Hortense

sitting by a Caribbean sea (for Irie and Joshua become lovers  
in the  
end; you can only avoid your fate for so long), while Irie's  
fatherless  
little girl writes affectionate postcards to Bad Uncle Millat and  
Good  
Uncle Magid and feels free as Pinocchio a puppet clipped of  
paternal  
strings? And could it be that it is largely the criminal class and  
the  
elderly who find themselves wanting to make bets on the  
winner of a  
blackjack game, the one played by Alsana and Samad, Archie  
and Clara,  
in O'Connell's, 31 December 1999, that historic night when  
Abdul-Mickey  
finally opened his doors to women?  
But surely to tell these tall tales and others like them would be  
to  
speed the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense  
and the  
future, perfect. And as Archie knows, it's not like that. It's  
never  
been like that.  
It would make an interesting survey (what kind would be your  
decision)  
to examine the present and divide the onlookers into two  
groups: those  
whose eyes fell upon a bleeding man, slumped across a table,  
and those  
who watched the getaway of a small brown rebel mouse.  
Archie, for one,



watched the mouse. He watched it stand very still for a second with a

smug look as if it expected nothing less. He watched it scurry away,

over his

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hand. He watched it dash along the table, and through the hands of

those who wished to pin it down. He watched it leap off the end and

disappear through an air vent. Go on my son! thought