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Creative Writing MA by Research Thesis

by SAIRISH HUSSAIN

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TIME SUBMITTED	29-SEP-2015 10:22PM	WORD COUNT	30743
SUBMISSION ID	46952601	CHARACTER COUNT	150002

**Rethinking Muslim Narratives: Replacing Stereotypes with
Human Stories in a Novel titled 'Missing'.**

Sairish Aamreen Hussain

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA by
Research.**

University of Huddersfield

September 2015

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MISSING

1

1992

Amjad Sharif clutched the tiny bundle in his trembling arms. He rocked gently, back and forth, careful not to make a sound. The streetlamps were glowing outside. He could see the dull orange light burning through the condensed window. It was 4am in the morning and Amjad wondered if he would get any sleep now. He doubted it. Sleep provided a merciful cover and it had been blown only a few moments before. The sound had travelled ruthlessly down the hallway, determined to trouble him. He had considered turning over on the couch and placing something over his ears. His arm had throbbed as he'd retrieved it from under his weight, and his fingers twitched longingly as he contemplated reaching out for a cushion.

Minutes later, Amjad plodded up the stairs. He dragged his feet, step by step, one arm using the banister to pull himself up, the other still throbbing and limp by his side. Amjad paused for a moment, balling up his fist in determination. He needed all the strength he could muster, all the resolve in the world to reach the top of those damn stairs.

Five little fingers were now wrapped tightly around his pinky. His daughter's face rested peacefully against him, her tiny chest rising and falling. Amjad tried not to think of the disgraceful thoughts he had entertained just moments before. The ones where he'd thought of blocking out Zahra's frantic wails with a beige, corduroy cushion.

Amjad held Zahra close. Even then, amidst all the pain, he could not help but smile as he looked at her. He had managed to soothe his newborn baby, despite desperately needing consolation himself. It was the first of a series of 'moments',

Amjad thought. For the next few weeks, he'd find himself comparing his two lives. The previous one, in which he could simply call out and his wife Neelam would come rushing into the room to assist. And this new one, where his voice would reverberate against the dark walls and disappear into nothing. They would never stand together over Zahra's cot and exchange tired smiles. Fingers interlocked as Neelam's head rested on his shoulder. They would never shush each other as they eventually tiptoed back to bed, Neelam telling Amjad off for stepping on a creaking floorboard.

Amjad wiped his eyes. It had all changed. The mud under his fingernails proved that. Only yesterday he had thrown the Earth into his wife's grave and cried silently at the mosque beside her body. Now it was just Amjad. Amjad, rocking back and forth in a darkened room, clinging on to Zahra.

She would never know her mother. Zahra's little face would never be cupped by Neelam's hands. The tips of their noses would never touch. The injustice of it all crushed him and Amjad wanted to fight against it. Was there no-one he could protest to or demand an explanation from? No complaints form, no senior institution he could persuade to overturn their decision, to let his wife live?

Amjad thought he saw a pair of eyes peeking through the bedroom door. It creaked open and ten year old Saahil teetered into the room. His long, uncombed hair shrouded his tiny face and his big, doleful eyes looked to Amjad, desperately.

"Come here," Amjad whispered, arm outstretched.

Saahil walked closer and leaned into his father. His shaky little hand gently stroked Zahra's head. Amjad felt his heart break. He enveloped his son and they all huddled together for some time. Zahra, sleeping soundly against her father's chest. Saahil, small and as fragile as a baby deer, struggling to take his first steps in a new world, a world without his mother. And Amjad, holding them all together. He must

stop feeling sorry for himself, he thought. He was determined to protect his children from anything. Pain would have no place in his household. He would fling it out the door at its first appearance.

The dull orange glow shed light on the family's silhouette in the darkened room. A droplet of water slid down the window.

2

"You need to marry again." Amjad's mother peered at him expectantly over her jam-jar glasses.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Do you want to eat saag aloo tonight?" was Amjad's response.

"Don't change the subject. The kids need a mother. You can't do it all by yourself."

It had been one year since Neelam's death and now the nagging had started.

"Anyway, what about you? Do you want to end up all alone? You need someone you can grow old with."

Amjad sighed.

"I'm not going to marry a stranger from Pakistan and bring her over here to clean the house and look after my kids," Amjad said. "They've got me and you, they don't need anyone else."

"Well I'm not going to live forever! I'm an old woman." Ammi screeched. "You don't listen to anything I say. You won't even let me move in and help you out."

She sat peeling pomegranates for Saahil who stuffed the seeds into his mouth quicker than they appeared on the plate. Every now and then, her henna-tipped fingers ran over his face affectionately.

"Look Ammi," Amjad began, hoisting himself up in his chair. "You've lived in your house for nearly forty years. You've got friends and neighbours, your own little community. It would be difficult for you to move over here where you don't know anyone. And anyway, it's good to stay independent for as long as you can. "

“Ah yes, and I suppose when I can no longer stay independent you will chuck me into a nursing home like goray do away with their parents.”

“Of course not,” Amjad said, though the idea was tempting. “I really don’t know what the problem is, Ammi. You’re here quite a lot anyway. You stay overnight. I pick you up, drop you off whenever you want.”

Ammi continued arguing and although Amjad didn’t say it, the constant pestering was the main reason he didn’t want his mother living with them. When she came over, she would settle herself down on her favourite spot, all fluffed up like a hen ready to roost. Her head darted with precision in all directions, and her beady eyes remained forever watchful, always waiting for some slight error to be made on Amjad’s part. It was later used against him as evidence he needed to marry again. Although Amjad knew she meant well, the last thing he needed was to be pecked to death over silly mistakes. Guiltily, he would sigh with relief when he dropped the old woman off on her own doorstep, wishing she’d visit his brother, Javid, more often instead of him.

Besides, he had a pretty good system in place. From day one, Saahil was always on stand-by whenever he attended to Zahra. Nappies, baby bottle, dummy, he ran to fetch whatever Amjad ordered. Saahil followed Zahra around the room as she crawled between table legs and put random objects into her mouth. He stood patiently against the kitchen door in case Amjad flung it open from the other side as Zahra shuffled towards it. Now she could almost walk, Saahil would distract her as his father ironed his school uniform and tidied the house.

Making dinner was also a joint effort. Unlike Neelam’s finely chopped onions and selected spices added to the curry in a timed manner, Amjad just threw it all in and hoped for the best. It turned out okay. Saahil would run down to the roti shop a

few streets away and buy four chapattis for a pound. Of course, the days Amjad could not muster the energy to cook, he would grab some fish and chips on the way home, or, simply reach out for the faithful can of Heinz beans, always available to throw over some toast.

Of course, if Ammi was around, she would take over in the kitchen. She would knead the dough and roll out the chapattis herself.

“No ginger!” she would remark. “How can you make handi with no ginger? See, this is why you need a woman in the house. And if not me, then it’s time you got married again!” Amjad would block his ears.

“So,” he said, hoping the conversation was over. “Is saag aloo okay then?”

Ammi sniffed and began muttering under her breath.

3

Amjad drove past the littered back alleys filled with scraggly children and the tracksuit-clad youths hanging around grimy kebab shops. He sighed with relief. *Thank God we got away from here*, he thought once again. Amjad had just picked up Saahil and his best friend, Ehsan, from school with Zahra gurgling away in the baby seat next to him. The boys were sitting in the back, tugging at their school ties and whispering away in hushed voices. Amjad craned his neck and tried to listen in on their conversation. He caught Ehsan's eye in the rear-view mirror.

"Ask your dad," Ehsan said, nudging Saahil. Saahil cleared his throat.

"Abbu, what's so good about the other school, the one you wanted us to go to?"

Amjad sighed. He panicked when he heard that Saahil and Ehsan were being placed in the local failing comprehensive, the one he'd dreaded them going to.

"That one's for white people," Ehsan said, without waiting for an answer. "We haven't got a place there coz we're Pakis. Think about it. All our goray mates have got one."

Saahil looked confused. "But how can there not be any white kids at this other school?"

"Oh yeah, there will be," said Ehsan. He leaned closer to Saahil and whispered, "Council estates."

"Ehsan," said Amjad, frowning in the mirror. He saw Ehsan shrink back in his seat.

"Sorry, Uncle," he said. "But I'm just *sayin'*... It's true, innit."

“What did I say to both of you the other day?” Amjad said, taking a right turn.

“At least you’ll be together. And if you work hard, you can succeed anywhere. You just need to really concentrate and... and try.”

“What does ‘special measures’ mean again, Abbu?” asked Saahil.

“It just means the school is erm... struggling... a bit,” said Amjad, choosing his words carefully.

“Hmmm,” Saahil said, not sounding too fussed. “At least we can mess about at this crappy school.”

“Saahil!”

“I’m just joking, Abbu.”

“We can’t mess about,” Ehsan said, his face scrunched up with worry. “You know what my dad’s like. He says I’ll end up washing dishes at a restaurant if I don’t study hard.”

“He’s right. And *you*,” Amjad said, pointing to his son in the backseat. “You’ll be stacking shelves at Morrisons. That’s what happens if you don’t concentrate at school. Look at me.”

Saahil nodded dutifully. Ehsan continued frowning.

“I don’t wanna be a bloody shelf-stacker,” he said. Amjad saw Saahil grin and roll his eyes.

“As *if* that’s gonna happen,” he whispered into Ehsan’s ear. Amjad smiled to himself approvingly as he parked up outside their house. He thought about quickly shoving some fish fingers into the oven for the boys when a taxi pulled up behind them. It was Harun, Ehsan’s father.

“Sorry, I got held up in traffic,” he said.

“You didn’t have to rush,” Amjad said, unstrapping Zahra from her car seat.

“Anyway, come in, we’ll have a cup of tea.” They all went inside.

Harun always helped Amjad with school runs to save him from dragging little Zahra out in the cold. Saahil and Ehsan could walk home, of course, but Amjad didn’t like the idea of the pair sauntering home with the rest of their friends, kicking discarded takeaway cartons in their path and replying to racist graffiti on the walls. He felt uneasy about Saahil hanging around with some of the boys who lived in the rough neighbourhoods Amjad had worked so hard to get his family out of. He felt bad for feeling this way, because after all, he had grown up on the same rundown streets lined with halal butchers, money transfer shops and windows displaying mannequins wearing glittery salwar kameez.

Amjad had worked six day shifts at his warehouse job to save up enough money to move away from there. He could see the area deteriorating further and wanted better for his family, especially when Neelam had announced she was expecting a baby. The best he was able to afford at the time was a pleasant-looking terraced house less than two miles and a ten minute drive away from their old place. There were even a few English families on the street too, though Amjad predicted they would move away soon enough. He remembered being glared at by one man on the day they had moved in. Amjad had almost mouthed, “sorry” as he’d carried a cardboard box apologetically through the door, a pregnant Neelam following him. Amjad had placed two hanging baskets at each side of the door at her insistence. He still imagined her sometimes standing by the doorway, scarf draped loosely over her head, one arm extended to arrange the flowers and the other placed protectively over her baby bump.

Besides, they weren't able to move too far away as they needed to be close to a mosque. Amjad had always skipped his lunch break on Friday afternoons to pray the special Jumma prayers. Men poured into the mosque at noon sometimes accompanied by their young sons whose floor-length robes flapped around at their ankles. Fathers and sons walked together; Saahil with Amjad, Ehsan with Harun. The dads had often shared a casual wave or nod of the head across the mosque. That was until news of Neelam's passing made Harun come knocking on Amjad's door with some food prepared by his wife, Meena. Amjad often wondered what he would have done without their help over the past year. Or what he would have done without Harun's friendship.

As much as he loved his children, it made a nice change not to have to gurgle away in baby language to Zahra twenty-four seven, or have to tell Saahil off *again* for banging his football against the wall. Plus, a good catch-up with Harun always relieved Amjad of the bitterness he felt at being stuck indoors for days on end. Changing nappies, preparing the baby milk, ironing uniforms, making dinner. Harun reminded Amjad he was still a young man who could obsess over cricket and football scores, talk about cars and share Bollywood music cassettes. He was Amjad's contact with his previous life.

"Keep it down," Harun shouted at Saahil and Ehsan as Amjad prepared the tea. They always saved their meetings to make proper Pakistani chai, not the watery English tea they usually drank for quick convenience. Harun stood in the kitchen with Zahra in his arms as Amjad boiled the milk in a pan and threw in a few teaspoons of loose Yorkshire Tea, lots of sugar, cardamom pods and some cinnamon sticks. When it was ready, they both settled onto the couch as Saahil and Ehsan played with Zahra.

"You're not still worrying about the new school are you, Amjad?" Harun asked, slouching over his mug, the bad posture inherited from his job as a taxi driver.

"No," Amjad lied. Harun raised an eyebrow at him.

"Well," Amjad began. "You know I would have preferred for them to go to a mixed school, to be around different children."

"I know, but there's nothing we can do about that now," Harun replied. "They'll be fine. They're both clever boys."

Amjad looked unconvinced. "I know they are, but the school's reputation..."

"Amjad," Harun said, impatiently. "I don't know what your problem is. You need to stop worrying."

Amjad bit his tongue. *Maybe you don't have to worry, mate*, he thought as he watched Harun sipping his tea. Harun carried an ordinary man's burdens. Bills, mortgage, work problems. But at least he had a lovely wife at home who he could talk to. Somebody who could share the 'worrying' with him. Harun continued:

"At least you were born here and can help your boy. Look at me..." He paused for a moment, keeping one eye on Amjad as he grinned. "I still sign my name with a thumbprint."

Amjad laughed along with him, feeling slightly guilty for his negative thoughts.

"Yeah well," Amjad began, trying to justify himself. "I was never clever enough at school. We didn't have much money either growing up. Just took whatever job was available."

If Harun's feet hurt from pounding at the pedals in his taxi all day, then Amjad's shoulders ached from stacking heavy boxes at the warehouse. He didn't want that for Saahil. And he knew Harun didn't want that for Ehsan.

"It's not like that for our boys," Harun reminded him. "Times have changed. Insha'Allah, they'll both make it to university. You wait and see."

There was no doubting the boys were intelligent. Amjad watched them on occasions working through their homework together. They sat with open books facing them, brows furrowed as they tackled difficult sums. It seemed his regular outbursts of 'you don't want to end up like me' had had some impact. Saahil actually wanted to do well at school. So did Ehsan. Amjad had heard them a few times speaking of what they would do once they "got rich". He smirked as he eavesdropped on their big plans. They consisted of nothing more than driving fancy cars for the time being, but it didn't matter. Amjad held onto that flicker of ambition, he wanted to nurture it, to tell Saahil he could do and be anything he wanted. In fact, it wasn't that Amjad worried Saahil wouldn't do well at school. His insecurities were more personal. He just didn't want to mess up.

Of course, it was one thing feeding and clothing your kids, and another making sure they were well prepared in life. If he could just make it until they were old enough to look after themselves, he'd be happy. If he could just witness the lives they would go on to create for themselves, he'd be content. If all he could do was encourage hard work and determination in Saahil, it was enough. After all, if he popped his clogs unexpectedly, then at least Saahil would be well-equipped to look after his baby sister.

Amjad felt silly worrying over the timing of his ultimate demise. But death just took people. He'd seen that for himself. The thought of his children alone and unsupported choked him up with fear. He needed to raise them well and give them everything they would need to be okay, for Neelam's sake.

Amjad knew that when he did eventually join his wife in that other place, he wanted to be able to meet her eyes when he got there.

4

May 2003

Saahil Sharif eyed the empty plastic bottles lined up on the dining table. One of them had toppled over and rolled onto the floor near the doorway. If Zahra bounded towards the door without looking, she would trip over and fall. Still, Saahil couldn't muster the energy to go and pick it up. Maybe energy drinks lose their effectiveness if you down too many, he wondered. He'd have to switch back to coffee and try not to spill any over his books. He'd noticed a few stains on some of the pages. The last time he had completely missed his mouth as he'd brought the cup to his lips. It wasn't his fault, he was just concentrating too hard.

Saahil lowered his head and let the cold page touch his cheek. He let his mind wander off. He thought of Ehsan. They both envied those losers at school, the ones they used to laugh at. They were probably sitting at supermarket checkouts right now, sliding loaves of bread down those slopey things and arranging groceries into plastic bags. Saahil would gladly swap lives with them. Here, he'd say, take the bloody Engineering degree and let me have a go on the till. At least it would stop the brain-ache.

Of course, he wouldn't be saying that tomorrow after his final exam. But that was twenty four hours away and Saahil was already exhausted. He had almost dozed off when Zahra almost jumped on top of him from behind. Saahil jerked awake as her skinny arms wrapped around his shoulders. She giggled as she planted a big kiss on his cheek.

"Zee, why did you do that?" he asked wearily. She appeared at his side, grimacing and holding her nose.

"You stink Bhai-jaan," Zahra said.

"Oh, thanks."

"When did you last have a shower?"

"I don't have time," Saahil snapped.

"Well," she started, waving her arms around importantly. "I have loads of homework too, but I still find time to have a bath."

"There's a bit of a difference between your homework and mine, kiddo."

Saahil watched Zahra's eyes travel over the pile of books on the table.

"I know. Yours looks well boring."

"Well it doesn't matter if it's boring," he said, tugging her plait lightly. "It's gonna get me a wicked job. And then I'll have loads of money to buy you stuff."

"What does Abbu always say to you? It's not all about money."

"Er... yeah it is. Now stop acting like a smartass, I think Abbu's back from work."

Zahra giggled her way to Amjad as he appeared at the door. He responded with equal enthusiasm prompting Saahil to smile and roll his eyes. He stood up, stretching and yawning.

"Pull your pants up!"

Saahil winced.

"Nice to see you too, Abbu."

Amjad kicked off his shoes and Saahil heard him mutter "stupid fashion" and "bum hanging out" under his breath.

Saahil went off into the kitchen and put the kettle on. He came back with a solitary cup of tea.

"No biscuits Abbu. You're getting a bit podgy around the middle. I don't like it."

Amjad scowled, but not for long as Zahra had already sneaked a packet of Rich Teas to him under the table.

“How’s it going?” Amjad asked, motioning toward Saahil’s work. He groaned in response. Ammi came down the stairs thumbing her prayer beads in one hand. She waddled past them wrapped in layers of shawl and took a seat on the sofa. Amjad eyed her nervously.

“Are you still angry with me about the can of chickpeas?” he asked. There’d been a commotion the previous night when Ammi had sent Amjad out shopping and he’d returned with insufficient goods.

“You were supposed to get me two tins,” she snapped back, her beak suddenly in Amjad’s face. “And you only got one. Now I can’t make *chaat*.”

“Well, Saahil will run out and get you one.”

“No he won’t. He’s busy studying. I asked *you* to get me them.”

Amjad rubbed his temples and closed his eyes.

“Bad quality chickpeas too,” Ammi added.

“Bad quality?” Amjad said. “Chickpeas are chickpeas. What’s the big deal?”

Saahil decided to intervene. “I’ll go and get you them, Ammi. Just chill.”

“You *chill*,” she shot back.

Saahil laughed and put his arms around her. She resisted a little but a slow smile spread across her face. Saahil knew Ammi could never be angry at him for more than a second. He was her favourite. She often said that when Saahil walked in to a room, all the other boys would pale in comparison. She would notice no-one except her own handsome grandson. Saahil laughed this off on many occasions, feigning embarrassment. This, however, was not just “grandmother talk”. The old woman was spot on. Saahil was pretty, and he knew it.

He stood a few inches taller than Amjad and walked with a slight swagger that was neither intentional nor overdone. His thick raven hair was pushed back with no desire to be neat, though the messier it got the more attractive Saahil became. His heavy lidded eyes always found girls. They waited with bated breath to be on the receiving end of one of his smiles. Saahil was happy to oblige, but only with a slight upturn of his lips. He didn't want to lose the cool, laidback air that surrounded him with too much enthusiasm.

As Saahil scribbled complicated symbols on sheets of paper, Zahra hovered around, watching him in awe. She loved the look of steely concentration in her brother's eyes and the scritch scratch sound his pencil made as it travelled across the page. Saahil spoke of success as though it was waiting around for him like a faithful pet dog. It would come rushing to him as soon as he whistled. He'd worked hard enough for it and more importantly, Saahil wanted it badly enough. He'd delivered his pizzas and mopped his shop floors to earn extra cash alongside his studies. His dark eyes gazed out at the world with a bored indifference. There wasn't much to get excited about after all. The dull northern city he'd grown up in consisted of rows of terraced houses and the odd chimney of some derelict factory piercing an already crappy skyline of nothingness. It wasn't for him. Saahil knew he would do one out of there at the first opportunity.

Of course, he was going nowhere alone. Oh no, he wasn't going to be one of those people who just bugged off and left their families to it. They were all part of his ambitions. As Saahil watched his Ammi and Abbu continue to bicker over chickpeas, he felt a rush of affection. Zahra gave him a look from across the room to suggest 'here we go again'. She was quite sharp-witted for a little one, Saahil noticed again.

He liked to take some of the credit when it came to his sister's upbringing. He remembered his dad's friends watching him fondly as he scurried around after her as a kid, attending to her every need.

"You know what they say, Amjad. Older siblings are like parents. And especially when there is such an age gap. He'll always be there for her."

They spoke the truth. It was Saahil who took over when Amjad could not be in two places at once. He was the one who had tied Zahra's shoe laces and brushed her hair when she was little. He'd smoothed down plasters on her knees and elbows and kissed them better when she'd fallen in the playground at school. Now, he accompanied her to parent's evenings and gave her self-defence lessons to prepare her for secondary school. Amjad would shake his head in disapproval as he watched the pair of them wrestling in the middle of the room like idiots.

"Be careful, Saahil! You might hurt her."

"No I won't. I always let her win don't I? And anyway, she needs toughening up."

Naturally, they didn't always see eye to eye. Saahil constantly undid Amjad's fragile attempts at discipline. Zahra would bury her face in his chest when she was being told off for causing mischief. Saahil would hold her, his chin resting on her head, the corners of his mouth twitching as he tried to maintain an adult sternness.

"Leave her alone, Abbu," he would protest. "She's only little."

It was always funny when Abbu got in a huffy mood. According to Saahil, it just made him even more lovable. He wasn't as slick or sophisticated as Saahil hoped to still be at forty five. He wasn't even cool. He was just Abbu. Quite unextraordinary to an outsider, with his glasses, bald patch and beginnings of a paunch. "What does he want?" Saahil often wondered, as he watched his dad plodding around the house.

“What would make him really happy?” Surely it wasn’t just the fork-lift driver promotion Abbu went on about.

At twenty one, Saahil already felt like he had everything figured out. He knew what he wanted to do, and who he wanted to be. But things hadn’t been so easy for his Abbu. Saahil remembered him, newly widowed with two small children to look after. He had told grief to stay put in one corner and had gotten on with it. He’d invested so much time in them that he had let himself go. Quite like those women who got fat and then blamed it on motherhood or middle age. Abbu never blamed anyone.

Saahil slipped on his jacket as Ammi’s rant about chickpeas reached fever pitch.

“Hurry,” Abbu mouthed urgently, motioning him out of the door.

Saahil smiled as he walked down the street thinking about his Abbu. He realised once again that it was quite possible for people to go through life and never think about themselves. It was possible to live completely for others. He realised that Abbu didn’t actually want anything for himself. The thought had probably never even occurred to him. And that’s why, Saahil wanted to give him everything.

5

Saahil and Ehsan waited for their friends to emerge from the exam room as the rest of the students piled out of the door. They walked outside and found a quiet corner to discuss their final exam. Saahil leaned against the wall, leg cocked casually, preoccupied with his phone.

“How did it go?” Ehsan asked them all.

“I’ve really messed up,” Umar said before anybody else had chance to speak. His double chins quivered as he looked to his friends for consolation. “I missed the last question out completely.”

“Don’t worry about it now, mate,” Ehsan replied. “It’s over. You’ll have done fine.”

“No I haven’t,” he said, frantically. “I’m definitely gonna fail. Didn’t I tell you I would fail?”

“Stop pissing your pants, Umar,” snapped Kamran. “You always whimper like a bitch after every exam. Doing mi head in.”

“How about *you* stop having a go at him all the time?” said Ehsan.

“Yeah leave him alone, twat.” Saahil piped up. He didn’t bother looking up from his phone.

“How did you do, Saahil?” Umar asked.

“Erm...well-”

“*Obviously* he thinks he’s aced it,” Kamran said, wearing his usual malicious grin, the one he reserved only for Saahil.

“Yeah,” Saahil replied coolly, knowing exactly what to say to piss him off. “I probably have.”

Kamran snorted. He opened his mouth but Ehsan cut him off.

“So we’ll see you both tonight then, yeah?”

“Why?”

“We’re gonna celebrate with the rest of the lads.”

Kamran shrugged. “Fine.” He slunk off after one last glare at Saahil whose middle finger responded casually to the back of his head. Umar ran off behind Kamran, all flustered as he tried to catch up.

Ehsan looked at Saahil.

“He’s a right weirdo isn’t he?” Saahil nodded in agreement. Ehsan’s face broke into a huge smile. “How you feeling?”

Saahil blinked a few times as reality set in. “I’m gonna sleep for a few days. And watch the football without feeling guilty.”

“Are you joking? I’ve already quit my shitty job.”

They laughed and gave each other a high five.

“Here, have you seen those girls?” Ehsan said, motioning with his eyes to the left. “They’ve been looking at you for ages.”

There were two girls sitting on a bench across from them, whispering with their heads together. Saahil had already had a good look at them, discretely of course. When he finally honoured them with his gaze, his expression suggested he was bored out of his brains. After a few seconds, he turned away from them indifferently, and began texting on his phone. The girls giggled stupidly and hurried off. Ehsan shook his head at Saahil's absurd reaction.

“What the...” he began. “I don’t blame Kamran. You are an arrogant-”

Saahil blocked his ears. He could see Ehsan mouth moving, a look of disgust on his face.

“Do you know them?” he asked, gesturing towards the now empty bench.

Saahil shrugged.

“Whatever, I’m sure I’ve seen you hanging around in a corner with one of ‘em. Maybe even both.”

“Don’t remember.”

“Don’t remember?” Ehsan repeated slowly. “What do you mean ‘don’t remember’? Do you just get off with them and then forget who they are the next day?”

“Oi, I don’t ‘get off’ with anyone, alright,” said Saahil, firmly.

“Oh yeah, sorry I forgot. You’re a good Muslim aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I bloody am,” he said, smirking. “Plus, you know my Abbu, he’d chapatti pan me over the head if he found out.”

“Well don’t forget,” Ehsan said. “I’m his informer. He’s told me to keep an eye on you.”

“I know,” Saahil said, giving Ehsan a dirty look. “Anyway, your dad is at my house. Abbu just text me.”

They headed off towards the bus stop together. A car sped past and honked at them. Two lads they recognised from their course sniggered through their tinted windows. Saahil opened his mouth to shout something but Ehsan grabbed his arm.

“Leave it,” he said.

Saahil kicked at a scrap on the floor and mumbled something about “getting his own car soon”. Ehsan smiled good-naturedly.

“They’re showing off, taking the piss out of us,” Saahil said.

“So what?” Ehsan replied.

Saahil looked at his best friend. “Why doesn’t stuff bother you?” he asked.

Ehsan shrugged.

“Goody goody,” Saahil said, rolling his eyes.

–

When the boys arrived home, they found Amjad and Harun in their usual spot, drinking tea and watching cricket on the TV.

“So you’re going out again tonight?” Amjad asked.

“Again? We haven’t been out in about a month,” Saahil said.

“Well, don’t get carried away, alright?” Harun said. “I know you’re celebrating and everything but-”

“Oh Abbu,” Ehsan said, cutting his father off. “Don’t give us another lecture.”

The dads gave each other a knowing look. Unfortunately, Uncle Harun had seen what silly students got up to on his late night taxi rounds. Half naked, drug taking, alcohol drinking fiends that they were. He’d seen them squaring up to the police before passing out on to the streets in pools of their own vomit. They didn’t understand that neither Saahil nor Ehsan wanted to behave in that way.

“How many times do we have to say it?” Saahil said to the pair of them. “Why would we drink alcohol? It stinks.”

“I know,” Ehsan added. “I can’t breathe when I’m near it...”

“Isn’t it yeast?”

“Oh yeah, yeast fermentation or summat?”

“I don’t know,” Saahil said. “It bloody pongs whatever it is.”

Amjad and Harun smiled at each other. They always enjoyed teasing them.

"Well, I'm more concerned about drugs," Harun began. "Boys your age, they're always getting into my taxi at night, stoned off their heads."

"Oh come on, drugs aren't as bad as alcohol," Saahil blurted out. Amjad and Harun's faces hardened. Saahil could tell Ehsan was resisting the urge to punch him. He quickly jumped in, "He means alcohol is like *really* haram. Whereas drugs are, you know, not as... haram." Ehsan's voice trailed off.

"Anything that intoxicates you is haram," Harun said. "Anything that makes you lose control of what you're doing."

In which case, Saahil thought, the odd joint here and there when you were out with your mates was hardly a big deal. Not that the old boys needed to know that. "Dumbass," Ehsan mouthed to him when the dads weren't looking.

"Anyway," Amjad continued in a way to suggest the whole conversation had been scripted beforehand. "Have you heard about Rashid? The poor bloke hasn't been to Jumma for two weeks in a row. He's too ashamed."

"Why what happened?" Ehsan asked.

"His son got some girl pregnant," Saahil sniggered.

"Really?" Ehsan exclaimed, all high pitched. "That nerd Hassan? How did he get a bird?"

"It's not funny," Amjad said. The boys tried to look serious.

"Sorry Amjad, but it's this one you need to keep an eye on," Harun said, grinning as he pointed to Saahil. "He's the pretty boy. My Ehsi is too shy about that kind of stuff."

Saahil snorted as Ehsan covered his face. He was definitely too shy. Saahil had watched him deal with his new-found crush, Alisha, in a typically Ehsan way. He saw him give her a shy smile and gaze longingly after her as she disappeared down

the corridor. Slumping back against the wall, downcast for letting the opportunity pass him by again. Nothing got past Saahil either. He'd also noticed the girl glance back at Ehsan hopefully. Adjusting her hijab and walking slightly taller when she saw him.

"Me?" Saahil said, all dramatics as usual, mouth hanging open in shock.

"Yeah, you," Amjad said. "Your Uncle's right. What did I find on your phone the other day?"

Saahil groaned.

Amjad had seen a text message on Saahil's phone recently.

"Who's Katie?" he'd asked.

Saahil pretended he'd gone temporarily deaf.

"You better skive lesson for me today," Amjad had read. "I'm only coming into uni for you." He'd turned the phone sideways. "I take it that's a wink," he'd said, squinting.

"Don't read my messages, Abbu!"

"Well, it's a good job I did." Amjad had followed him around the room jabbering away in Punjabi, the go-to-language whenever a good bollocking was in need. "Is that why you go to university? So you can miss lessons and meet girls?"

"No... I don't know..."

Amjad's voice rose. "If I find out-"

"Yeah yeah, Abbu... Later." Saahil had managed to escape out of the door.

Okay, fine. He liked girls. A lot. And sometimes he did have a few on the go at the same time. But he always stopped short of going into their knickers. An achievement he was quite proud of. Plus, he didn't like hypocrites, and he had his own sister to think about. She was just a kid yet, but already Saahil could see she was going to be a little beauty. With her cute upturned nose and pouty lips. Yep, in a few

years time, many inadequate pricks would scurry around after her when she reached a certain age. And Saahil looked forward to breaking their balls if and when they got too close. In which case, he'd rather not go around bonking everything he saw and be able to guide his little sister with a bit of integrity.

"Astaghfirullah," he said, touching his ears like Ammi often did. "I don't mess around with people's daughters thank you very much. Don't wanna go to hell, do I?" He suppressed a grin.

"See Uncle, you don't have to worry about Saahil doing owt wrong," Ehsan said, patting his best friend on the back. "Look at his moral superiority. He doesn't mess around with girls because *he* doesn't want to go to hell. Not because it's wrong."

"No, I didn't mean it like that-"

"Yeah you did-"

"Shut up, *Ehsi*. Shall I tell Uncle Harun about Alis-"

"Shhh!" Ehsan placed his hand over Saahil's gob. Amjad and Harun looked at each other and sighed.

"All we're saying, boys, is that you need to be careful and not get carried away."

"Yeah, you remind us every semester," Ehsan sulked.

"And we know you're young," Amjad continued. "But you don't need to do any of those things to have fun. You're better than that."

"Yeah, yeah," Saahil said, winking at Ehsan when the old men weren't looking.

6

Saahil frowned as he watched his friend swearing his way through the crowded restaurant. All six of the lads already seated at the table looked around, horrified. Ehsan smiled nervously at a couple sitting near them, trying to make amends. Too late, Saahil wanted to tell him, the tutting had already begun.

"What you doing? Bloody idiot!" they asked when Abdul reached the table with Hardeep.

"He's letting that gora wind him up again," Hardeep said, casually.

"Who?"

"Daniel or summat or other."

"He started a debate with me after the exam about Iraq and Bin Laden and all that shit," Abdul said. "All his fuckin' gora gang were there. You should have seen how they were looking at me."

"Why do you get yourself into these situations?"

"I don't. He's in my face all the time."

"Where do you know him from?"

"Debating society." Everyone burst into laughter.

"Serves you right then," Saahil said. "Don't join a debating society if you can't take it."

"I can take it," Abdul said, huffing and puffing away. "But he's always at it. Making snide comments and stuff. Making out as though we're all... I'll fuckin' punch him next time." He pulled a plate of biriyani towards him angrily.

"Well, I hope you shut him up properly, bro," Asif said.

"I did. I told him that Blair has done us over because Saddam might have destroyed his weapons before we even invaded. That's the latest I've heard anyway."

"There might not be any weapons," Kamran sneered.

"I know but... that's what they're telling us, innit? That he's got weapons of mass destruction. And he's killing his own people-"

"So we've gone to save them."

"Yay!"

"That's what I don't understand," Asif said. "Why does it bother them who Saddam's killing? They only give two shits when white people die. Not us."

"Shhh! People are listening," Umar said, as a waiter slid past them carrying a tray of drinks.

"Don't care."

"Wait and see," Hardeep said. "They'll do to the Iraqis exactly what they did to us. Barge in, take all their shit, and then scarper outta there and leave 'em to massacre each other."

"You talking about... Partition?"

"Yeah," he said, grimly. Hardeep was Indian. The rest of them were Pakistani. A few uncomfortable looks passed around the table.

"That was complicated," Ehsan eventually said. "You can't just blame all of what happened there on the whites."

"Why not? They like blaming us for everything."

"Yeah and it's not gonna help with you doing the same thing back, is it?"

"Well, do you know what?" Abdul said, still angry. "When people keep telling you how shit you are that's the only response you have left."

"Just chill out, Abdul," Ehsan said.

"I know, he's getting well paranoid," Hardeep laughed.

"You would be as well," Abdul continued. "They were smirking at me. I was trying my best to explain and they just smirked away. I probably looked like a right twat. I was going bright red..."

"That's what goray do," Ehsan said, shrugging. "Explain and justify your entire existence to us whilst we sit here and watch you squirm."

"Exactly, they get a kick out of it," said Saahil. "I just act thick, pretend I can't hear 'em."

"Anything for an easy life, eh?" Kamran sneered.

"Yeah, either that or you end up with constant earache," Saahil replied. "And anyway, sometimes you can't really blame them. It's not their fault Muslims have started blowing shit up, is it?"

"And is it mine?" Abdul shot back, his mouth full of naan bread.

"Well no, but there's some of these idiots at my mosque who are in denial. You know, 'Muslim blows summat up - it's the media's fault!'"

Ehsan laughed. "Yeah, *everything* is the media's fault. Or America's fault."

"So what if they blow stuff up?" Kamran said. "Why should you feel guilty? Did your dad drive those planes into the twin towers?"

"Shut up dickhead-" Saahil began, but Asif cut him off.

"Fuck 'em," he said. "They probably did it to themselves anyway."

"Did what?"

"9/11. That was some illuminati shit." A few of them rolled their eyes. "I know you don't pay any attention to what I say," Asif continued. "But it's true. They needed a reason to start a war in the Middle East for oil. I was reading about it on the internet, it said-"

“Get him to put a sock in it,” Saahil said to the others. He stopped and looked at the neighbouring tables before dropping into a whisper, “Or he’ll start banging on about Jews in a minute.”

“Jews?” Asif said, loudly.

“Shurrrup idiot!”

Saahil thought he saw Kamran smirk.

“Don’t underestimate Zionists,” Asif continued. “They control everything and they want everyone to hate us-”

“For God’s sake,” Hardeep said, grabbing Asif in a headlock. They heard him mumble a few things about ‘Israel’ before he eventually giving up.

“*Anyway*, most people know we’re not all the same,” Umar said, instantly pissing Saahil off. He was sick of hearing that tired, old line. It struck him as a particularly dumb thing to say. After all, there were quite a few of them about, Muslims and that.

“What? That we’re not all suicide bombers?” Ehsan said.

“Yeah, we are actually,” Saahil said loudly. ““Kill a kafir a day’! That’s our motto. That’s what’s kept us going for the last 1400 years. In fact, I’ve got an urge to slit Hardeep’s throat right now because he believes in Guru Nanak and not Allah.” He smiled as he put his arm around his Sikh friend.

“It’s not funny, Saahil.”

“Yeah, stop making it into a joke.”

Saahil’s smile faded. He threw his fork down onto the plate with a clang.

“Fine,” he said. “What do you suggest we do? Cry about it.”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

"Calm down everyone," Ehsan sighed.

Saahil watched his friends dip naan bread into their curries with miserable faces. Abdul muttered under his breath.

"Well you guys sit here and sulk," he said. "And I'm gonna go. I'd rather not spend the evening pondering over the many ways in which people can hate each other."

Ehsan touched his arm as Saahil made to get up. "Don't," he said.

"Talk about summat else then," Saahil replied.

"Yeah, he's right. We just finished uni for God's sake. Cheer up."

Please, if you don't mind, Saahil thought. Only yesterday he had had a run in with his dad for telling Zahra to "fucking turn it off" as the TV reminded them of what had occurred on 11th September 2001 - as if they could forget. Unfortunately, Abbu had been just within earshot. First he had told him off for swearing. Second, for swearing in front of Zahra. And then for being 'insensitive'.

Sensitivity? Everyone was past that stage. Maybe if these news channels hadn't shoved it in their faces so much over the past two years, Saahil might still react with some sympathy. They were still at it, churning out one documentary after the next, agonising over every detail, milking it for all it was worth. It was easy gawping at the telly in apocalyptic awe at the scenes, but now Saahil had to remind himself there were actual people in those buildings deciding on which was the easiest way to die. To sit around and embrace a fireball on the inside, or jump out of the window and let their bodies shatter all over the streets of Manhattan.

Saahil didn't blame Abdul for getting his knickers in a twist. It would be nice after all, to just sit back and feel sorry for the victims and angry towards the perpetrators and that be that. To not shrink slightly every time the image of those two

skyscrapers popped up unexpectedly. And they did pop up. In dentist waiting rooms on muted TVs, in conversations with smug white people. It *was* always there. Crashing, burning, smoking, and spreading like an ash cloud into every facet of their lives.

Saahil often thought back to the actual day nearly two years ago. It niggled at him; Abbu holding Zahra close in a one armed hug. Her blinking away innocently and playing with her plait as she watched the screen. She was completely oblivious to the fact that life had probably just changed forever.

"It'll blow over," Abbu sometimes said, trying to convince himself. Because wars just had a tendency to *blow over*. God only knew what kind of hell this would mutate into, Saahil thought. After all, they'd invaded two countries now. They could bomb as many Muslims as they wanted.

"You see," Ehsan said, shaking his head. "You can't do shit like that and not piss a few people off."

"No one cares about brown civvies caught up in the middle, Ehsan," Saahil replied, bitterly. "No one cares apart from us."

He'd taken to viewing the whole damn thing with contempt. Hatred. And it unsettled him, because sometimes he didn't know who it was intended for. It was a headache he could do without. It had no place in the ideal life he imagined for himself and his family. Things that were happening a million miles away in foreign countries had no bearing on him. But there it was. This anger. This dread. And he could see it engraved all over his friend's faces.

"Talk about summat else?" someone said. Saahil was retrieved from his own thoughts by Kamran's snarling face. "Talk about summat else?" he repeated. "Some of us actually care about what's going on in the world."

Saahil was not in the mood, and Kamran had been glaring across the table at him all evening.

"*You* care about something other than yourself?" he shot back. "Don't make me choke on my vindaloo."

Everyone held their forks mid air and looked to Kamran for his response.

"You're a big, fat piece of shit do you know that?" He spat the words out, as though unable to hold them in any longer.

"What the flippin' heck is your problem?" Ehsan started, moving forward in his seat. He was definitely a born peacemaker, but when it came down to it, Ehsan would defend Saahil without a second's hesitation.

"His fucking face is my problem," Kamran said.

"Well it's prettier than yours," Saahil said quietly. It elicited a few giggles from around the table.

"You think you're better than everyone. Walking around everywhere like you own the place. You think you're gonna outshine us all, don't you?"

"What's this all about?" Ehsan asked, looking confused.

"Stay away from Farah."

"Who?"

"Farah. The girl you were chatting up at uni today." He looked furious. Saahil could hear him breathing hard out of his nose, eyes fixed in a glare, fists balled up tight.

"You're not talking about that bird who was trying it on with me in the cafeteria," Saahil asked slowly.

"Shut up! You were flirting with her. I saw you, leaning into her, holding her hand."

Saahil burst into laughter. "As *if* I would go after her. Even I've got standards. Girl's been around the block more times than a taxi."

"Saahil," Ehsan said, nudging him.

"What? It's true! And anyway, why does it bother you so much? You got a thing for her?" He smirked at Kamran.

"She's a family friend-"

"Yeah right," Saahil interrupted.

"-And I'm looking out for her," Kamran continued. "I don't want you trying it on with her like you try it on with everyone else. You're just a bastard who messes girls about."

"So fuckin' what if I do?" Saahil said. "It's not like I messed about with your sister, is it?"

Kamran stood up. A few of the lads muffled their laughter. "Oooh, shit got serious," Saahil heard someone say. He rolled his eyes and sniggered into his drink.

"Oi, shut up now, Saahil," Ehsan said. "And you, Kamran, what are you getting emotional for? You don't even have a sister. Sit down." He was pulled back down onto his seat by his friends. They glared at each other from across the table.

"We're supposed to be celebrating," Ehsan continued. "Stop kicking off with each other."

Smirks vanished as the boys nodded with a new found earnestness. Everybody always listened to Ehsan.

Saahil squinted and half covered his eyes. The green laser lights were making his head bang. They were stuffed into a booth outside in the courtyard of their favourite nightspot, well away from the packed dance floor where it appeared most of the students had finished their exams for the year. Their heads nodded in accordance with the inadequate booty-shaking that came as *Crazy in Love* blared from the speakers. They'd passed a spliff around. Saahil waited for everything to just float away. The anger at Kamran, the stress of exams and studying, just everything. It wasn't long until they were all acting gormless with long, drawn out 'whaaats' flying around the table.

"Look at all those birds, man," Asif said. He looked at Saahil and motioned with his head. "Go on, Saahil, you always get off with one."

"How many times... I don't get off with anyone," Saahil said, still holding his head.

"What about you, Umar? Why don't you go dance with one of those lasses?" Umar eyes widened. "No no, I don't think so," he stuttered.

"Why not? Go and have your last bit of fun before you get your bride import from Paki-land." Everyone laughed.

"I don't have anyone in Pakistan." An unspoken 'you will have soon' passed around them.

"Don't be a dick, Asif," Ehsan said.

"Yeah, just because he's fat," Saahil blurted out. "Oh, sorry Umar, you know what I mean. You're a nice bloke, you can have any girl you want."

"Oh look, Robert's coming over."

Saahil made a face at Ehsan. That was all he bloody needed. The three guys wandered towards them, beer bottles in hand. One of them tripped over a chair leg.

“Alright boys,” Robert said, obviously tipsy but still managing to reek of self-importance. Saahil had always resisted the temptation of lobbing a textbook at his head across the lecture hall, the pretentious know-it-all. All three of them eyed the series of cokes and lemonades on the table.

“Look at you lot sipping on your sodas,” Robert chuckled. “Surely you deserve a beer tonight lads. We just finished uni.”

“Haha.”

Liam was still ogling at the soft drinks. Squinting and turning his head as he tried to comprehend what was before him. He opened his mouth but Saahil cut him off.

“Just shut up,” he said.

“Yeah but, like, don’t you drink... at all? Not even on special occasions.”

“No,” said Ehsan, staring into space like a man defeated. “Told you about a millions times already.”

“He’s pissed, he doesn’t remember,” Asif sniggered.

“So how do you explain Kamran then?” Robert shot back, grinning from ear to ear. Saahil could tell it gave him much joy to get one over on them. “He’s sat at the bar necking it down. We saw him on the way in.”

They craned their necks over the crowd and could see Kamran sitting on his own at the bar, drinking his heart out. Not even trying to hide it. They glanced at each other in shock.

“What a turd.”

“I’m gonna tell his dad,” Asif said, rubbing his hands together gleefully.

“His dad drinks as well. I’ve seen him coming out of that pub. The Shoulder of Mutton I think it’s called.”

“What were you doing in The Shoulder of Mutton?”

“I work opposite the building, Sherlock.”

“Forget him,” Saahil said. He looked at Robert. “Alright, mate. What did you write for question 12b on the exam? I think I got it wrong.”

—

Saahil checked his watch. It was nearly two o’clock and he suddenly realised how tired he was. He’d drunk litres of Red Bull and trudged throughout the night making sure he had got all his revision done. Robert was now completely wasted and had transformed into 50 Cent.

“I want them to love me like they love Pac,” he slurred. Everyone fell about laughing.

“Do you even know who Pac is, white boy?”

“Yeah, go and listen to your puffy Timberlake.”

“He’s not *that* bad,” Umar said, nervously.

“He thinks he’s MJ,” Saahil said, scowling. “And he’s not.”

“I know who Tupac is,” Robert mumbled, a few minutes behind everybody else. “He’s the dead guy.”

“Oi, he’s not dead alright.”

“Here we go.”

“Yeah Asif, move on with your life dude. He is dead.”

“No, he faked his own death, I’m telling you.”

"And which website have you been reading now?"

"Who's dead? Sorry, alive?"

"What?"

Saahil decided to leave his friends to their debate. He'd noticed Ehsan slip away fifteen minutes earlier as he answered a call. He found him hanging around the doorway of the back exit.

"You missed it," Saahil said, as Ehsan put the phone down. "Robert's acting black." Ehsan smiled coyly. Saahil frowned at him with suspicion.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Alisha."

Saahil's jaw dropped. "When did this happen?"

"I told you."

"You've told me nowt." Saahil turned to face Ehsan, expectantly. "Go on then."

"What? There's nothing to tell. We're just... talking."

"Oooh," Saahil said, mockingly.

"Shut up."

They settled down together on the step.

"You're not pissed about Kamran are you?"

"Nah," Saahil lied. "I didn't know he fancied that girl."

"Ignore him. He's always been jealous of you. You beat him at everything. And now he thinks you're going after his girl."

"Whatever. They're all doing mi head in. Glad to get away from 'em."

Saahil preferred it like this anyway, when it was just the two of them. They sat in silence for a moment facing a brick wall and a few overflowing black bin liners.

"It's weird isn't it?" Ehsan said. "That it's over. No more studying and books and deadlines."

"Hmmm. But from now on it's just like 9-5 work work work."

"But still, do you reckon things are going to get good now?" Ehsan asked.

"Er, yeah," Saahil replied and turned to his best friend. There was an odd look in his eyes. One Saahil was not used to.

"We'll do it won't we, Saahil?"

"Do what?"

"I don't know. Just everything. Everything we said we would."

"Course we will. We'll have money. First thing I'm gonna do is take my Ammi and Abbu to Mecca. We can all go, you guys as well. That'd be so cool."

Saahil looked at Ehsan confidently. His smile faded. Ehsan was resting on his knees, hugging them. Saahil thought he looked small. Like a little boy.

"You alright, bro?" he asked.

"Yeah," Ehsan replied. "I've just had a weird feeling all day." He grabbed a fistful of his T-shirt. Directly over his chest.

"Don't worry about it, man," Saahil said. "We're gonna be fine. We'll show everyone. Insha'Allah," he added quickly.

Ehsan smiled and Saahil felt a sudden urge to look after his best friend. To embrace him and tell him everything would be okay.

"Do you remember that time, Ehsan?" Saahil said.

"What time?"

"When...er... when you found me at school. I was alone in the cloakroom, crying, you know, not long after... anyway, do you remember what you said to me?"

Ehsan shook his head.

Saahil continued. "You put your arm around me and told me not to worry. And you said that you were an only child so your own mum wasn't too busy so--"

"You could share with me," Ehsan finished Saahil's sentence. They both smiled at the memory in silence.

"She'd be proud of you," Ehsan mumbled.

Saahil shuffled around and looked away, overcome with sadness. People had said that to him plenty of times before and he had nodded dutifully. But it was different coming from Ehsan, it carried a different honesty. After all, nobody knew Saahil like Ehsan did.

Saahil remembered how they had sat poring through university prospectuses together three years ago. They'd already decided they weren't moving away from home. Saahil knew Abbu still needed him, as much as he pretended he didn't.

"You should go," Saahil had said reluctantly to Ehsan.

Ehsan snorted. "I'm not going if you're not going."

"Don't be daft. We're not kids anymore."

"Don't care. What am I gonna do on mi own?"

"You'd make other friends, stupid," said Saahil, secretly loving him for what he said.

"Forget it."

Saahil knew what he meant. It just wasn't the same with other people. There was a reason why they had latched on to one another and not let go, to not let loneliness completely consume them. It was silly to think a playground friendship had helped Saahil get over his mother's death. But it had. Plus he had Zahra. Ehsan, on the other hand, didn't have anyone. That was probably why he was the way he was, so perceptive and attentive to everybody around him. It came naturally to him having

spent so much time alone. Ehsan, Saahil had quickly realised, had too much love to give. And most of it he was the recipient of.

Saahil had found cover in Ehsan's serenity, in his calm, dignified manner. Ehsan didn't swagger around like he did, thinking he was *it*. Saahil remembered the many times Ehsan had saved his arse from being kicked. Like he had done again today, stepping in before Kamran could whack him one for being an arrogant prick. Saahil watched Ehsan out of the corner of his eye, sitting beside him on the step, all bunched up and hugging his knees. So what if they hadn't shared the same womb, Saahil thought. According to him, they were closer than brothers. And now they were finally going to make it, together.

"Thanks," Saahil mumbled.

"For what?"

"Just... stuff."

"Stuff?"

Saahil laughed nervously. Suddenly, he could barely string a sentence together.

"Just for... erm."

For sticking by me? For always making things better? For being you?

"For everything. We've come a long way, haven't we?" Saahil finally said.

How inadequate, he thought.

They looked at one another for a second, and then burst into laughter.

"Okay then," Ehsan said, awkwardly.

"Shall we get back to those clowns? They'll wonder where we've gone."

"Yeah, I suppose."

They slunk off inside, each one smiling to himself in secret.

8

“Let’s do one,” Saahil whispered to Ehsan. “Or we’ll have to carry that idiot home.”

He motioned to Liam who had fallen asleep on Umar’s shoulder. Umar, being too polite, continued smiling awkwardly and didn’t shake him off.

Besides, it was nearly three o’clock and the boys were getting rowdier. Saahil was sure he could feel a migraine coming on. He just wanted to collapse onto his bed.

“We’re going,” Ehsan shouted. Nobody was listening.

“Shhh, they’ll blackmail us into staying.”

They made a quick getaway, running towards the entrance of the club. Ehsan laughed and turned around as they got to the door. He walked backwards, not paying attention to where he was stepping. He tripped and fell straight into a group of Asian men loitering about outside.

“Motherfucker! Watch where you’re going!”

Saahil saw at least four pairs of hands knock into Ehsan and push him away. He fell onto his knees before Saahil quickly helped him up.

“What the fuckin’ hell is your problem?” Saahil shouted.

“Shitheads,” Ehsan said, wiping gravel off his palms.

“What did you say?”

Saahil looked at the gang. There were about six of them, all tracksuited up and stinking of weed.

“He called you a shithead. What you gonna do?”

“Don’t act hard. Fuckin’ pussy students,” one of them drawled. They sniggered at each other.

“Well we can’t all be crack dealers,” Saahil shot back.

The leader, Saahil assumed, smirked at him oddly. He was visibly stoned with three lines in his eyebrows. He didn’t speak but his sunken eyes stared at them over the hook of his nose.

“Oi! What’s going on?” The bouncer had been momentarily distracted. Now he came charging at them.

“Clear off! I’m warning you!” he shouted.

“It’s alright. We’re going,” Ehsan said. “Come on.” He pulled Saahil away. Saahil gave the thug one last filthy look before setting off down the street with Ehsan.

—

“What’s going on today? Everybody wants to kill us.”

“I know,” Saahil said.

“It’s your fault. You keep starting fights with everyone.”

“Shut up. You’re the one who smashed straight into those druggies.”

Only their laughs punctured the silence as they walked through the outskirts of the park. They were a few streets away from Saahil’s house. Ehsan would probably crash there for the night. They heard a noise and turned abruptly.

“What was that?” Ehsan asked.

It sounded like footsteps and a few muffled voices. They listened for a few seconds, eyes focused on each other.

“Jinn,” Saahil said, the atmosphere was too eerie to pass up the opportunity. He could feel Ehsan recoil slightly.

“Or a churail,” Saahil continued casually as they entered the dimly lit park alleyway. “Did I tell you about that guy who was driving home really late at night a few years ago? He saw a woman in the middle of the road and she disappeared. When he looked in his rear view mirror she appeared in the back seat. He ran off screaming like a girl. They say he even pissed himself.”

Ehsan sped up to walk closer to his best friend.

“Apparently she started talking in a man’s voice,” Saahil continued. “You know, like they do in the films.”

“Don’t,” Ehsan warned.

“Anyway, do you think a churail can possess you like a jinn can?” Saahil asked.

“Shut up,” Ehsan said, looking around in the dark. “You know I get scared.”

“Well, it’s true,” Saahil continued. “You need to be careful when you’re walking about at night in deserted places. I’ve heard that jinn can fall in love with you. Become obsessed. Especially if you’re good-looking like me,” he added.

“Brilliant, they’ll go after you then,” Ehsan laughed.

“Oh no, they can sense fear. So you better stop shitting your pants-”

“I will if you shut your face.”

“I’m only saying it for you, mate,” Saahil said, acting all concerned. “We’ll have to perform an exorcism on you, otherwise.” He paused and let out a chuckle before continuing.

“Poor Christians. In films they always get a priest in, don’t they, and everybody still ends up dead. Bless ‘em,” he said, fondly. “They try their best, I suppose.”

“Talk about summat else,” Ehsan said.

Saahil laughed and turned around to face him. Walking backwards, he noticed a flurry of movement behind Ehsan, like a group of shadows had just entered the alleyway. He flinched.

“Saahil, fuck off. What is it?” Ehsan shouted, turning around.

“Oi!” The sound made them jump. It was cold, hell-bent.

They were coming at them. Running. Hoods pulled up. Sleeves rolled back. Six in total. They were too fast and before Saahil could reach out and move Ehsan out of the way, he saw a glint of metal, a lean object collide with Ehsan’s head knocking him sideways. A splatter of blood.

Saahil felt his nose break as the fist made contact. He fell to the floor. The pummelling began.

Someone kicked his groin. He yelled but no sound came out. He tried to curl up defensively, but as he lowered himself, a shoe made contact with his head. It sent him hurling backwards. He noticed the pattern of a trainer sole before it stomped on his face. Again and again. There was mud in his mouth. A broken tooth. They were determined to flatten his head against the concrete. One of them grew tired and started booting him in the lower back.

They jumped on his ribcage. It cracked. Saahil felt blood in his mouth. Vomit rise up in his throat.

A break. Saahil gasped for air, praying it was over. He could hear them talking. They were hanging around casually. Discussing how far to go...

“...if they die?”

“We’ll blame it on you.”

Saahil heard deep throated laughter. His watering eyes saw two people high fiving.

It started again. Prolonged. Relentless. No part of his body remained untouched by a fist or a boot. Somebody sat on top of him and punched him repeatedly.

“Hold it up, hold it up.”

Saahil felt an excruciating pain in his leg. Like it had been snapped off and tossed aside. He screamed.

Play dead, play dead.

They loitered around some more. Occasionally booting him wherever they felt attention was needed. His stomach. His back. His face.

“Yeah, we’d better...”

“... someone sees.”

The smell of weed filled his nose as, again, someone sat directly on top of his chest. He, whoever it was, grabbed Saahil’s jaw and laughed, “Pussy student.” His head was slammed back against the floor.

Shapes began moving away, but not before one last, well aimed kick between his legs. When it stopped, the agony started. It travelled up his body, burning through his skin like he had been set on fire.

Saahil lay there for hours. Growing cold as he slipped in and out of consciousness. No one would find him. He would die. He knew that for sure, because he could see his mother. She was right there. *Right there.* Arms splayed out for him, offering protection. He wanted to crawl back to her. It had been so long.

Saahil knew that happened when you were ready to go. Someone from the other side would come and take you with them. He was one of the lucky ones; he could say *Shahada* before he died.

“La ilaha... ill-Allah,” he breathed.

The last bit. Say it.

“Muhammad-ur rasul Allah.”

He pushed the words out.

There.

It's over.

He let himself drift away.

Somewhere a few yards away from him, Ehsan had stopped breathing.

9

"I wo' walking home from the bar," said the man, crouching down by Saahil.
"Took this shortcut. Stumbled across 'em."

A group of people gathered around the scene. Girls wailed and were comforted by their boyfriends.

"I don't have a mobile thingy," he continued, his bloodshot eyes visible as he looked up at the ambulance crew. "I had to run and find someone. Luckily I saw these youngens."

"Can you please move back, sir?"

"Mi name's Kevin."

"Kevin, can you move back."

"I can't! He's grabbing mi arm! I won't leave him." He held onto Saahil's hand tightly.

"This one over here's a goner," a girl said, holding her head.

"I didn't see the other lad," Kevin said. "He was in the shadow, face down. These kids found him."

"Hurry up with the stretcher!"

"He's bleeding from his ears."

"Please move back everyone. Make some space!"

"He's not breathing."

The blue lights flashed and pierced the dark sky. The paramedics rushed around, their faces fraught with panic.

"Get them in the ambulance."

"Can I come with this one?" Kevin asked. "He's looking at me."

"No, you're in no fit state." They could smell alcohol on his breath.

"But... I wanna come..."

"Talk to the police."

"Come this way with me, sir, we'll need a statement from you."

"Well, how do I know if they're alright?" he slurred, arm still outstretched as they rushed the boys into the ambulance.

"The police," they shouted, over their shoulders. "They'll keep you updated."

"The police... yeah... the police," Kevin said. "Oh God... Oh God."

-

"Where are they?"

"Did they say they were leaving?"

"I didn't see them go."

"I don't know anything."

"Yeah we know you don't know anything, Umar."

"Ring 'em."

"You ring 'em."

"I can't be bothered reaching for my phone."

"It's in your back pocket!"

"I'll do it," Kamran said. They all looked at one another.

"Why are you being so nice all of a sudden?" He ignored them and dialled Saahil's number.

10

Amjad stood over the hospital bed not quite knowing what to do with himself. He patted Ehsan's bandaged head lightly.

"Bismillah... Bismillah," he repeated. There was fear all over Amjad's face. His hands were shaking. As he gazed at Ehsan's lifeless body, he didn't know what he could do to make it all better. Ehsan was hoisted up slightly, his head turned to one side. His lips were cracked and his mouth hung open oddly. There was a probe sticking out of his head, something to do with monitoring the pressure. *The pressure, the pressure.* That's all Amjad could hear them saying. A catheter was stuck to the side of the bed. They were draining fluid from both ends. Bleeding Ehsan dry.

"Plenty of sedatives," Harun had stuttered.

"But he's already... unconscious."

"I know but still... they said they want to give the brain as little to do as possible." Harun had looked at Amjad desperately. Amjad could almost hear him crying out, "You were born here, surely you understand better than me!" *No Harun, I don't.*

At that moment, Harun walked in grasping Meena by the shoulders. He almost carried her to the chair. Her eyes were swollen and she stared ahead, dazed and unresponsive. Amjad fiddled with the plastic apron they had given him on his way in.

"I'll come back in a bit," he mumbled. Harun nodded, wide-eyed. He looked around the room as though confused as to how he had ended up there.

Amjad almost ran out of the room without looking back. He didn't stop until he got back to the ward where Saahil lay. He slammed the door shut behind him.

It shocked him again just how horrendous his own son looked. His face was a mangled mess of blood, swelling and bruising. His body lay limp and exhausted, like he had been trampled over by a stampede. Still, Amjad thought he saw a hopeful look flicker in Saahil's barely open eyes.

"Ab..Abbu," he stuttered. It looked at though he was trying to move forward. Amjad turned his back to his son and poured water into a plastic cup.

"What is it?" Amjad asked, more abruptly than he had intended. There was no answer from Saahil. Uttering one word had taken it out of him.

"I was there last night, Saahil," Amjad continued. "Nothing has changed in one night. He's had head surgery. It's going to take time." His voice broke.

Saahil let out a moan as he slumped back into the bed. Amjad couldn't make out if it was due to the pain in his body, or his heart.

"Have some water." Amjad lowered the cup to Saahil's lips. He slowly turned his head away. Amjad placed the cup on the table and hung around awkwardly.

A few minutes later, and he heard Saahil's heavy breathing. He was so drugged up on painkillers and other medication that falling asleep came easily. Amjad felt relieved.

He scurried off towards the toilets. Once there, he simply stared at his own reflection. He tried not to think of the fragmented conversation he had overheard as he'd gone to check on Ehsan that morning. Two nurses cleaning an empty room and talking in hushed voices, completely unaware the father of the 'other boy' was listening. Amjad regretted eavesdropping.

"Was he bludgeoned or something...?"

"Don't know... weren't found for a couple of hours after and..."

The sound of a bed screeching.

“Definitely won’t make it...”

A sigh.

“Yeah, but sometimes... it’s for the best.”

11

Four weeks later and Saahil was discharged from hospital. His face emerged solemn and weary from underneath the swelling and bruising. The pain of his broken ribs remained but it didn't hurt so much to breathe anymore. The fracture in his leg was by far the worst. It throbbed and ached, waking him up at night. Saahil had lost over a stone in weight. He remembered all the hours him and Ehsan had spent in the gym, trying to get 'big' with definition in their arms and abs. Now when he felt his body, it was scraggly and thin, pathetically weak. So much had changed in just one month.

He'd managed to visit Ehsan twice in that time. His wretched leg failed him as he tried to sneak off to the ICU ward. He barely got past the nurses station before being ambushed.

"No Sa-hil. You can't go, you're--"

"Infection risk," he'd finish the sentence off for them. He wanted to wring their saggy necks as they shouted at him in their shrill voices.

"And by the way, it's Saahil," he'd say. "Saaa-hil. It's double 'a'." He'd limp back to his bed in a foul mood, albeit with a twinge of guilt. He didn't really care if they couldn't get his name right. He just wanted to get one over on them. And as for those sugar-coated reports from his father on Ehsan's condition, they were driving him up the wall.

The day the doctor told Saahil he could go home he hated them all even more. Again, like an ungrateful little bastard, he resented every mended bone, all the healed flesh. He felt like trashing the place with the crutches they had provided. The crutches that would help him hop his way out of the hospital whilst Ehsan lay in the cold,

unfeeling ICU ward where they fed him through a tube and turned him over every hour to prevent holes erupting in his skin.

“Are you happy to be going home?” the nurses asked merrily.

Saahil bit his tongue as Abbu gave them chocolates and non-alcoholic sparkling wine for the staff room. He felt Abbu nudge him. “Yes, thank you,” Saahil eventually said, making sure the sarcasm was felt.

Home felt different. Saahil smiled mechanically as Ammi fussed over his gaunt appearance and scabby face. What would he like to eat? And drink? She had made him her special chicken soup for poorly people, was that okay with him? If not she could cook something else? Anything he wanted.

Zahra clung onto his arm and cried. He barely lifted his free arm to comfort her. He didn’t tell her not to cry, that her Bhai-jaan was home now. Eventually she shuffled away into a corner.

He feigned tiredness, leaning on Abbu’s shoulder as they trudged up the stairs. He stood awkward and embarrassed as his dad helped him put on some pyjamas. Abbu had helped him dress and undress at the hospital, but here at home it felt worse.

Saahil willed for his father to just leave. But he insisted on providing extra pillows for his broken leg. He mentioned something about physiotherapy appointments.

“Yeah, Abbu. That’s fine. I’m okay. No no, leave that. Thank you. Thanks. Go on now, you need to rest too.” Abbu must not have even got to the top of the stairs when Saahil reached out for his crutches. Hoisted himself up. Hopped over to the door. And with great relief, did something he’d never done before. Turned the lock.

12

Life was measured in weeks now. And progress. Saahil obsessed over the scale. The Glasgow Coma Scale. Why Glasgow, he wondered. He became fixated over every detail about this damn scale that would slowly but surely, climb higher until his best friend was back to normal. Fifteen. It was the most important number in the world. Ehsan would hit fifteen. He needed to hit fifteen. He would, of course he would.

The doctors had abandoned the scale. Saahil pretended not to hear the phrase “continuing vegetative”. *Vegetative*. He flinched like somebody had shouted a dirty word in his eardrum. Anyway, back to the scale. At the moment Ehsan was on six, Saahil calculated. He occasionally opened his eyes, moved his hands and arms, and whimpered.

Saahil mentioned this to the young doctor, or registrar or whatever. He could tell he was newly qualified and all smug. Probably only a few years older than him. He ummed and ahed.

“Well, we normally only record reactions that are a *response* to something. Pain or speech. Not spontaneous or random movements and sounds. It’s not quite the same thing. Do you understand?”

Saahil did not know what came over him. He grabbed a fistful of the doctor’s shirt and shook him violently. “What do you mean ‘do I understand’? Do I fucking look thick to you!” he shouted in his face before Abbu flung him out of the room, apologising.

Dumb doctors. They didn’t have a clue. Saahil had watched them place a pen between Ehsan’s fingers and squeeze hard, waiting for a reaction. It took Saahil all his strength to not snap off *their* fingers for purposely hurting his best friend. And

besides, it had only been eight weeks. Seemed like a lifetime but not really. Ehsan would definitely come back to them.

Every few days, Saahil almost ran into the high dependency ward. Auntie Meena would hold her arms out for him. "It's okay," he'd say, holding her head close to his. Uncle Harun always fidgeted around in his own corner, away from everybody else. Abbu would bring food and start arranging it methodically on the small table. Saahil would settle himself down next to Ehsan and hold his hand. Then he would stare. He would stare so hard his eyes hurt. Looking for signs, looking for any movement that had not been present the last time. Saahil hated the sounds Ehsan made. He would close his eyes and bite the inside of his lip until he drew blood. Nobody else saw, they were all too busy exercising their own methods of coping.

Abbu would always stand by the top of the bed, carefully positioning himself to avoid tubes and machines. He would pop on his mosque hat and open his prayer book. Always *Surah Yaseen*, the heart of the Qur'an. He would read the whole prayer, long though it was, three times and blow over Ehsan's head. He kept his nose buried in the book as though he was consulting an instruction manual. A matter-of-fact look on his face. Saahil noticed his eyes fill so easily with tears if he let his gaze linger on Ehsan's face for too long.

Family members wandered in and out but Saahil did not allow anything to distract him. Two months since the attack and he was desperate for anything. A twitch of the index finger, an audible intake of breath. He would take anything. He'd follow Ehsan's unfocused eyes to the corner of the room. The fluttering eyelids entangled in one spot, unable to break free and shift. Saahil would move in closer, willing him to focus. "Come one, mate," he'd whisper. "Stop messing about."

Each time Saahil returned home more disheartened than the last. "Move," he'd say to Zahra and stomp up the stairs without giving Salaam to Ammi, without even removing his shoes or jacket.

"Saahil," Abbu's weary voice would follow him up the stairs.

Sometimes he heard Zahra sob outside his bedroom, scratching at the door. She mewled like an injured cat. He always made sure the lock was turned tight.

13

“Salaam Alaykum.”

“Wa-Alaykum Salaam.” Amjad eyed the chubby-faced lad on his doorstep.

“Is Saahil in? I’m Umar, his friend from uni.”

“Erm, yeah, he’s upstairs,” Amjad answered, but he didn’t invite the boy in.

“We’ve been trying to get in touch with him for weeks. We just wanted to know if he’s alright.” Amjad sighed heavily before motioning the boy in.

“He might be asleep but we can go see. Follow me.”

Amjad lied to the kid because he knew Saahil rarely opened his bedroom door. Only if Amjad really shouted and banged at it hard with his fist did he relent. He didn’t want to create a scene in front of Saahil’s friend and was still waiting for Saahil to leave the room long enough so he could unscrew the lock and chuck it away.

“Saahil, open the door. Your friend is here.” He turned the handle and to his great relief, the door was unlocked. The room was dark and the curtains were closed. Amjad saw a shape perched at the end of the bed.

“Sorry, Umar,” Amjad mumbled. He hurried to the end of the room and threw open the curtains. Saahil’s knees were drawn up and his head rested against them.

“Umar’s here, Saahil.” There was no response. Amjad lent down and shook his son. “*Saahil*,” he hissed.

“It’s okay, I’ll just sit here.” Umar pulled the chair from the desk and sat down.

“Yes...okay. Erm, well, I’ll go and make some tea.” Amjad left the room.

Umar cleared his throat. "Mate," he said, gingerly as Saahil stared out of the window. "We've been worried about you. You haven't replied to any of our texts or calls."

Saahil remained silent.

"We thought you'd done summat to yourself," Umar added, nervously.

"Topped myself?" Saahil's voice was croaky. The last word he had spoken had been a few days ago to his father. It was 'no'. He thought of his own body hanging from the ceiling. Swaying side to side. He laughed at the image but felt a sharp, searing pain in his chest. He quickly brought his hand up and held it there for comfort. It happened sometimes. An occasional, painful reminder of how they had gleefully jumped on his chest. Laughed as though they were trying to balance themselves on a skateboard. How they had kicked his arms away so they could do the job properly.

"Are you okay?" Umar made to stand up but Saahil motioned him back down.

"We went to see Ehsan," Umar started again after a few minutes. "It's just... Kamran's in a state." His voice shook. "At least they got those motherfuckers," he continued. "Bastards. I hope they give 'em life."

They're not going to give them life, you idiot, Saahil wanted to say. Not that he wanted to talk about it. He was already a bit fed up of Abbu giving him updates from the police. It's not like justice would be served, would it? The copper in charge of the case had already told them the sentences would be reduced slightly as they had all handed themselves in. Well deserved for such a noble deed. Nah, his country had no balls. Here, they ran around after criminals, kissing their arses, shaking their hands and calling them 'sir'. Saahil wanted to see them hanged or tortured or beaten to death for what they had done to Ehsan.

“What do you want Umar?” Saahil asked, his voice toneless and cold.

“I’m not graduating next week. I’m postponing it until November. I’m going to wait for you... and Ehsan.”

“There’s no need for you to postpone it, it’ll just hold you back for no reason.”

“But I want to. It’s the least I can do.”

“I don’t have the energy to argue with you, mate. All you’re gonna do is walk across the stage and shake hands with some old white geezer wearing a cloak. Just get it over with.”

Umar shuffled around. He decided to change the subject.

“Why don’t you come out with us tomorrow? It’ll help take your mind off things. The guys miss you. And it’s not good being stuck in this room all day.”

Saahil ignored him.

“At least let me try to help you,” Umar’s voice became a tad impatient. “You’ve always helped me. I don’t know what I would have done without you these past three years. You and Ehsan. You’ve always helped me with work and...and stuck up for me in front of... people.”

“Ehsan stuck up for you, not me.”

“It was both of you.”

“No it wasn’t. I only bothered with you because Ehsan did.”

It surprised Saahil how easily the words came out of his mouth. He really didn’t care if he caused Umar pain. It was true, he only ‘stuck up’ for Umar so he could take a swipe at Kamran. Only Ehsan genuinely cared about things like that. Feelings and stuff. He was the one who made sure everyone was alright. Not him.

“You’re upset,” Umar said. “You just need to try and...”

“And what?” Saahil said, waiting for the genius answer. Umar couldn’t find one.

“Hopefully everything is gonna be okay, Saahil.”

Again, the shitty generalist statements he had no interested in hearing. It’s not *fucking* okay though is it, he wanted to shout out. It’s never gonna be okay, not unless Ehsan sits up in bed tomorrow and starts talking. The chances of that happening were slipping away day by day.

They had beaten Saahil more. He was the one, after all, who had mouthed off the most. They had done their best to break his body, but Ehsan had received the blow to his head. Then he had stopped breathing. No oxygen to his brain. Swelling and pressure. God knows what else. What the fuck was he doing during that time, Saahil asked himself. Why hadn’t he moved? Called Ehsan’s name? Reached out for him? Saahil had no recollection of anything. If only he had moved his backside, he may have seen Ehsan lying there face down in the shadows, blood seeping from his ears.

“Please go, Umar,” Saahil sighed.

Umar stood up and walked towards the door. “Just pray, Saahil. Keep praying. There’s nothing else we can do.”

Saahil went to the window and watched Umar’s flabby frame walk down the street. He took his phone out of his pocket and, ignoring the unread messages and missed calls displayed on the screen, stared at the calendar. Four months. Four months until the end of November. That would be six months in total. More than enough time for Ehsan to come round and be with him on graduation day. Just like it was supposed to be. The two of them ticking off another life event together and planning how to go about fulfilling the next.

“Bhai-jaan?” Zahra was stood outside his room, white headscarf held in place with a safety pin under her chin. She eyed him hopefully as she clutched the Holy Qur’an to her chest. He always listened to her recite after school. That was *his* responsibility.

Saahil walked over to her. He stopped short and reached for the handle. He saw the last glimmer of hope fade on his sister’s little face as he slammed the door shut. Lock turned. He perched himself onto the edge of the bed once more.

He had his own praying to do.

—

Amjad sat down on the sofa with the cup of tea he had made for Umar. He heard the door close again upstairs. He would have to do something about that lock. It was unsafe. Amjad could barely get through to his son these days. He could not be certain there were no funny thoughts going on in his head.

Saahil had no interest in talking about what had happened. When Amjad tried to ask questions, he snapped at him and wandered off, rolling his eyes. He’d done the same thing when the nice lady from Victim Support had come over to the house. Saahil had taken one look at her and bolted straight of out of the door.

“They beat the crap out of us,” he said later to an angry Amjad. “What’s there to talk about?”

Amjad was not used to his son’s cutting tone. Saahil had never spoken to him like that in his entire life. It was understandable of course, but it still bothered Amjad when he looked into Saahil’s eyes and saw no love. Just indifference. Or annoyance.

He tried to comfort him as best he could. But Saahil was not a little boy. He was a man. He didn't want to be cuddled or caressed by his dad, Amjad knew that for sure. He'd sit with Saahil sometimes, a big gap between them and pat his shoulder awkwardly. "Everything's going to be alright," he'd say, nervously. Saahil would barely respond.

Women, Amjad realised, did not care for such barriers. After living alone for so long he had fooled himself into thinking he could do everything. He couldn't. As he watched Ammi swoop down on Saahil and wrap him up in her shawl, his heart panged with envy. She cradled him gently as she sobbed into his hair. He didn't resist but instead, lay against her shoulder, quite still. Amjad would leave them to have their moment. He had never missed Neelam so much.

Of course, there wasn't the added stress of finding the culprits. Amjad had sighed with relief when they had handed themselves in, though he doubted a sense of remorse had compelled them to own up to their crime. News of Saahil and Ehsan's condition had passed quickly throughout the community. Prayers had been held at the mosque and it had appeared in the local newspaper. The policeman had mentioned how the father of one of the thugs had brought him into the police station by the scruff of his neck. That explained it all.

Something else troubled Amjad. He'd noticed it again on their last visit to the hospital. Saahil holding Ehsan's hand against his cheek. Harun throwing a filthy look in Saahil's direction. Turning his back as Amjad offered him his hand.

Resentment was understandable. Saahil was recovering, physically at least, whilst Ehsan could not even respond to his own name. Deep down, he knew Harun loved Saahil, just as Amjad loved Ehsan. They had raised the pair of them together. They were closer than brothers because Amjad and Harun had encouraged their

friendship. Saahil and Ehsan were *his* boys. He could not imagine one without the other.

Still, there was a problem. He thought back to a comment made by Harun a few weeks ago. "My boy, my Ehsi. He'd never have started a fight with anyone. He was always sensible. None of this is down to him..."

Amjad had agreed. But now, he was not so sure. Maybe Harun had stopped short of saying Saahil's name. They both knew he was the gobby one out of the two. But this was different. Those bastard thugs had just been looking for an excuse to start on someone.

Amjad thought of raising his concerns, maybe it would clear the air between him and Harun. He dismissed this straightaway. He would hardly start an issue with a man who had lost everything. He'd hold tight. They all would.

Ammi walked down the stairs with her prayer mat. Amjad took it from her and headed to his bedroom. He had started praying namaz five times a day since the incident. He felt guilty for reacting in this shameless, predictable way. Praying day and night now that he needed Allah to help him. His desperation compelled him to continue of course. A beautifully stitched image of a mosque lay out in front of him. Amjad readied himself on that mat and raised his hands to his chest. It just wasn't in their nature to give up hope.

14

November 2003

The days were shorter and darker. The wind shrieked. It was always muggy at dawn. Dull and grey. Saahil could see people sitting in their cars in the early mornings, steaming the A/C full blast to de-ice their windows. Blowing warm air on their hands and shivering. Saahil paid a lot of attention to what was going on outside. He spent a lot of time staring out of the curtains, out of the blinds at the same old streets, the same old people. Always remaining hidden.

He regretted not making the most of summer. Every year before that had been spent studying or taking up shitty part time jobs to pay for driving lessons and car insurance. Now he was free to do whatever he liked! Ah yes, the irony of it all made him laugh to himself like a madman. Alone in a room, laughing to himself.

So that's it then is it? Saahil wanted to ask Him. That is Ehsan's life. Twenty one years of nurturing and feeding and loving from his parents, only to be cut short when life was supposed to truly begin. Like waiting for a flower to grow and then snatching, tossing and ripping it aside before it had chance to bloom. *You can't do that*, Saahil would think, gazing skywards with contempt. But He could. And He had. And there was nothing Saahil could do about it.

He'd suddenly feel small and insignificant. Fearful and apologetic for arguing with God. After all, when it came down to it, when he could not sleep at night, it was to Him that Saahil whimpered to. It was Him Saahil would bug. "Ya Allah... please help," he'd repeat over and over again.

Those sleepless nights were the worst. Where he would lie awake for hours, praying for sleep. Even in states of semi-consciousness, he rarely escaped unscathed. A lovely walk down a path would lead him to fall abruptly down a set of stairs. He

would jolt awake. It wasn't always stairs. Sometimes it was a boot, pounding at his face, kicking him out of his slumber. For the first few seconds he'd feel relieved. It was only a nightmare. But then. It fucking wasn't, was it?

That's when images of Ehsan would invade his thoughts. Auntie Meena wiping dribble from his chin. The clenched fists. The moaning. Saahil didn't see everything, of course, but he could only imagine. Pretty nurses slapping on latex gloves, edging towards his best friend, wrinkling their noses because of the smell. Pulling back the sheets, changing his soiled undergarments. Wiping him clean. Saahil would hold his head in despair. Dig his fingernails into his face.

It was like Ehsan had been thrown off the edge of a cliff and then, maliciously, caught just in time, just before death could have him. They had reeled him back in slowly, allowing him to resurface. Now he was stuck between life and death. He was neither alive nor dead. He was nothing. If there was a way Saahil could go back, he would. He would kick Ehsan off that cliff himself. Cut the rope. Pull the plug. Smother him.

Saahil listened in on Abbu's telephone conversation to Ehsan's parents. It was increasingly always Auntie Meena who talked to Abbu, and not Uncle Harun. Saahil wondered why? The adjustments were being made in their house. The kitchen wall knocked through to make space for a hospital bed. A hoist being fitted into the ceiling. A downstairs toilet and wet room for bathing.

"They ask me," he heard Harun say on a previous visit. "They ask me if I have the strength to look after my own son. Harami..." He muttered a few more swear words in Urdu. "He's still our boy. Hai na Meena? We looked after him before, and we can bloody well do it now." They all surrounded Ehsan's bed at the rehabilitation

unit he had been placed in temporarily. Saahil, increasingly hovering around the end of the bed, looking everywhere except at Ehsan. Harun continued.

“I know what they want. They want me to kill my own son. No quality of life. Astaghfirullah. I won’t do it! Hai na Meena? Kill him off just so we don’t have to look after him. That’s selfish.” He paused and stroked Ehsan’s forehead. Ran his fingers through his hair. “How could he ever be a burden?” Saahil had never seen so much pain on a human face. So much love. He wanted to run along to his own father and pull at the cuff of his sleeve like a kid. *Please take me away from here, Abbu, please.*

When it got too much, he’d come home and trash his bedroom, smash plates in the kitchen. He’d even punched a hole through the glass door in the living room. Abbu charging towards him to control the outburst and Zahra cowering in a corner, frightened. He let himself be dragged off to counselling sessions. Abbu telling him all the while that he needed help. Whatever he needed, it wasn’t that. A bespectacled geeky man asking him dumb questions and jotting down his answers on a clipboard.

“How do you feel about that, Saahil?”

How the fuck do you think?

He’d choose a different adjective each time to spice things up a bit. Last time it was ‘devastated’. The time before ‘broken’. Just broken.

Saahil tried to control the anger, but it wasn’t all his fault. His body was playing tricks on him. The night before he graduated he awoke in his bed with the feeling that somebody had their hands around his neck. He gasped, but couldn’t move his arms. Saahil fought the weight on top of him and fell on to the floor, clutching his throat. He was terrified, his eyes darting around in the pitch black. What was it? Later Abbu would tell him it was sleep paralysis. Didn’t feel like that at the time though.

Was it a Jinn? The very thing Saahil had been frightening Ehsan with moments before they were attacked. Was there something watching him as he struggled on his bedroom floor? A supernatural force, a demonic spirit.

Or maybe it was Ehsan. His trapped soul finding his way to Saahil, clutching, clawing and pulling him out of sleep. Screaming for help. Cursing Saahil for abandoning him.

He needed to get out of there. He went to the door, and pulled it open. Staggering into his father's bedroom. He wasn't there. Down the stairs, holding on to the banister, gasping for breath.

Abbu had fallen asleep on the sofa, still seated with his head lolling backwards. He must have risen early for morning prayers. Light was coming through the curtains. Saahil almost fell on the couch next to him. He placed his head against his father's chest. He felt Abbu stir.

"Saahil? Saahil are you okay?"

Tears fell, soaking Abbu's shirt. Saahil felt his dad's arms wrap around him.

"I... I can't do this Abbu. I can't."

Soon he too, was sobbing into Saahil's hair.

"I won't... I won't recover from this." Saahil had battled with that feeling for weeks. Like he would never laugh or smile again.

"Shhh," Amjad said, holding his son tight, rocking him gently. "I'm here," he said. "My little boy...my beautiful little boy."

15

Saahil leaned back on his chair, slowly dipping from view. He could see Abbu, Ammi and Zahra from the corner of his eye, sitting with the rest of the families. Saahil tried to look interested as people made dull speeches about how utterly amazing his university was. How it was at the cutting edge of research and had the best employability rates, creeping up every league table known to man. How absolutely awesome they, the Class of 2003, had it. From this moment on, they had the world at their feet. They could do and be anything they wanted. They could change the whole world. Become millionaires. Blah, blah... fucking *blah*.

Even the annoying black tassel dangling in front of Saahil's eyes was more inspiring than the drivel being spouted at them. Every time he tossed his head back, the tassel returned with a vengeance, determined to obstruct his view. Not that he minded. When he looked around, he wanted to laugh at his fellow students. They were sitting on the edge of their seats like meerkats, all doe-eyed and quivering with excitement. He wasn't even supposed to be there. "Can I just clarify," he wanted to assert, "I didn't fail first time around okay. Not like these thickos graduating now, months after everybody else."

Saahil knew he didn't need to. They knew who he was. They recoiled when they set eyes on him. Took a step back. Pretended not to have seen him. Saahil heard them whispering away, "Saahil... Saahil and Ehsan... attack... remember... in May... Ehsan... brain dead."

Someone cracked a joke on stage. Polite laughter. He smiled along with everyone else, instinctively looking to his side. No, Ehsan's wasn't there. He suddenly felt small and insecure, sitting up in his seat and pulling himself together, realising

again just how much of his bravado and swagger had relied on his best friend. It was like he was learning new things about himself everyday.

Tutors approached Saahil nervously. "How are you?" they asked.

"Fine," he replied, looking straight past them.

"So sorry to hear about what happened to Ehsan," one of them said.

"Hmmm."

Another asked about the future. *Future*. He wanted to laugh. What future?

"Have you got a job lined up? No... okay, well any idea what you'd like to do?" Silence. "Further study perhaps?"

"Don't know."

"Ah... right."

Abbu quickly jumped into the conversation and started talking about how lovely the buildings were. All glassy and modern. Very modern indeed. Zahra held Saahil's hand and pulled him towards the photography booths. He allowed himself to be led away by his little sister without looking back.

Ammi adjusted his graduation hat. She'd pinned his gown in place, clipped it together under his tie, smoothed down creases over his shoulders. "Masha'Allah," she beamed. He was ready for his picture.

Saahil held the plastic graduation roll in his hand, the dodgy nail sticking out of the back of it to keep the red ribbon in place. What a let down, he thought; Ehsan would have something to say about this.

Hmmm. Now how was he supposed to get the hell out of there unnoticed? He watched Abbu looking at different photograph packages, an overenthusiastic assistant trying to persuade him to buy a ridiculous amount of copies of the same photo, the same pose. They only needed one bloody picture, Saahil thought. A space had already

been vacated on the wall of their living room for the thing to hang there in all its glory.

Ammi and Zahra were sitting apart from him. He could see Ammi gossiping away, whispering into Zahra's ear. Checking out what everyone was wearing, grimacing at the tan lines streaking down white girl's legs. At the over the top, bright salwar kameez worn by Asian girls on such a smart occasion, where understatement was key. If Saahil told them he wanted to go see Ehsan, they would stop him. He didn't blame them. He would be the last person Harun and Meena wanted to see today of all days. But they went home for breaks didn't they? Saahil had figured out their timings. A quick five minutes wouldn't kill anybody.

Should he return his cap and gown? No, Abbu would see and realise what he was up to. At least he could leave the stupid hat with Ammi? No, she would start asking questions. He'd hide it under his gown and sneak off. He headed towards the exit. Abbu would start looking for him after he'd made his purchase. Nobody would know where he had gone. They'd ring him and he wouldn't answer the phone. They'd worry. They'd panic.

Oh well.

—

"He's been sitting in his chair today. Haven't you sweetheart? We've just moved him back now." Saahil smiled at the plump nurse who had led him to Ehsan's room.

"Look who has come to see you! It's Saahil. He's come to show you his graduation outfit."

"No, no, I haven't..."

"Mum and dad left ten minutes ago," she continued. "They'll be back in this evening. He's always on time is your dad, isn't he?"

It was comforting to hear the nurse (Mary something, it said on her badge) speak to Ehsan as though he was a child. She was motherly and affectionate, like the type of person who was always ready for a cuddle.

"Now let's make you a bit more comfortable... there, that's better. I'll leave you fellas to it now." The nurse wandered off, humming to herself. Saahil actually longed for her to stay. Her presence had made the atmosphere seem surprisingly serene. There was none of the pain or hurt Harun and Meena carried around with them. Or the guilt-ridden faces he and his Abbu wore whenever they entered the room. No, today, there was just this wonderful nurse, who fussed over Ehsan as though he was the most important thing in the world.

Saahil pulled the chair to the top of the bed. To his surprise, Ehsan's face was relaxed. If it weren't for the fluttering eyelids and croaky breathing, Saahil could pretend they were back to normal. Chilling out together on the sofa, watching the football. Talking about girls. Secretly giving Zahra sweets before dinner.

Ehsan's hands were resting over his stomach. Saahil noticed they were beginning to claw and become rigid. He straightened them out.

"Ehsan," he whispered. Saahil arms were folded on the bed. He leaned in closer. "Ehsan?" There was no answer. *Please talk to me.* Saahil nudged him. *Tell me what to do. Where to go from here?* Still, nothing.

You're the sensible, clever one. You always know what to do.

Saahil had come to accept the fact that there was no awareness. No way Ehsan could see, feel or hear what was going on around him. But still, as he looked into his

best friend's face, there was that question, that impossible possibility that a little part of him remained. Those questions, they haunted Saahil at night.

Does Ehsan know?

Does he know what has happened to him?

Does he know how he has ended up?

What has become of his life?

Saahil placed his head on the pillow next to his best friend. He moved in. Closer still. Their foreheads touched. He closed his eyes.

—

When Harun and Meena walked into the room, Saahil stood up smiling at them.

"Salaam Alaykum," he said. They didn't respond. Instead their eyes crawled all over him, incredulously. Saahil looked down. He felt his hands claw at the black robe wrapped around his body. His eyes rested on the graduation hat toppled over at the end of the bed.

Shit.

"I'm... I'm sorry. I-"

"How dare you?" Harun breathed.

"No, Uncle, I came straight from uni I-"

"Why have you come here!" Harun shouted. He was shaking.

"Harun, calm down-" Meena began.

"Chup!"

"He just wanted to see Ehsan, he didn't mean it-"

“*He*,” Harun said, pointing straight at Saahil’s face and making him flinch. “Is the reason your son is lying there in this state.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Meena said, looking anxiously at Saahil.

“Me?” Saahil said, feebly.

“Yes, you. With your big, loud mouth. My Ehsi was not a *Shaytan* like you. He didn’t start fights with anyone and gob off. This is all down to *you*.”

“Saahil just go,” Meena cried.

Harun wasn’t finished.

“Just because I tolerated you all these months for your father doesn’t mean I’m going let you come here today, dressed in all your finery, and gloat in front of my son!”

“Gloat?” Saahil was horrified.

“Harun don’t-”

“No, Uncle, please I would never-”

“I’m warning you. Don’t come back here again. Get out. I said GET OUT!” Harun lashed out and knocked a jug of water onto the floor. It smashed. Water seeped across the wooden floor. Saahil ran. Without looking back, and without saying goodbye to Ehsan for the last time.

–

Saahil tore at his gown as he stumbled out of the care home. He ran past shops and streets, carrying the black mess in his arms, the pleats dangling to the floor. He slipped into an alleyway and fell against the wall. His arms relaxed and he watched the gown tumble to the floor, landing in a pile before his eyes.

Saahil realised his hands were shaking and he was gasping for air. He pulled at his tie, yanking it off so he could breathe properly. He almost slammed his head against the wall as he looked skywards. A pain spread from the back of his head but Saahil barely noticed. He was too busy running over every memory he had of that night. Every movement Ehsan and him had made, every exchange, every retort between them and those gangsters. Somewhere, within those memories, he would find legitimacy in Uncle Harun's accusations.

Surely it was all his fault. It had to be. *He* was the only one capable of causing such heartbreak, not Ehsan. But the more Saahil tortured himself, the more he unpicked every memory of that night, he found nothing to suggest he done anything to justify their response of almost killing his best friend.

When Saahil emerged, he found himself curled up against the wall. He hoped nobody would walk past and see him. Ask if he was okay. He suddenly remembered his family. Now he would have to return home and face them.

Saahil gathered his things from the floor and slowly walked off towards his house, thinking all the while that he would rather run away.

-

"Where the *bloody hell* have you been?"

Saahil rushed passed Amjad and headed straight for the stairs.

"Why didn't you answer your phone? We were waiting around there for an hour looking for you. Oi! You little shit, get back down here now."

Amjad made to follow Saahil up the stairs but Ammi held on to him.

“Let him go. It’s no use,” she said. He sighed and reluctantly followed her to the couch. Zahra held his hand. They all sat in silence.

16

Amjad smiled as he heard the chatter coming from his living room. He added the garam masala to the curry and stirred. Everything had already been beautifully chopped, the onions, the peppers, the tomatoes and the rest of the veg. By Saahil! Yep, he'd volunteered himself. He was an expert chopper. Most of it was due to his desire to be good at anything and everything. He was such a cocky little so and so.

"See Abbu, see how fast I can do it," he'd say as a teenager.

"Yeah, stop showing off. And please don't take your finger off while you're at it."

Amjad opened the kitchen door and watched Saahil sitting opposite Zahra and her little school friend Libby. They appeared to be having a face pulling competition. The girls giggled away at a particularly contorted expression of Saahil. He was smiling at them and it seemed to reach his eyes.

Today had been a good day. Amjad had still not forgiven Saahil for deserting them at the uni a few days ago. He'd said he'd bumped into some of his friends and lost track of time. Well, anything that coaxed him back into normal life Amjad could be grateful for.

There was a knock on the door. Amjad opened it, still smiling as fresh giggles erupted from Zahra and Libby. His smile faded immediately. Harun thrust something into his hands. A black object. A hat. A graduation hat.

"I'm not here to argue, Amjad. In fact, I'm surprised you haven't already rung me demanding an explanation."

"What? Why? Come inside."

"Tell your son," Harun said. "That *my* son is brain damaged. He can't see, hear, or understand anything. So there's no need for *him* to come around showing off. Not now, not ever."

Amjad looked down at the hat. His heart sank.

"Harun, I don't know about any of this," he said slowly. "But whatever happened, Saahil would never show off. How can you say such a thing?"

"Don't," Harun held his hand up sharply. "I haven't got it in me anymore."

"Harun," Amjad reached out and held his arm. Harun pulled away.

"We're moving Ehsi home tomorrow. There's no need to visit."

"What... what are you saying?" Amjad looked at his friend's face in disbelief. Harun fidgeted, as though he was dangerously close to the edge.

"Thank you for everything you've done, Amjad," Harun said, his voice quivering. "But now you have to just leave us alone. Tell *him*, he's not welcome. No one is."

"No, I'm not letting you go like this. Come inside. I'll call Saahil. He'll apologise."

Harun slapped the palms of his hands together and held them in front of his face. "Please," he begged. "For Allah's sake, just leave me alone to look after my son." He turned and left.

Amjad stared down at the hat, feeling incredibly stupid. Saahil had lied and he had believed him. Amjad had warned him not to go anywhere near Ehsan on that day. Harun and Meena did not need reminding that their son would never graduate, despite all his hard work. He would never go on to start a career, get married, have his own children.

“Just leave them alone,” he’d warned Saahil. “We’re not going to mention it, we’ll pretend it hasn’t even happened.”

And yet still, Saahil had disobeyed him. He’d gone and paraded around in his graduation clothes in front of Harun and Meena. Amjad felt the anger rising up in his chest. His hands trembled. He was going to kill him.

Amjad marched into the living room. “Zahra, upstairs, now.”

“But Abbu we’re-”

“Now!” He watched the two girls slip away, staring at him fearfully as they headed towards the stairs, well aware that something bad was about to happen. Saahil frowned.

“What’s up, Abbu?” Amjad threw the graduation cap. It hit him on the face.

“What’s this?” he asked his son. Saahil gaze lingered on the hat, he touched it with his fingers. He looked at the floor.

“You lied to me. I told you not to go. I fucking told you not to go.” Saahil remained silent. Amjad never swore like that.

“Answer me,” he said, standing over Saahil.

“I just wanted to see him,” he mumbled in response.

“And could you not have gone the next day? Do you not think about anyone but yourself?”

Saahil looked hurt. “Abbu?”

“Harun has been around, telling me they’re taking Ehsan home tomorrow. And that none of us are welcome.”

Saahil stood up. “He can’t do that.”

“Yes he can. He’s Ehsan’s father, he can do what he wants.”

“I’ll ask Auntie Meena, she’ll let me go.”

"No she won't. Are you not listening to me? They don't want us anywhere near them, thanks to you."

"He's blaming me," Saahil shouted back. "He's saying Ehsan's a vegetable because of *me*. That I made him like that."

"He's just lashing out. Put yourself in his position."

"Well he's not the only one who's hurting! What about me? What am I supposed to do?"

"What about you? You've got me." Saahil rolled his eyes. Amjad stared at him.

"Ah, is that what the problem is? Have I not supported you enough these past six months? Looked after you? Don't you dare walk away from me," Amjad grabbed Saahil's sleeve and flung him back. He continued, "I'm sick of you running off every time you can't be bothered answering me. It's time you faced things like a man."

"Faced things like a man?" Saahil laughed. "And how do you suggest I do that? By doing a few shifts with you at work to 'take my mind off things'. It doesn't work like that."

"And you're going to tell me how things work? You, a kid, are going to teach me a lesson about life."

"You just don't understand, Abbu."

"What don't I understand? Do I not love Ehsan? He's like my own son."

"Oh yeah, whatever..." Saahil's voice trailed off. He looked away but Amjad followed him with his head.

"What? Why don't you say exactly what's on your mind? Go on." Amjad grabbed hold of his arm.

"Get off me!"

“No. Answer me properly!”

They were yelling at the top of their voices. Footsteps came running down the stairs.

“Fine!” Saahil shouted, pushing Amjad back. “Why should you care so much about someone else’s kid? That’s probably why you’re praying five times a day now, eh? Don’t think I don’t know, you’re probably thanking Allah that it’s Harun’s son who is lying there half dead and not your own!”

It wasn’t a slap. It was a punch. Amjad’s fist was balled up, a speck of blood on the knuckle. Saahil, caught off guard, fell back onto the sofa. Zahra and Libby, now at the bottom of the stairs, clung onto each other in shock.

Apart from the odd smack on the bottom when he was a kid, Amjad had never hit Saahil before. Saahil held his face and stared at the floor, surprisingly calm. A trickle of blood fell from his nose. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. He waited for Amjad to speak.

“Get out of my sight,” Amjad said. Saahil bolted out of the door. Amjad pulled a chair from the dining table and sat down. Zahra ran to him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, as Zahra cried into his shirt. He looked at Libby, who had gone bright red. “I’m sorry, Libby, come here.” He held his arm out for her. She came quickly. “Are you okay?” Amjad asked, patting her on the shoulder.

“Erm... Yeah,” she squeaked.

“Sorry you had to see that,” Amjad said. He settled the girls down on the sofa and put on their favourite film, *Shrek*.

“It’s okay,” he said, as he floundered out of the room. “It’ll be okay.”

He leaned against the kitchen counter, watching his hands shake uncontrollably. *They need something to do*, Amjad thought. In his fretfulness, he

reached out and put the kettle on. As he waited for it to boil, he began worrying about where Saahil had gone. What time he would be back? How they would carry on from this? Perhaps a break from one another was for the best?

Amjad decided he would definitely be ringing his brother, Javid, first thing in the morning.

17

“Send him to me,” Javid said. “I’ll straighten him out.”

“He doesn’t need straightening out. He just needs a change of scenery.”

Javid laughed his annoying, smug laugh. “A change of scenery? We’re two hours down the motorway, brother.”

“You know what I mean,” Amjad said. “We just need a break... from each other.”

“Yeah yeah,” he said, not really listening. “The boys will come and get him.”

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll drop him off. Or if I can’t, he’ll get the train.”

“No no, you know my boys, they need an excuse to get onto the motorway and drive 100 miles an hour.” He laughed heartily again. Amjad didn’t bother to ask if his precious boys were even bloody insured.

“Just a couple of weeks, you know. It’ll be nice for him to see his cousins. They can ‘chill’ or whatever it is they get up to.”

“Well,” Javid said, in his booming voice. “I’ve been saying it to you all summer. Let him come over. Don’t know why you keep fobbing me off.” *Because you’ve driven me up the wall in a two minute telephone conversation.*

Javid had five children. The eldest was the same age as Saahil and the youngest, same age as Zahra. Yep, they’d certainly kept busy.

When Amjad’s nephews turned up at the door a few days later, they walked in with sagging pants and weird patterns shaved into their heads.

“Chachaaaa! Amjad Chacha.” They greeted him in a bizarre handshake/hug. Amjad had seen black men do on the telly. He offered them roti, tea or a cold drink.

“No Chacha, we wanna get back on the road before the traffic sets in, innit.”

“Yeah, innit,” Amjad could not help but repeat. Zahra raised her eyebrows at him.

“Where’s Saahil Bhai?”

“He won’t be long.” They decided to wait in the car. Amjad and Zahra tried to keep straight faces as they watched them saunter down the garden path. Young people these days, Amjad thought shaking his head. Their entire attitudes were encapsulated by the long, drawn out ‘yeaaahs’ they added to the end of each sentence.

Saahil came down the stairs clutching his bag.

“Have you got everything?” Amjad asked.

“Yeah, Abbu, I don’t think I’ll stay for too long, you know they start doing my head in after a bit.”

“Okay, well they’re waiting for you in the car,” Amjad said.

“Yeah. Khuda Hafiz then.”

“Khuda Hafiz. Bye.”

Amjad hung around near the drawers. Saahil fiddled with his bag. He went towards the door but stopped short. Turning around, he headed straight back for Amjad and kissed him on his bulbous nose. Amjad blinked through his glasses. He remembered Saahil doing that as a kid.

“Are you my friend, Abbu?”

Amjad smiled and touched his son’s face. “Course I am... Go on now, they’re waiting for you.”

Saahil hugged Zahra. “Why can’t I go?” she asked.

“You have to go to school, Zee.”

“But I wanna come with you. In fact, why do you have to go?”

“I’m only going for a few days. It’s no biggie.”

“Well it is to me.”

“Don’t be silly, Zahra, I’ll be back before you know it.” He held her face in his hands. Kissed her forehead. Saahil looked back at his family one last time and smiled. That right there, was how Zahra would remember him.

“Bro!” Amjad heard his nephews greet Saahil. “Come and sit. Oi, move to the back, let Bhai sit in the front.” Amjad heard them shout “Khuda Hafiz Chacha,” as they drove away.

“A few days, Abbu?”

“Yes Zahra, only a few days.” She fidgeted around, looking entirely unconvinced.

18

“What time did you say he left, Javid?”

“This morning, about nine o’clock. The boys offered to drive him, but he insisted on catching a train. Something about stopping off in Manchester to do some shopping.”

“Well it’s five o’clock now. He’s not answering his phone.”

“Don’t worry about it Amjad. He’s a young lad, probably bumped into his mates or something. My boys do it all the time.” Amjad replaced the phone on the stand with Javid’s laugh still echoing from the handset. Maybe Saahil had pulled another stunt like before and had gone to see Ehsan? Amjad nervously dialled their number. To his relief, Meena answered the phone.

“No Amjad, he’s not here. Is everything okay?”

“He’s just not answering his phone. It goes straight to voicemail. Was supposed to be back by lunchtime.”

“Will you let me know when he gets in?”

“Yeah, I will do Meena, thanks.”

—

“You’re sure, Umar? Maybe he’s texted you?” Amjad held the phone to his ear desperately.

“No Uncle, I have my mobile in my hand. There’s nothing from him.”

“Maybe... erm... did you have any plans to meet up?”

Umar hesitated. "No. I haven't heard from Saahil in a while. Every call or message I sent him went unanswered... It's been a few months now."

"Oh, okay."

"I'll ask the other lads for you," Umar said.

"Yes, thank you."

"I hope you find him."

Amjad put the phone down and flipped through the pages of his address book. He realised there was no one else to ring. Ammi appeared at his side and tried to grab the phone. "Let me do it," she shouted, like a madwoman.

"Do what? I've rung everyone."

"Well ring them again," she spat.

"I'm trying, Ammi."

"Try harder. And if not, go out and look for him." She blinked through her huge glasses at him challengingly.

Amjad nodded and stood up to fetch his coat.

—

"Wait until he gets home, I'm going to kill him."

"Ring the police," Ammi screeched.

"What if he turns up though? It's only eight o'clock. It's not late."

"What's happening, Abbu?" Zahra asked, fear in her eyes.

"I'll give it another hour."

"But you've been to see all his friends. No one knows where he is!"

"Ammi please, just stop shouting."

“But it’s so cold outside.”

“He’ll turn up. You know what he’s been like recently. I don’t want to waste the police’s time.”

“You never listen to me.”

—

“Saahil... Saahil Sharif... Yes... Missing... Since this morning.”

“Okay. We’ll send someone out,” said the person on the other end of the phone. Amjad cleared his throat. Zahra looked at him in disbelief. Ammi started to wail.

19

The policeman who had arrived on the same night of Saahil's disappearance had been a compassionate fellow. He'd taken the important details: name, age, description, contact numbers of family and friends. He'd asked for a recent photograph.

"He's kept us waiting before," Amjad said. "You know, since the attack. But not like this. He wouldn't leave it this late."

"Don't worry, love," the officer said to Ammi, who cried silently and wiped her eyes with her shawl. "We'll do our best."

The following afternoon, two different police officers arrived. The younger one asked to check Saahil's computer and bedroom and took some DNA from a toothbrush. The older man was surly-faced and had a curt air around him. He said he'd come to get more detailed information. Amjad felt uneasy straightaway.

"So you said he left your brother's house at approximately 9am?" the officer asked.

"Yes, to catch a train home. He mentioned something about stopping off in Manchester to go shopping. But obviously you already know that."

"Hmmm. You said his cousins offered him a lift. But he declined?"

"That's right."

"So he left on his own, willingly?"

"Yeah," Amjad paused. "Sorry, what do you mean by that?"

"We've been in touch with the Manchester police force. They're searching the area right now."

"Good, thank you."

"They have, however, checked the CCTV around the train station. Haven't been able to spot anyone of Saahil's description."

"Well, it's hardly reliable is it?" Amjad said. "It's always too fuzzy to see anything whenever they show it on Crimewatch." The officer ignored him.

"So how has Saahil been coping since the assault?"

Amjad was caught off guard. "Erm, well not great to be honest. But I think we'd just managed to turn a corner."

"He's had counselling? Has it helped?"

Not really, he wanted to say. "Yeah I suppose it has."

"We've been in touch with his counsellor. He told us Saahil was suffering from severe depression." Amjad blinked. No one had put it quite like that before. He quickly recovered.

"Well, obviously, they told me at the hospital, you know, post traumatic stress..." The policeman continued scribbling away on his notepad, without looking up.

"His best friend is in a permanent vegetative state," Amjad almost shouted at him. "Obviously he's depressed." The officer looked at Amjad and nodded.

"Of course, it must have been extremely difficult."

"What has this got to do with anything anyway?" Amjad knew the answer to his question, but pushed it out of his head.

"Did Saahil ever express any suicidal thoughts?"

Amjad stood up. "Suicide? What are you suggesting?"

"Mr Sharif, I have to ask these questions."

"My son would not think such things."

"But you have to consider-"

"No no, you don't understand. We're Muslim, we don't commit suicide. It's against our religion." Amjad knew he sounded like a madman.

"Sit down," Ammi croaked, from the other side of the room.

"Can we continue, Mr Sharif?"

Amjad reluctantly took a seat.

"Has there been any tension between Saahil and family members? Any arguments in the house? Any fights?"

"No," Amjad lied. There was no need to tell the cop about the punch. Amjad didn't think he had it in him to relay the whole thing in actual words. It had tormented him even more than usual since Saahil's disappearance. Thinking about it made his brain hurt.

"I'm nearly done. Did Saahil say anything unusual in the past few days? Anything to suggest he needed, well, *a break*?"

"No," Amjad said, in an offhand way.

"When I say 'a break', I mean literally 'time out'."

"No. I mean yes, that's why he went to see his cousins. To have a break." The officer jotted something down. The younger policeman came down the stairs.

"We'll keep you updated," they said. Amjad saw the pair out of the house. Something the cop had said lingered in Amjad's head. A word.

Willingly.

-

"So that's it? You're just going to stop looking?"

"No Sir, but as we explained-"

"Yeah yeah, I know what you said..."

"Nothing suspicious has been found-"

"Suspicious?" Amjad shouted. "Do you not know what these thugs are like? They have friends on the outside. They give orders from their cells. What if they had been following Saahil all this time? They'll be pretty pissed off to say they got ten years each."

"There's no evidence to suggest there is a link between the incident in May and Saahil's disappearance. We've investigated all avenues."

"You're not listening to me. Something has happened to my son." Amjad spoke through gritted teeth.

"He left your brother's house in the morning, in broad daylight. As we've informed you, the police have searched the surrounding areas and nothing has been-"

"-found, yeah I know."

"There's every possibility Saahil may reappear. Maybe we just have to wait."

"Wait? It's been two weeks! He wouldn't just disappear off his own accord."

"Sir, we can't rule such a thing out. You have to understand, your son was going through a very difficult time-"

"Yes, but he wouldn't just abandon us and not get in touch! This isn't him!" Amjad turned and grabbed hold of Zahra.

"Look, this is his little sister. He loves her to death. He wouldn't just leave her." The police officers looked at one another but said nothing.

"You've already decided haven't you?" Amjad said, accusingly. "You've already decided that he's done this himself. That he's chosen to go missing. To get away from us. To get away from me."

"That's not what we are saying, Mr Sharif. But you have to remember, Saahil is not a minor. He's a twenty-one year old man."

"Hardly a man!" Amjad shouted. "Not like me or you. He's still young. And he's vulnerable. He needs me."

"Abbu, stop shouting," Zahra said, tugging at his sleeve.

"Fine," Amjad said, looking in the opposite direction. "I know something has happened to him. You should be asking those bastards in prison. They've done something."

"Mr Sharif-"

"We're Pakistani," Amjad continued, waving his arms about. "We don't just abandon our families. Our kids, they stay with us. They don't even leave the family home until they get married. They look after us and we look after them. We don't just up and leave."

"We're doing all we can, sir."

Amjad's face crumbled. He managed to hold it together. Only just.

"Please go," he said. Ammi walked the policemen out and muttered a quick "sorry" as she closed the door behind them. She re-entered the room and touched Amjad's shoulder.

"Son?"

He turned to look at her. "What am I going to do, Ammi?"

20

The weeks seemed to rage on ahead. They turned into months. Zahra watched her Abbu try to grasp hold of them. Slow things down. Pull them back. Like a rope slipping through his fingers. His hands bloody.

He barely acknowledged her some mornings. He never ate. The car keys were snatched off the drawer, the door would slam shut. Zahra would not see Abbu for the rest of the day. Not until he came home in the early hours. Where was he looking? Where to start?

Ammi moved in to look after her. They clung to each other on the sofa. Waiting for news. There never was any to deliver.

One day, Zahra saw her Abbu cry. He cried into Ammi's arms. *Abbu? Cry?* Dads weren't supposed to cry, were they? She hid behind the kitchen door. Bit into her knuckle and prayed never to witness such a thing again. Her whole body quivered. The sounds he made, it stabbed at her. She woke up in the middle of the night. It was still ringing in her ears.

She walked down the stairs for a glass of water and found Abbu in the living room. He was staring out of the window, alone in the dark. It frightened her. It *was* still her Abbu wasn't it? She cleared her throat. He jumped.

"What you doing up, Zee?"

"I'm scared, Abbu. I'm really, really scared."

"Let's sit down." They cuddled on the sofa. Zahra noticed the curtains were ajar. A dull orange glow shed light on their faces. Rain poured down the glass.

"Are we gonna be okay, Abbu?"

"Shhh..." he said. "I'm here."

“What’s going to happen now?

“Just the two of us now,” he said, in a trance-like state.

“Abbu?”

“Me and you.”

“And Saahil? What about Saahil?” He did not answer.

Droplets of water slammed against the window.

**Rethinking Muslim Narratives: Replacing Stereotypes with Human
Stories in a Novel titled ‘Missing’.**

For my Creative Writing portfolio, I have written an extract of a novel with a working title of *Missing*. It is a story about a British Pakistani family living in northern England and follows Amjad, a single father, and his two children, Saahil and Zahra. This extract focuses on Saahil, who finishes university and goes out for the night to celebrate with his best friend, Ehsan. The boys’ optimism for the future is short-lived as they are brutally attacked and left for dead. Ehsan receives a severe head injury and ends up in a permanent vegetative state. Saahil, unable to cope with this tragedy, abandons his father and little sister and disappears without warning. He remains missing for ten years.

The inspiration behind the novel was born mostly out of a frustration with the lack of diverse representations of Muslims in film, television and literature. I felt that the same narratives and stock characters were being repeated creating a “single story” (Adichie, 2009) about Muslims. I believe it is important to create alternative representations of stigmatised groups to allow for understanding amongst people to grow. To contribute towards this, I have tried to create a humanised portrayal of British Muslims by exploring themes that can be described as universal. This, I hope, will serve as a counter-narrative to prevailing stereotypes.

My research has consisted of identifying the trends in which Muslims have been portrayed in contemporary literature. Junaid Rana summarises the dehumanised caricature of Muslims that has emerged since 9/11:

...including, but not limited to, “terrorism,” “fundamentalism,” “clash of civilisations,” “panic,” “peril,” “hetero-patriarchy,” “oppression of women,”

“Taliban,” “violent masculinity,” “queered,” “homophobic,” “warlike,”
“fanatical,” “radical,” and “barbaric”. (2011: p. 10)

Since the beginning of the 21st Century, people have witnessed the horrors of terrorism, war, and the rise of violent extremist groups. The controversies surrounding Muslim women and veiling, cartoons of Prophet Muhammad and the radicalisation of youths has made it difficult for many not to associate Muslims with negativity. They are the “problem community” (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 41), or “permanent foreigners” (Arjana, 2015: p. 2) who, despite their arrival in England in the 1950s, have failed to assimilate into society, constantly clashing with ‘Western values’.

This is not just a post-9/11 phenomenon. Edward Said described the “camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lecher” image of Muslims shaped by Orientalist discourse over centuries (Arjana, 2015: p. 2). The September 11th attacks, however, led way for these to “emerge with renewed force” (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 3). The Muslim is now portrayed as:

...a homogeneous, zombielike body, incapable of independent thought and liable to be whipped into a frenzy at the least disturbance to their unchanging backward worldview. (Arjana, 2015: p. 2)

Hence, the Muslim ‘other’ has been firmly re-established into mainstream global discourse with a greater focus than ever before.

My interest lies with British Muslims and how the “Muslim problem” (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 2) fits within the prevailing narrative that has surrounded British Asians since their arrival in Britain: one of culture-clash and identity crisis. Kavita Bhanot describes this narrative as...

...the tale of the second generation's efforts to assimilate into mainstream British society, and the clash with their 'traditional' or 'backward' parents, who hinder this process. (2015)

This narrative of inter-generational conflict, undoubtedly an important part of the immigrant diaspora, has been repeated in popular films such as *East is East* (1999) and *Bend it like Beckham* (2002). The character's "path to assimilation" (Bhanot, 2015) however, relies on an internal identity crisis. British Asians have often been painted as an isolated group experiencing disenchantment with a country that doesn't want them. Those born in Britain don't necessarily relate to their parent's traditional culture having never even visited their ancestral countries. Similarly, they are not fully accepted into mainstream British culture due to racism. Once this desire to carve out their own identity is coupled with the backlash against Muslims after 9/11, such characters find an outlet for anger, and a cause to identify themselves with.

These are central themes in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Sebastian Faulks' *A Week in December* (2009). I have chosen to discuss these novels as they are all set in contemporary Britain. The portrayal of women largely fulfils the 'oppressed Muslim woman' narrative. In *Brick Lane*, Chanu marries Nazneen, a woman twenty years younger than him, in an arranged marriage. Similarly, in *White Teeth*, Samad marries Alsana, a woman twenty years younger than him, in an arranged marriage. These female characters perform typical domestic duties of cooking, cleaning, and producing children. *Brick Lane* is the most sustained example of this as the narrative voice is that of Nazneen, a housewife whose desire for independence results in her having an affair with a young man named Karim. Ali adopts the "marginalised position of the subaltern" by giving a voice to "working-

class, Bangladeshi women settled in Britain” (Bentley, 2008: p. 85). Yet Alastair Cormack argues that this is a “problematic move in the context of postcolonialism” (Bentley, 2008: p. 86) as the character of Nazneen becomes a familiar “symbol of subjugation” (Perfect, 2008: p. 111), a woman “covered from head to toe” in a “little walking prison” (Ali, 2003: p. 114). It is not a progressive portrayal. Ali’s representation of the Bangladeshi community was also criticised as many argued “what right and insider knowledge Ali, as an Oxford-educated woman... has to speak for this under-represented minority” (Bentley, 2008: p. 84), and particularly, the deprived area of Tower Hamlets.

This can also be applied to Zadie Smith who, unlike her main characters, is neither Bangladeshi nor Muslim, and Sebastian Faulks, a white, middle-class male. Nick Bentley asserts that this limits the role of the writer:

If writers were not allowed to use their imaginations to empathize with characters from a different class, gender or cultural background, then novels would be limited to a series of semi-autobiographical, narratives. (2008: p. 84)

Arguably, the “burden of representation” (Perfect, 2008: p. 110) that comes with “writing contemporary ethnicities” (Bentley, 2008: p. 65) stems from the sensitive issues it deals with. The “heightening sensitivities towards representations of cultural difference” (Perfect, 2008: p. 110) reveal much more is at stake with ethnic representation, as it is easy for writers to contribute to the marginalisation of stigmatised people, or, to continue the propagation of stereotypes that causes generalisations to be made about entire cultural groups.

Faulks and Smith both explore multiculturalism in London through “omniscient narrators” (Bentley, 2008: p. 52). Smith follows the Iqbal and Jones’

family over three decades, whereas Faulks, as suggested in the title, follows his interlinked characters in a week in December. Nasim is the only female Muslim character in Faulks' novel. She is the wife of a man about to receive an OBE from the Queen, and, unknowingly to her, the mother of a son about to take part in a terrorist bomb plot. Unlike Nazneen and Alsana, she has a good relationship with her husband and spends most of her time wearing expensive saris and socialising at dinner parties. She meets Gabriel, a solicitor, at one of these occasions and has a brief conversation with him. Gabriel's observation of Nasim is significant. He describes how she "didn't look happy" and "seemed sad", going as far as calling her "marginalised" (2009: p. 366). The use of this particular term to describe the only Muslim female character in the novel illustrates just how ingrained the 'oppressed Muslim woman' narrative is. Gabriel, a white, middle-class male, is quick to interpret Nasim's downcast mood as an indicator of her subjugation. Whether Faulks intended to demonstrate the injustice of this, or, simply played into his own prejudices as a white male, is unknown. Ultimately, it suggests that Muslim women are never able to escape their oppressed status.

The three "Muslim patriarchs" (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 115) in the novels possess stereotyped characteristics of being "ridiculous, comical and obstructive" (Bhanot, 2015). Chanu, in *Brick Lane*, and Samad, in *White Teeth*, both face classic "going home syndrome" (Southmayd, 2015) as a result of their increasingly westernised children. Samad wants "two good Muslim boys" (2000: p. 406) but instead gets Magid, whose English friends come to call for him using the name "Mark", and Millat, who "farts in Mosque, chases blondes and smells of tobacco" (2000: p. 218). He resorts to drastic measures to achieve his dream by sending Magid back to Bangladesh so that he may be reconnected to Islamic culture.

On the other hand, Chanu is a “classic mimic man” (Mamun, 2014: p. 512) who quotes English literature and refers to himself as an “intellectual” (Ali, 2003: p. 35). Yet when his daughter, Shahana, wants to wear jeans instead of shalwar kameez (2003: p. 180), Chanu reacts with anger as this is a “weakening of his patriarchal power” (Bentley, 2008: p. 92). Klocker al-Rashid also possesses similar qualities to Chanu. He summons up romantic images of his selection for an OBE thinking the Queen will have personally chosen him for this “great British honour” (2009: p. 57), and hits back at his son when challenged about colonialism. He dismisses it as being “a long time ago... we are friends now” (2009: p. 59). Klocker, an illiterate man, wants to learn how to read so he can have a conversation with the Queen about books, like “smart English people” (2009: p. 61). He obsesses over improving his speech and is desperate not sound like a “Bradford Paki” (2009: p. 200). This fractures his relationship with his son, Hassan, who is secretly being drawn towards Islamic extremism and refuses to follow Klocker’s “version of Islam” (2009: p. 106). In all the portrayals, the fathers impose expectations on their children and this signifies intergenerational conflict and culture clash. This narrative device is described by Kavita Bhanot as a “formulaic and ultimately oppressive expectation” that British Asian writers must fulfil in order to reach out to “primarily white, middle-class publishers, agents and readers” (2015). First-generation immigrants must be “strange, ridiculous, comical, even sinister” (Bhanot, 2015), and this is best demonstrated through Muslim fathers being unable to connect with their children.

The most significant representation in the novels is that of the young men: Millat, Karim and Hassan. Sophie Arjana argues that Muslim men are *all* considered “naturally violent” as a product of “race, ethnicity, or religious impulse” (2015: p. 11). The conflict within the British Asian narrative strikes most clearly in *White*

Teeth, a novel written before 9/11. Millat is a confused sixteen year old who wants to rebel against his father's attachment to religion and culture through American rap music and by sleeping with "white women" (2000: p. 368). Islamic extremism, however, provides Millat with another way of rebelling. It is also a reaction to the injustice of being steeped in stereotype. Millat recognises that he will always be "a Paki no matter where he came from" (2000: p. 233). That he smells of curry and either takes people's jobs or sponges off the state (2000: p. 233). He may not care much for religion but he is sure about one thing:

...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. (Smith, 2000: p. 234)

In the book, it is the Salman Rushdie fatwa that operates as the event that gives Muslims a "political identity" (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 46) and not 9/11. Smith makes it clear that Millat does not really understand the fatwa and is more a "juvenile delinquent" than a terrorist (2000: p. 446). Still, the connection between Muslim men and violence exacerbated through an increased identification with their 'Muslimness' is already made. It is even more significant that *White Teeth* was written before the post-9/11 narrative of Muslims was firmly in the global imagination.

In contrast, Monica Ali's portrayal of Karim is more recognisable. At the beginning of the novel, he asserts firmly "This (England) is my country" (2003: p. 212). At the end, he is believed to have gone to Bangladesh for jihad. He becomes increasingly politicised in response to a local group known as the 'Lion Hearts', who

push leaflets through people's doors warning them against the "islamification of our neighbourhood" (2003: p. 257). Karim tells Nazneen about the "world-wide struggle" of Bosnia, Chechnya and Palestine and how Muslims are being oppressed all over the world (2003: p. 243). In response to the media's demonisation of Muslims after 9/11, Karim trades his jeans and trainers for traditional clothes and a skullcap. His path to radicalisation is a response to racism, community tension and foreign policy.

A Week in December is set in 2007, six years after 9/11. Faulks' portrayal of Hassan is more complicated and his identity crisis, much more pronounced. Throughout his story, Hassan's desire to find a sense of belonging is evident, despite the fact that he seems to have everything: wealth, love, education and opportunity. He is always looking for a "disguise" (2009: p. 106) and during his teens, he rejects religion and becomes "Scottish and atheistic" (2009: p. 107). At university, he turns to student politics before finally becoming involved with an extremist group. Hassan develops a deep hatred for the West and almost takes part in a bomb plot. This is perhaps a more up-to-date version of the 'radicalised young man' narrative whereby it is difficult to pin down one cause for such feelings. In all these depictions, three British-born Muslims cannot make peace with England and this path leads to terrorism.

Undoubtedly, these novels are illuminating explorations of a very important and current issue of our times. Although Smith, Ali and Faulks adopt different approaches, it can be argued that they are all "different versions of the same story" (Adichie, 2009). The British Asian/Muslim stories combine to create a much repeated and preserved narrative. The authors may try to give their characters 'a voice' by telling their side of the story, however, I feel many fall back on...

...conventions of representation having their roots in the twin projects of colonialism and Orientalism... re-enacting and reinforcing the problematic colonial binary reanimated in “War on Terror” rhetoric” (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 119).

These binaries are vital to consider when dealing with two identities that are already heavily entrenched. I will now discuss my response and attempt to create a counter-narrative to these stereotypes.

In the book titled *Framing Muslims* (2011), Peter Moray and Amina Yaqin assert:

Muslim characters, in contrast to their Western counterparts, are mediated to us via externals, by social circumstances and actions, not through any kind of emotional life we are invited to identify with. (2011: p. 156)

This is significant. The Muslim identity in literature is attached to “clothes, skin colour, and ritual” and Muslims exist as “subjects without any other affiliations or interests” (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 119). How can an emotional connection be established when a reader is made aware from the outset of how different and ‘other’ such characters are? My response is to not make the story about 9/11, and introduce a family experiencing problems that can occur in any family. The family in question happens to be Muslim and Pakistani, but the central plot does not revolve around their identity.

The story begins in 1992 with the passing of Amjad’s wife. He has a son, Saahil, aged ten, and a newborn called Zahra. The first three chapters are told through Amjad’s point of view and this introduces the family. The point of view then switches

to Saahil in 2003 when he is twenty one. It focuses on Saahil and Ehsan finishing university and celebrating with their friends. After the attack, the point of view switches between father and son to capture the disintegration of their relationship as a result of the tragic incident. After Saahil goes missing, I will switch the focus of the story to Zahra in 2013, when she is twenty one. This alternating point of view and shifting of time is my attempt to explore each character's circumstances at a pivotal moment in their lives. This technique of third person narrators that are "able to float between the consciousnesses of a series of characters" (Bentley, 2008: p. 52) is also employed by Zadie Smith, but unlike *White Teeth*, my focus remains on three members of the same family. My primary aim was to create characters that go against 'type'. I am presenting three characters, as I have discussed previously, that are most likely to be stereotyped: a Muslim father, a young Muslim man and a Muslim woman. Amjad, Saahil and Zahra fit into these categories.

I introduced Amjad as a single father to bring the focus on his parenting style as he tries to juggle work and look after children. I felt this would be significant since the three female characters of Nazneen, Alsana and Nasim are limited representations of Asian women always being wives and mothers, and never individuals in their own right. The fact that Amjad has lost his wife means he himself has to carry out this stereotypically female role of cooking, cleaning and looking after children. This is my attempt of turning the Asian woman narrative on its head.

The second difference between Amjad and other "Muslim patriarchs" (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 115) is that he is second-generation and not an immigrant. This has allowed the focus to be shifted from the classic inter-generational struggle between parent and child. He understands his children better and being British-born, is more concerned about education and living standards. Amjad describes moving his family

away from the “rundown streets lined with halal butchers, money transfer shops and windows displaying mannequins wearing glittery salwar kameez” (6). This expresses Amjad’s desire to raise his children in a better environment by moving away from a deprived area of the city and breaking free from a ghettoised Asian community. He is glad there are English families in the new area, but predicts ‘white flight’ will soon change that. He also speaks of wanting Saahil to go to a “mixed school” (7), demonstrating his desire for his children to actively engage with a multicultural British society.

I included this narrative aspect as a response to the popular notion that British Muslims are reluctant to integrate. As a child, I had a similar experience to the one described above when my parents moved out of the Girdlington area of Bradford, and into a more mixed area. When my friends and I were placed in a predominantly Asian secondary school, the primary concern amongst our parents was that the school was not racially diverse. In this way, Amjad is more concerned with helping his children be at ease with both British and Pakistani culture, rather than a stubborn insistence of them ‘being good Muslims’. I use the symbol of Amjad using “loose Yorkshire Tea” (7) to prepare Pakistani chai to illustrate how two cultures can blend together.

The main problem with my characterisation of Amjad is that he may come across as being ‘too nice’. I resolved this by adding the bitterness he feels at being “stuck indoors for days on end. Changing nappies, preparing the baby milk, ironing uniforms, making dinner” (7), and remembers longingly his care-free hobbies as a young man. There is also a particularly dark moment in the first chapter where Amjad thinks of “blocking out Zahra’s frantic wails with a beige, corduroy cushion” (1). These are natural reactions for a man who is so bogged-down in responsibility. As a

father, he can be strict at times, but also sweet and simple which is best described through Saahil's observation of him:

He wasn't as slick or sophisticated as Saahil hoped to still be at forty five. He wasn't even cool. He was just Abbu. Quite unextraordinary to an outsider, with his glasses, bald patch and beginnings of a paunch... (13)

Amjad plods around the house and talks about a fork-lift driver promotion, all of which, when contrasted with Saahil's ambitions, seems trivial and small. This adds an element of pity to Amjad's story.

Amjad's mother, Ammi, is first introduced in chapter two and is added in as a comical challenge to him. She is constantly telling Amjad he needs to "marry again" (2), much to his displeasure. She has an old-fashioned mindset with regards to this and Amjad rejects her desire for him to "marry a stranger from Pakistan and bring her over here to clean the house and look after my kids" (2). Ammi picks faults with his domestic abilities, citing the lack of ginger in his cupboards as evidence Amjad "needs a woman in the house" (2).

My inspiration for Ammi comes from my own grandmother who came to this country when she was eighteen, left behind her entire family and adjusted to Britain from a small village in Pakistan whilst raising children and running a home. I wanted to bring out that strength in Ammi. She is not a timid or passive character, as is often portrayed with Muslim mother-figures such as Nazneen's mother in *Brick Lane*, who offers her daughter advice on how to pass "God's test" in life: "It's easy. You just have to endure" (Ali, 2003: p. 323). This is very similar to the portrayal of Mariam's mother, Nana, in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), a novel set in Afghanistan. Mariam is the illegitimate child of a wealthy businessman. Her shamed

mother is sent to live in a mud house on the outskirts of the city to avoid dishonour being brought on the family. Due this experience, Nana is bitter and pessimistic. Her advice to Mariam is similar "It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have." (2007: p. 18). Although I am not concentrating on female characters in the extract, I wish to make them the central focus once the story switches to Zahra as an adult. As Amjad's wife, Neelam, has died, Ammi replaces her as the mother figure. This is why I have portrayed Ammi as a strong, opinionated woman. She will never encourage Zahra to be passive or to endure injustice patiently.

Saahil is the main character in the first part of the novel. His story begins in chapter four when he is just about to finish his exams at university. Saahil is good-looking, arrogant and at times, shallow. He is very ambitious and speaks of "success as though it was waiting around for him like a faithful pet dog" (12). I am hoping that by making Saahil overconfident and cocky in the beginning, the contrast between his character before and after the attack will be even more striking. It is also essential to make Saahil very different to Ehsan, whose character I only had a short time to develop before he is attacked. Unlike Saahil, Ehsan is sweet and sensible but can also be quite assertive, always sticking up for friends and acting as a peacemaker between them.

Nevertheless, there is also a sensitive side to Saahil. He loves his father and appreciates everything he has done for them. This makes Saahil eager to become successful and take a lead role in supporting his family. His relationship with Zahra is very paternal as he is ten years older than her. He often "accompanies her to parent's evenings and gives her self-defence lessons to prepare her for secondary school" (13). His attachment to his family is significant, as again, his change of character after the

attack will be more shocking to the reader as he pushes his family away and eventually, abandons them altogether.

Saahil and Ehsan are both different to the other portrayals of young men I have discussed. They are very much aware of who they are and what they want to do in life. Sartawi and Sammat state that the categories of 'Muslim' and 'British' are juxtaposed as "separate, distinct, and potentially incommensurable" (2012: p. 562). They argue that being both British and Muslim also means to be "culturally dislocated" (2012: p. 562). Saahil and Ehsan, however, navigate through their supposedly 'incompatible' identities quite easily, and this is best demonstrated through their night out with friends. The boys eat at an Indian restaurant with mostly Asian friends. Later, they go to a nightclub and, though they refrain from having alcohol, mix with their English friends. Unlike Millat, Karim and Hassan, Saahil and Ehsan do not suffer from an identity crisis and are not plagued by a sense of detachment from British society. They are comfortable with who they are.

This is best expressed in chapter five when the boys arrive home and are lectured by their dads. I have not dismissed inter-generational conflict completely in my novel, and acknowledge that Pakistani culture is different to British culture and so finding a balance between the two can be difficult. However, unlike other representations I have discussed, when Amjad and Harun warn Saahil and Ehsan against drink, drugs and girls, it is done in a light-hearted manner. As young men, Saahil and Ehsan are not completely obedient to Amjad and Harun's wishes, but manage to maintain a balance between both cultures. Saahil may have lots of girlfriends, but he "stops short of going into their knickers" (19). The boys may have an "odd joint here and there" (18) but they don't touch alcohol. This inability to find a

balance is best demonstrated through the characters of Magid and Millat. Nick Bentley notes:

Magid returns a reflected Englishman: a late product of the British colonization of the Asian sub-continent. Millat, on the other hand, is influenced first by American gangster movies and later by Islamic fundamentalism. (2008: p. 57)

Whilst one brother becomes an atheist, the other becomes involved in religious fanaticism. Smith's juxtaposition of two identical twins as extreme opposites is significant. It is perhaps suggesting a middle-ground cannot be reached by British Muslims. Through Saahil and Ehsan, I wish to challenge this idea by portraying them as characters that can exist in a "comfortable mainstream" (Faulks, 2009: p. 217) and be assured about their identities.

Again, this differs from Hassan and Millat, who both rebel against their parents by drinking excessively and, in the case of Millat, having sex with lots of women. This is also seen in the BBC drama *Yasmin* (2004), which explores the aftermath of 9/11 on the Muslim community in a Britain. Yasmin's brother, Nasir, wears "designer trainers, bling jewellery" and is well-known for his "sexual conquests of white girls" (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 120) which clashes with the expectations of his first-generation, immigrant father. Characters like Nasir and Millat engage in excess with these things in order to assimilate into society. However, I believe this reduces British culture to just an overindulgence in alcohol, drugs and sex. It is this "effort to close down and narrow the parameters of Britishness" (Lynch, 2013: p. 254) that I have attempted to challenge in my portrayal of young British Muslims.

Another important scene develops in chapter six where the boys meet up with their friends to celebrate. Abdul arrives at the restaurant fuming as he has just had a debate with someone “about Iraq and Bin Laden” (21). This is my attempt at contextualising the story which is set in 2003, two years after the attack on the World Trade Centre and three months after the invasion of Iraq. Because radicalisation is mostly associated with “male Muslim youth” (Lynch, 2013: p. 241), I decided to present six male characters, all from similar backgrounds, expressing their varied opinions on what has happened.

To capture the feelings of angst, it is important to understand the “positioning of Muslims as different, exceptional and outside normal society” (Lynch, 2013: p. 249), and how this impacts ordinary Muslims. This is not just through media demonisation, but also through “economic disadvantage” and “direct and institutional discrimination” (Sartawi & Sammat, 2012: p 562). There is also an overbearing “pressure to integrate” and to be seen by the rest of society as “moderate” (Sartawi & Sammat, 2012: p. 562). Muslim must “do enough” to denounce extremism and prove their loyalty to Britain (Poole, 2009: p. 11). The “creation of an in-group and an out-group constructed along religious lines... that was not perceived to exist in that format before the terrorist attacks” (Lynch, 2013: p. 249) also severely alters Muslims’ relationships with other people. One example of this is presented through Abdul, who feels patronised and demeaned by the difficult encounter he has just had with a group of white people. He says, “You should have seen how they were looking at me... They were smirking at me. I was trying my best to explain and they just smirked away” (22). I have portrayed Abdul’s anger as a response to a build up of malicious remarks that have eventually led to him losing his temper. Ehsan also acknowledges that it is expected of them as Muslims to “explain and justify their

entire existence” to certain people who enjoy watching them “squirm” (22). Personally, I feel racism that is subtle and disguised can be more damaging than overt forms of discrimination. I have had experience of being questioned excessively by people and this dissection of my religion and culture is not only tiring, but also upsetting. As a result of this, I have witnessed people constantly being on the defensive. I have attempted to portray this paranoia through Abdul.

Saahil has conflicting feelings about 9/11. The scene focuses on Saahil’s thoughts as he admits becoming desensitised to images of the Twin Towers burning, but also hates how this event is now somehow directly connected to him:

It would be nice after all, to just sit back and feel sorry for the victims and angry towards the perpetrators and that be that. To not shrink slightly every time the image of those two skyscrapers popped up unexpectedly... (24)

Because he is Muslim, Saahil cannot distance himself from this event or take an outsider’s approach by just sympathising or expressing anger. I have tried to portray the image of 9/11 as something that comes up in everyday life, without warning. When this happens, Saahil needs to find a way to deal with it, regardless of whether he is able to or not. The entire scene is a metaphor for that, as it is supposed to be an end of term celebration but instead becomes an argument between the friends about these issues.

Saahil also expresses indignation at his father who naively states that things will “blow over” (24). I feel there is an intergenerational misunderstanding between those who grew up in a post-9/11 world and their parents. Olra Lynch asserts:

UK Muslims, both young and old, have moved from being seen as members of ethnic minority communities with concerns relating to socio-economic issues, education and race relations, to becoming a national security concern... (2013: p. 257)

This shift in attitude is something Amjad may not have fully understood. Our parents remember what it was like before 9/11 and are at a comfortable stage in their lives, like Amjad, a family man in his forties. This differs to people like Saahil and his friends who are in their twenties and face the future with uncertainty. Like my parents, Amjad will have established his friendships at work and elsewhere over many years and may not be as affected by prejudice as Saahil and his friends, who are just starting out. I think this causes a lack of understanding between older generations over the difficulties young people face on a day-to-day basis.

I intended to reveal Saahil's selfish nature through this scene about 9/11. He says he views the "whole damn thing with contempt" as it is a "headache he could do without" (24). Towards the end of the conversation, he wants everybody to "talk about summat else" (25). This will make the reader wonder if Saahil is genuinely concerned by what is happening in the world, or more frustrated that it is affecting him. I deliberately made Saahil appear selfish so I could later contrast him to Zahra. I think it will be interesting to make her the more politicised of the two. As seen in *Brick Lane*, Muslim women do not engage with anything outside the home and listen to other people's opinions of the world. Nazneen describes how Karim's "knowledge shamed her" as he teaches her of the world's "scattered" and "tortured" Muslims (Ali, 2003: p. 243). Similarly, In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam's abusive husband, Rashid, mocks her when she asks him what a communist is. He says "You know nothing, do you? You're like a child. Your brain is empty. There is no information in

it" (2007: p. 89). Men are always the angry, political characters and I feel it would be interesting to give this role to Zahra and make her more socially-aware and cynical about what is going on around her.

Ehsan acts as a voice of reason. He doesn't like the way Muslims blame everything on America and the media. Saahil agrees that some Muslims are "in denial" and says negativity directed towards them is expected since they have "started blowing shit up" (22). It is important for them to pick out problems within their own community too, and I wish to do this throughout the novel. One such issue I have addressed is Muslims engaging with conspiracy theories. Mehdi Hasan, a Muslim journalist, argues:

We blame sinister outside powers for all our problems - extremism, despotism, corruption and the rest - and paint ourselves as helpless victims rather than independent agents. After all, why take responsibility for our actions when it's far easier to point the finger at the CIA/Mossad/the Jews/the Hindus/fill-in-your-villain-of-choice? (2014)

In relation to this, Asif talks of 9/11 being an 'inside job' before going on to blame Israel and Zionism. He is an embodiment of what is wrong with some parts of the Muslim community who do not tackle the problem from within and instead blame others.

In this scene, my aim was to present a different narrative to the usual response to 9/11 in literature which I believe centres on outward expressions of anger and renewed assertion of Muslim identity. This is best shown through Karim, who adopts traditional clothes and a beard after 9/11. Sartawi and Sammat argue that after 9/11, "some [to] avoid identification with the Muslim community in their everyday life and

embodied practices, and yet [to] others emphasize it" (2012: p. 572). Again, this inability to find middle-ground is what I have challenged through my characters, none of whom, even those with controversial opinions, express any kind of sympathy with terrorism, or wish to reject their Muslim identity altogether. There is an increasing focus on the "enemy within", of westernised "hybrid subjects" (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 115) who pose an even greater security threat to the West...

...a half-dozen young men could well be dressed in jeans, drinking coke, listening to rap and between their bows to Mecca, putting together a bomb to blow up an American airliner. (Morey & Yaqin, 2011: p. 115-116)

This scene is a counter-narrative to this idea as it sheds light on the neglected section of British Muslims who are trying to cope with events they have no control over. The "dread" that is "engraved all over Saahil's friend's faces" demonstrates this (25). Despite their anger and frustration, all the boys are consumed with anxiety about the future. This become even more poignant when we look back with hindsight and realise that the invasion of Iraq was just the beginning of what would become a worldwide descent into chaos and instability.

Being a victim of unexpected, uncontrollable events is a central theme in the novel. The assault which changes Saahil and Ehsan comes at a time when both boys are facing the future with much optimism. They do not have the burden of the financial crisis hanging over them and are very much guaranteed to have promising careers. Saahil is the "gobby one out of the two" (50) and is beaten up more. Ehsan, however, receives a severe head injury and ends up in a much worse condition. I decided to portray Ehsan in a vegetative state rather than being killed as I believe this would be more devastating to both families as it prevents them from accepting what

has happened and moving on. Instead, Ehsan is left in such a debilitating state that, despite him having no awareness, his body needs to be cared for and tended to daily. His presence is a constant reminder of the appalling incident that changed everything. He acts as a metaphor for the burdens that hang over people and cannot be buried.

I have documented Saahil's unravelling as he struggles to cope with what has happened. To reveal Saahil's inquisitive character, I portray him becoming obsessed with the Glasgow Coma Scale and, in his desperation, trying to diagnose Ehsan's progress himself. He spends time calculating how many months are required for "Ehsan to come round and be with him on graduation day" (49). He sits beside Ehsan and "stares so hard his eyes hurt. Looking for signs, looking for any movement that had not been present the last time" (45). Saahil neglects his relationships as he becomes increasingly depressed and withdrawn. When he arrives home from the hospital, Zahra clings to him and cries but Saahil "barely lifts his free arm to comfort her" (43). He locks his door to keep her out, even when he can hear her "scratching at the door" (45). When his friend, Umar, comes to visit, Saahil is cold and distant. His arrogance still comes through but whilst it may have been funny and appealing before, now it has turned nasty. He unnecessarily corrects Umar by telling him that he only stuck up for him because of Ehsan. His vanity is also shown on the day of his graduation:

He wasn't even supposed to be there. "Can I just clarify," he wanted to assert, "I didn't fail first time around okay. Not like these thickos graduating now, months after everybody else". (54)

It is still in Saahil's nature to be a little narcissistic and I think this makes his transition into darkness appear more natural.

That is not to say, however, that Saahil is not completely consumed with grief. In chapter fifteen, I attempted to create an eerie, supernatural atmosphere by referring back to the moment just before the attack where Saahil was scaring Ehsan by telling ghost stories. Saahil is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and has nightmares which consist of a “boot, pounding at his face, kicking him out of his slumber” (51). When he lies awake at night, Saahil is haunted by images of Ehsan in a vegetative state. He argues with God, “gazing skywards with contempt” but later feels “fearful and apologetic” (51). On the night before his graduation, Saahil experiences a bout of sleep paralysis which makes him believe a “demonic spirit” (53) is watching him. He dismisses this and thinks:

Or maybe it was Ehsan. His trapped soul finding his way to Saahil, clutching, clawing and pulling him out of sleep. Screaming for help. Cursing Saahil for abandoning him. (53)

As Saahil is religious, the idea of God, spirits and the soul are very real to him. The thought of Ehsan coming to visit him whilst being trapped in some form of afterlife, “stuck between life and death” sends Saahil into a panic (52). This is also seen in *Brick Lane*, where Nazneen has a breakdown after she believes she has seen a vision of her deceased mother, Amma, who warns her against her affair with Karim. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam also experiences this after her mother, Nana, commits suicide. She believes the guilt of this has resulted in her having a miscarriage:

She had fitful dreams, of Nana's ghost sneaking into her room at night, burrowing its claws into her womb, and stealing her baby. In

these dreams, Nana cackled with delight and vindication. (Hosseini, 2007: p. 84)

I have also used similar supernatural imagery to demonstrate that Saahil, who was once very much in control of his life, is now at the mercy of uncontrollable forces that he cannot deal with.

Although Saahil is the victim of the incident, Amjad is the one watching him unravel. The inability to console each other is best described through his point of view which is why I think this switching of perspectives enhances the reading:

He tried to comfort him as best he could. But Saahil was not a little boy. He was a man. He didn't want to be cuddled or caressed by his dad, Amjad knew that for sure. He'd sit with Saahil sometimes, a big gap between them and pat his shoulder awkwardly. (49)

I intended to portray a masculinity barrier preventing them from being emotionally open with each other. This makes Amjad feel as though he has failed as a father as, in the first chapter, he had vowed to "protect his children from anything", saying "pain would have no place in his household" (1). His own shortcomings as a father begin to trouble Amjad and the uneasiness of their relationship turns physical when Amjad punches Saahil during an argument. I decided to go this far to add serious conflict between the pair as this will make Amjad feel guiltier once Saahil has disappeared. Furthermore, I wanted Amjad's authoritativeness to come out, as later on in the story, Saahil's reluctance to return home after his disappearance would seem unnecessary if Amjad was too laidback.

The final scene switches to Zahra's point of view. She is only eleven years old and watches Amjad frantically searching for her brother. I have made a reference back to the first scene where Amjad held Zahra and Saahil together in an embrace just after Neelam's death. Now the scenario has changed completely and it is Amjad and Zahra huddled together on the sofa, with Saahil having just departed from them. Whereas the droplet of water "slid down the window" (1) in the first scene, it now "slams against the window" (72). This difference illustrates how the sombre atmosphere at the time of Neelam's death has changed to outright fear, where one of Amjad's children is out there somewhere, alone and unprotected from the family embrace that started the novel. I have chosen to end this part of the novel here and this will give way to the story switching to Zahra ten years later. Saahil secretly contacts her upon his return, the novel will then document their attempts to reconcile as a family.

In conclusion, I believe my extract works successfully as a counter-narrative to the prevailing stereotypes of Muslims in literature. I have focused on relationships such as family and friendship which I believe will help the reader to identify with the characters emotionally. The characters or plot do not operate for a solely 'ethnic purpose' which is demonstrated by the fact that the storyline can involve any type of character, despite their background. However, the Asian/Muslim viewpoint offers a fresh perspective and differs to the normalised white British point of view we are accustomed to seeing. I believe this will enhance the story and arouse more curiosity in the reader. I have also directly challenged generalisations about Muslims by having the three main characters operate as anti-stereotypes: Amjad is not an overbearingly strict patriarch, Saahil is not an angry, militant young man and Zahra, though not the focus of this extract, will not be an oppressed Muslim woman.

I have tried not to place too much importance on religion and my aim is to show that although it is a solid part of the characters' lives, it does not need to be scrutinised and discussed at length. Similarly, I chose to present the characters' assimilation to British society as already complete. I believe my depiction of the characters getting on comfortably with their daily lives is a subtle way of hinting at their assimilation, and prevents it from appearing forced and unnatural.

Overall, I feel I have achieved my goal of creating an alternative representation of British Muslims. The extract focuses on universal themes and I think this will humanise a group of marginalised people who currently exist in the media as stereotypes. Representation matters to those people who have had their individuality stripped from them and I hope my novel will serve as a small contribution to change that.

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