

Testimony

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Maybe in the future she'd embody the pure-feminine-ideal or something, but right now Suraj had to explain just who Judy was and why she killed herself.

Mom wasn't happy on the phone: was she a girlfriend, was she a good friend, why are you flying over just for a funeral, why are you flying over just for someone you went to school with, you don't go to funerals — *you don't go to funerals*. God takes you, ah, *Waheguru* takes you. Sikhs say God takes you and the body stays here. Understand, ah? It's looking like a skeleton after one two days only. Body is just a thing, OK? It's not pure. Dead bodies should be burnt. You're only twenty-five, what you going to funerals for anyway? Tell me honestly was she a good friend of yours?

Email flows converged into one detailed stream: *Judy's thing*. Suraj, Paul and Hannah, just the three of them now. They'd wear black but not suits, they wouldn't do readings, Hannah would pay for Suraj's flight, they wouldn't meet before.

Suraj, Paul and Hannah, and no Judy.

The last message was sent four days ago. Paul was annoyed when Suraj deleted Facebook (to write a book, in Berlin, Jesus), but Hannah said she was glad because now, with everything, email was an actual respite from all the updates and noise, and somehow appropriate, no? — just black writing on a plain background.

— God, Mom, I know, I know, this is what they do — they bury, OK. They bury. I'm flying back on Friday. OK I gotta go now. Sorry. I gotta go. OK. Mom, mom, I swear to God — just please God please calm down for once.

- What the fuck, a church? asked Paul. What the fuck?
- Sorry, Paul, you're breaking up. What did you say? asked Aiden.
- I asked if they're doing it in a church.
- Yes as I understand it. A church. Why? asked Aiden.

- Aiden. They're Jewish. Judy's Jewish. What the actual fuck?
- Her mum's often, I mean at least, frequently, in church though?
- Her mum is just some fucking hippy, said Paul.
- Right, said Aiden. I mean, think of it from her side — it's probably easier for her to do it this way. Imagine what she's going through — you can't even—
- What the fuck happened? asked Paul. It's mad. Are they going to do a Christian burial?
- I can't be certain. But at this stage, Paul, does it make a difference?
- Yes it makes a fucking difference! Who the fuck will give her kaddish?
- Give her *what*, sorry? You might have broken up there. I'm not sure but—
- Ridiculous. You'd think her own fucking family would take care of it. Jesus, you knew Judy, you know she would do it Jewish.
- Paul, I wasn't actually certain beforehand that she *was* Jewish.
- She was *fucking Jewish*.

Aiden Harris nominated himself to break the news to everyone. Long-time family friend of the Gibbons', he hugged Judy's mum Lily and confirmed he would do whatever he could to help. Plus since he'd known Judy and everyone else since school days, it might just be easier if he called.

His lines were: Judith Gibbons committed suicide, it happened in her rooms in Oxford, nobody's quite sure how. No, sorry, she did not leave a note.

Before he dialled, he allowed himself to enjoy accepting the international calling rates. He called London, yes, but also Berlin and Paris. He was taking responsibility, because you have to in things like this. You have to be that person; the calm centre in the turning world. He looked out onto the garden and the blocks of sunlight on his parents' sauna. He thought about how cosmopolitan and tragic his friendship circle was.

— At this stage it's better to stay calm Paul, said Aiden. It's near the house — St. Anne's Church. The big one near the park. Do you know which one I mean?

— Unbelievable. You know she went to Israel every fucking year? said Paul. She was on the pro-Israel thing at Oxford. Christian burial — for fuck's sake!

— Well I mean Lily's quite understandably in pain. I can imagine both logically and emotionally, it's easier to do everything quickly — because, well. Can you make it, do you think?

— Sure sure it's fine. London to Birmingham's fine. But the others will have ridiculous flights — so they should hear as soon as — I'll call them.

— No, no, said Aiden. I'll do it. You try to rest. I don't mind at all. I'll see you at the reception then?

— What? What's that? What reception? asked Paul.

— The reception, after the burial, said Aiden.
— That's called a fucking wake.
— No. No. I checked, said Aiden. It's the reception.
— Whatever. Have you told them? asked Paul.
— About Judy? No. You're the first one I rang. It's sad — you four were the core, so-to-speak, weren't you? Since school it was always you and Judy, Hannah and Suraj —
— When will you? asked Paul.
— They're next on the list — so it's really no trouble. How long has Hannah been in Paris now? I know Suraj has just gone to Berlin, but she went to Paris a couple of years ago didn't she?
— Call them.
— Sure. Thanks Paul.
— Yeah.

An hour later Paul's phone vibrated. A message from Hannah:

Are you OK?

And something else: an empty email from Suraj headed, **unbelievable**.

He answered both: Yeah.

He went to the pub.

Mum would cry, tell him how wonderful Judy was, that time she and her made Eton Mess together. He'd have to listen. And Dad. Oh Jesus dad. Dad would tell him to move back from London. Be home, closer to them. They're old, he's all they've got.

What the fuck.

Beer.

Some girl he dated told him to keep a dream diary, and obviously whatever, but still you know he did it. Jesus Christ he actually found it kind of interesting. Not like he bought a Moleskin or anything, he just emailed himself. He tried to add some thoughts to *Dream #27*, but distracted, just wrote the word: beer.

The day of the funeral, before leaving, when checking the chain between Hannah and Suraj, he realised he hadn't dreamt since the day Aiden called.

At the reception:

— Lily's done a good job, said Suraj. Last time I was here — was six years ago? Was two thousand and seven already six years ago? It was a shithole.

Paul laughed. They were in the Gibbons' garden, sitting around the patio furniture, as the other guests stood and talked outside, or sat and talked in the house.

— Oh yeah, Paul said. Was that big ditch here? Or here? Was it here?

— Can't remember, said Suraj. All I remember is helping Judy paint the kitchen. Was a complete mess.

— It was here, said Hannah. This fence — remember? It's those neighbours that complained all the time.

Her neck went tight, as always. Fucking stress! This is exactly what she knew would happen. They'd bring up the past, every little detail, and she'd be sucked into it without realising. The suburbs are the same everywhere, grass, fences, gardens, houses, left, right, front, back, OK guys? Let's not get into every little thing. Even about ditches what the hell? Like can you please not?

Paul lit up a cigarette, and Hannah pointed out that the Gibbons' neighbours two doors down had a huge tent up.

— Oh shit yeah. If that's for a birthday then that's too fucking ridiculous, said Paul. It's too obvious. God, imagine if it's a christening.

— Er, since when? said Hannah, pointing to his cigarette.

— Since this, he said, nodding to the reception. Actually, the day I found out, I sent James — you met James right?

— Yeah, said Suraj. Big James.

— Big James, said Paul. I sent him a text and he, poor guy, just came back home with a stack of pizzas and a pack of fags and threw them at me: 'Here man, sorry, sorry, I got to go — but I had to give these to you. Eat something, chill.' Which is just by the way perfect. Can't cook for shit.

— Ah man. Big James, said Suraj. Yeah my friend Johannes — I told him too, and he was just — 'right, khachapuri.'

Paul winced. Johannes. Khachapuri.

— What's that? asked Hannah.

— Cheese bread, said Paul. We get it Suraj, you live abroad, you have German friends, Georgian friends, we get it. Speaking of which, let's head to the buffet.

Hannah didn't want to. The food was so greasy.

But, the garden looked good. Lily was a hippy, but still, like, a person. And you know, she'd done this herself. Lily took out a loan to redecorate — the mortgage was finally paid, but she didn't have enough to get the house looking perfect again. This is how it was, in the end: you got what you needed by losing something important. You got wise by getting old. You owned your house by ruining it. How else do you make an omelette?

An old woman had done this herself. Lily, a sixty-year old single mother tackling a project as big as this — man. Check it out: walled flowerbeds, contemporary arch, conservatory done up. Aww.

At the Church, Lily told Hannah this is why she went there every week, even though she was Jewish, to get closer to life and to God and to go through challenges to get her closer: to help Theresa become Mother Theresa.

Lily said: Everything that helps you understand is a good thing, Bible, Torah, Qur'an.

Lily said: The point was how do you *actually* live? What's good for *you*? Try to understand: the greatest honour we can give Almighty God is to live *gladly*.

Lily said: Appreciate everything, not just the goal. All the way to heaven *is* heaven.

For Lily, the church group was fantastic for getting involved in the community and making friends, and plus, keep this quiet, she'd met a few men this way — nothing serious, but it was nice to be noticed. Wholeheartedness. Holistic spirituality — that's what you need, more than religion. Embrace the love around you, and the love inside you.

Yeah well you heard this kind of thing on Facebook all the time, so it's not like Hannah could take it seriously.

Lily said: what does it matter as long as everyone's there to remember Judith? She said: Church, synagogue, it was *this* earth, that Judith walked, and it was *the same earth* where she'd be buried.

Hannah said: yes.

Thank you, Lily said.

And that conversation left Hannah cold. She wasn't sure if Lily was remarkably together (maybe the hippy stuff helps, actually) or if in fact, maybe, Lily didn't care at all that her daughter had died.

At the reception, Hannah overhears people say things like: you can really feel Judy's absence, or like: it's like she's still here. Like, *hello!* As if you can say that for real and not be embarrassed. It's not like Judy's here *at all*.

Plus in the Church one of the speakers, Judy's friend — a girl, her name was May, or April, something, her name was also a month — went up and said something weird. She said no one should feel guilty for the suicide because there's more to it than anyone realises.

Suraj returned with a paper plate heavy and folding with oil.

— How are you doing? Hannah asked.

— Yeah. I don't know really. You? asked Suraj.

The patio, the steps, the walled levels — this was everything Paul would call kitsch, but to her it looked like rice-paddies she'd seen in Laos — all this a woman had done.

— I think it's crazy what that girl said at the funeral.

Imagine she and Suraj never broke up.

Obviously don't tell him this — don't be mental. It's not like Suraj hasn't thought about it. Look at how he looks at her.

But she's thought about it too, lying awake sometimes, with the alternative timeline, an autumnal montage playing out on her ceiling in Paris, soft tones, amber evenings, accordions.

They were sixteen when they met, in sixth form. Neither of them were from the lower school, but both came from the outside: Hannah from a Catholic grammar, Suraj from a failing comprehensive. They noticed one another immediately, and admitted this two years later when they started going out: Suraj told Hannah he thought she was crazy (because green hair), and Hannah told Suraj he was so clever (because good memory).

They hooked up at one of Aiden's parties. He had this thing back then of imitating the Great Gatsby. Suraj and Hannah couldn't stop laughing in his house, even with all the grown-up things like cocktails and cigars, God, they were fucking seventeen year olds in tuxes! Imagine that!

Their relationship was one summer long, between sixth form and university. It was super fun, getting drunk and going around Birmingham, getting high, talking shit, laughing so loud, all the books and poetry and art they'd make, dropping T. S. Eliot lines here and there all drunk.

He wrote her bad poetry and she kissed him. He knew it was bad, but he hoped that she would think it was simply too clever for her to really get it. Anyway, it was most of all just amazing to give someone something. It was the incredible rush of being seen. Being seen as a poet.

She just wanted to kiss him.

They agreed to break up before uni, but the separation, though planned, constituted Suraj's first heartbreak, and Hannah pitied and hated him for this. It was the first time a man told her she lived in a separate emotional universe (like they think *their* universe is the only one, the primary one, the one everyone else lives in), and the first time a man told her she was deceptive.

He said: you tell me you love me sometimes, but then you don't answer my calls.

She didn't say: just why the fuck are you calling all the time anyway?

She said: hey look I'll call you later OK?

Even if she wanted to call and she forgot, the next day, Suraj in London would imagine her fucking every guy in Manchester.

You should have heard the phone calls: him basically crying, her with the sounds of actual fun behind her, background noise which forever entered Suraj's experience of jealousy. *Other people* having fun, *other*

people having sex. He alone, at Goldsmiths in London, and she in Manchester, with other people, all together having immense fun.

But, people believe what they want to believe — they don't believe you when you tell them you want to call. They don't trust what you say.

In Paris, in bed, the moonlight fell across her face, or so she imagined, and there they were, holding hands on the Left Bank. He had a job, somehow — writing — at a startup or something, and he'd come home from work, like her, tired, but they'd spend the evenings in their little apartment, cooking, making love, or going out to bars and dancing, and then returning to make love. She kept all of the poems he wrote her, and from time to time read them, smiling, but not at their content.

Something Paul never told Hannah: he was first trying to get together with her, and not Judy.

He'd actually been to the school and then moved into the sixth form, and when Hannah joined they became friends pretty much straight away.

He had only one class with Suraj — politics — and it was actually kind of embarrassing how little Suraj understood about global power. Anyone can be against the Iraq War — it's easy. But why? What are your reasons? War is bad? Ah come on man, grow the fuck up.

At the church service, he looked at Suraj and Hannah, then at Aiden, and then at the body. He took out his phone to write an email to himself but he forgot immediately the feeling he was trying to describe. At the reception, he wasn't able to remember if he'd ever actually been in the conservatory before.

It's a bad day. The worst day.

After he realised Hannah wasn't interested (and, to be honest, she was actually quite dumb), he started dating Judy. They'd sit in the common room on Wednesday afternoons, when everyone else was doing their mandatory extracurricular thing, to do philosophy meetings. It was just the two of them, but they had to call it something official. Just two of them at 'The Sixth Form Philosophy Club'. Mr. McDonald checked on them and made sure they had papers and positions to defend — even though it was just those two in the room. The thing was, they were both serious about it. Flirting also, obviously. But they were both committed to philosophical ideas. Not just basic stuff, was there ever a non-selfish act, was incest OK etc. No, what was required to ensure reliability in event-recall? What can be said for conceivability and possibility as related concepts? Can there ever be such a thing as reliable testimony? And one day she wasn't in the room, and Paul experienced the most exciting text exchange he'd ever had.

Hi! Where are you? J

He typed.

In c room. Where u?

He waited. It buzzed.

Come outside by reservoir. Got spliff. Suns out.

Yeah? But what if McDonald comes? Maybe come back? Also: no more credit.

Paul, the sun's out, I want to kiss you.

That summer belonged to them too. Suraj and Hannah kept going on about their thing — yes, fine — but Paul and Judy had so much more. On such a more developed level — intellectual, and not just fancying each other, or whatever. They had a *connection*. They exuded a kind of power. Judy and Paul had parties, did things adults did. They made cocktails, had guests round Judy's house, told everyone to come outside, it's still warm. They kissed and made love in a connected, meaningful way which they hadn't realised was possible.

They liked: Bob Dylan, Piper at the Gates of Dawn, Israel, Negronis.

They liked: going to the park, smoking spliffs, hanging with Hannah and Suraj, making love.

They liked: arguing about philosophy, Rupert Brooke, talking about clothes, taking the piss.

Neither of them would say it, but that summer offered a kind of view onto the future. Clichéd, yep, but that feeling when you're so happy, you believe it will always be like that. Although they spent days just drinking and going to the park, it was a feeling that both of them legitimately felt: that they could truly make something of their relationship: that they were going to stay together when going to uni, even though Paul was at Oxford and Judy at Edinburgh: that things would last this way, that it would be summer forever. They kissed and Judith told Paul she loved him. They kissed and Judith told Paul to come downstairs for dinner, her mum had made macaroni and cheese. Paul and Judy kissed and went to the park.

Paul doesn't really remember that he tried to get with Hannah first, and her life is a bit sad — no no, good that she's happy, but Paris, tough stuff really. Big cliché. But everything feels cliché today. Everything has a direct-to-TV-movie feel to it.

When Paul and Hannah got to the reception, before they went in, they went to the cornershop to get a couple of cases of beer, a bottle of gin, some tonic, some wine.

Jesus how cliché, to be here again, buying this shit again, going to Judy's house for another party.

Jesus.

What a fucking mess.

When the Provost from Oxford speaks, Suraj feels guilty for the first time. He knows he'll write all this up into the novel one way or another — assimilate small details into a scene: the huge felt banner hanging across the ceiling saying 'God is Love and God Loves You', the sad little local ads pinned to a cork board in the entrance.

— What's it about? asks Paul.

This is on Lily's patio.

— Uh well it's hard to explain, it's kinda conceptual at this point I guess. There's this table or desk in someone's house — just in someone's living room, covered in shit, receipts, papers, books, glasses, cigarettes, dinner et cetera.

— Right, says Paul.

— And the narrator is this distinct, separate ironic voice hovering about the table, going through the objects one by one, explaining how they came to be. And each has a long, detailed, kind of twisty-turny story in it, so at the end — you — have this — composite — picture of the life around the table. You know — you see exactly who these people are.

— Ah OK. Sounds — sounds good, says Paul.

Suraj shrugs, puts his glass against his temples in turn, and then drinks. These days are the worst, cloudy summer days. He felt fat. He always felt fat. He felt his tits. God — they're so big. So *warm*. Should he go for a run? Should he have eaten that thing just now? That sugary thing — that green Arabic thing. Is that woman Arabic? She's black. God Lily's got strange friends.

No. Come on. Don't do this.

Don't let that happen. Don't try to impress Paul. Don't bother with telling him you think Judy might come to represent Jung's pure feminine ideal. If Suraj tried to match him on an intellectual level, Paul would just wind him with a comment and it would take days for him to recover, like when he casually said that thing about it being pointless to go to crappy universities like Goldsmiths and Manchester — you know, *come on!* it's not like everyone can get into Oxford.

No. No no no no.

Focus.

Be here now.

Not to do this was precisely the idea. What Jung says: it's not Paul, it's in you, it's your shadow. It's everything you yourself feel but can't confront: you are the person judging on cleverness.

And remember: even though Paul makes Suraj feel inferior, stupid, pathetic, pointless, etc. it was only because — and this was the important thing — Suraj let him.

Suraj says:

— Yeah it's difficult, plots always sound shit when you have them just laid out: Hamlet is a guy who spends two hours not killing his uncle, you know.

— Agreed, said Paul. Fully agree, your plot sounds shit.

— Let's talk about something else, says Suraj. What did that girl mean at the service?

— Who that mental girl? Fuck knows.

— What's her name? May?

— Fuck knows.

— How could Judy not leave a note? Wouldn't you want to tell everyone exactly why you were doing what you were doing?

— Yeah. But obviously I don't think she knew *exactly why*.

— It's just odd. I just get the sense I don't know her, says Suraj.

— Yeah.

— You don't want to talk about it? asks Suraj.

— Oh no, sure, I want to talk about it. Sure. I just don't know where you're going with this.

— Well, where I'm going is: why did she do it?

— Fuck knows, says Paul.

— Let's change the subject then, says Suraj.

— Been watching any good porn lately? asks Paul.

— Oh God. OK, my plot does sound shit, said Suraj, but look how shitty most books are.

He doesn't say: plus it's not like real-life has a good plot.

He doesn't point to the garden.

— Tell me about it, says Paul. How about this for a plot? Where I live, in Dalston, a bunch of super rich people move into the area because it's super cool, right above the fucking clubs, and then complain to the council they're too loud, so the clubs get shut down. You should write about that. Better than this fucking table thing.

Just focus: people arriving, cutlery against plates. It could be a barbecue or a wedding party.

Aiden telling a joke to some people down there. Don't lower shoulders, don't apologise.

Focus.

— You gonna get back on Facebook? asks Paul.

— Well, OK, about this, said Suraj. Jung says, the closer you come to individuating yourself —

— Ah Jesus, please no. Facebook. I asked about Facebook, said Paul.

— Nah not right now man, says Suraj. It's too distracting. It's crazy, people write such bollocks on there. It's all performative. Nothing authentic. And — especially Hannah.

— Oh I know what you mean, said Paul. Like someone else we know, eh?

Paul nudges Suraj, but Suraj ignores this.

— There's something really — you know, it's like looking at the Daily Mail or something — just the headline is enough, you know, just one word is enough to piss you off.

— Oh for sure, says Paul.

Suraj was too hot. Paul got his phone out and kept on talking.

He wanted to say about Jung: the more respect you will have for ambivalence, the more truly individuated you are.

He wants to say: what's the point in always trying to align people's perceptions of you with the reality of your emotions and spirit?

He wants to say that just the fact of your being alive is a continuous and beautiful statement against boredom and fear.

No for real he wants to say this. But instead he puts his glass to his temples and then drinks his water.

What the Provost said:

— Judith Gibbons was an exceptional student, for whom the entire college mourns, faculty and students alike. Judith came to us from the University of Edinburgh, where as many of you already know, she excelled in the philosophy department, going from Bachelor's to Master's with ease, and then onto Pembroke College at Oxford where she worked on the Philosophy of Mind. Her interests were clear to everyone, and her choice of topic for her thesis suited her perfectly: testimony, namely the epistemology of testimony. That is, how do we come to understand and believe things other people have told us? As the Provost of the college, and chair of the department, I can only say what a tremendous loss she is to our university and our discipline.

Hannah told her parents Judy killed herself.

The other way sounded so weird, committed a crime, committed to a cause etc. As if you can un-commit to it. She couldn't bring herself to say Judy *committed* anything, even though at the reception, a few days later, she thought Suraj was being a drama queen when he said he tried to say 'I'm sorry' to Lily, but the words just wouldn't come.

Judy killed herself. Silly thing, she got herself killed.

Mum and dad were ready to help, obvs. Super ready. As was Uncle Philip (as was his new wife). Like they say, Hannah's so delicate, so sensitive — you know, she writes poetry too — imagine that, the poet in Paris!

She projected her old bedroom in Birmingham onto her bedroom in Paris: teddy bears, The Smiths posters, Tibetan flag, the hologram of the depressing past superimposed onto the present. She only moved to Paris to get away from all that in the first place. All that English rose, delicate, sighing, lonely shit. But every time she goes back, her parents and everyone else just assume the worst from her. That she'll just fall apart. That the English rose will just wither. That she'll, like, write a poem or something. There was one poem, once. It *was* successful — but it was once! — in Birmingham, and it got published in a *school anthology*, but what the hell, it's not like she does that shit now, in Paris. She's twenty-five. She can't be sixteen forever. Just look at these hips.

When was the funeral again?

Paul said it was easy enough to take a day off here and there since law firms don't actually require you to be there all the time. But hotels do, and it's not so easy to maybe take five days off in five or ten days' time so Hannah needed to know — which was it?

When were they burying Judy?

Why was it so hard to be sure?

Aiden couldn't say.

Suraj said he needed money for the flight.

Hannah didn't remember the world map on the wall until she got to Birmingham, her tiny half-socked feet on tip-toes on a chair so she could circle Lake Victoria. Dad said it was bigger than Wales. Imagine that!

— What did you say to your mum? asks Hannah.

They're at the reception, on the patio.

— I just told her one of my friends did something stupid and I needed to come back home for it.

She never met Judy.

— Never? Asks Hannah.

Aiden, from the kitchen taps on the window and from behind the glass, signals tea to Suraj and Hannah.

— No thanks, mouths Hannah.

Suraj shakes his head.

— God Aiden's so *obvious*, says Suraj.

Hannah gently taps him on the arm.

Suraj smiles and shakes his head.

— You should be a bit more delicate, says Hannah.

— Why? asks Suraj.

— Really? Why? You haven't been in Berlin *that* long you've forgotten basic manners, says Hannah.

This is what he hates about England.

Just how weird English people are.

Even though he's from Birmingham like everyone else, he knows for sure he's not like these nice-nice English people. Berlin has taught him freedom and euphoria. You *can* leave your job and your home and go out into the world and become what you want to be. You don't need to hang back and be the guy people think you are: a nice guy, a bit quiet, a bit nothing. Go be a writer, work for an NGO, talk to strangers, live near the Tempelhofer Feld and go out and party, but also write, and also the main thing, *feel free*. God, these English people. So nice, so polite!

Mom always makes up shit. Remember that. That's why you don't trust the world. Remember what you figured out, you just want to *be seen* by her, as you are. Mom was worried, she had an illness. Mom was scared, the house is falling apart. Her sister is not talking to her, God, move back from Berlin and get married! Like these two things have anything to do with one another. She's manic people are going to leave her, or nothing is ever good enough. Get the house tidy, tidy, tidy, people are coming over, remember to tell them that you work for a big company, not this politics thing in Germany. Don't tell them you're a writer.

That's why you never trust yourself; because of mum.

How can you believe what other people tell you? How can you believe what you tell yourself, more like. How can you believe the testimony of your own thoughts?

He gets up in the morning before any of his flatmates and he sits at the desk and he tries to write. Sometimes he imagines Paul laughing at the book, but he tells himself, no no, not this. Focus on the page, the words, not the people in your mind. But it's too late. If he hears that voice, he can't.

He goes out and finds dark bars in Kreuzberg with ruined furniture and talks drunkenly in bad German to people about getting to know yourself, deeply, truly. So what if they laugh sometimes? It's their problem, not his.

Every now and then he worries if it's just the euphoria of breaking away from mom and England that's carrying him, not the desire to write. He reads Jung, Defoe, Eliot, Han Shan. He detects similar psychological struggles in their words, and writes this in his diary, and he feels happy enough to go out and discover again the whale-tail kites rising and sinking over Tempelhofer Feld. And even if that day he hasn't done any writing, he's free enough the next day to wake up and try. The next day, before anyone else, with green tea and a banana, God, he tries.

And then this, in this garden. English people with their little rules, their little politenesses, their surfaces, their little offering each other little things.

Through the kitchen window, Hannah can see a world map pinned to the back wall, and it is weird how Lake Victoria is bigger than Wales. She says:

— I suddenly can't remember what Judy's voice was like.

Before Suraj speaks, Aiden comes into the garden with a tray full of teacups and announces that biscuits are on their way.

The firm's latest initiative combined two operational strands under a catch-all term: Culture. Deliver a series of public lectures, delegate all sub-critical public-facing duties to non-managerial staff. Culture as in formalising Hesiod-Smart's one-hundred and sixty-five years of unspoken tradition into company-wide practice. Culture as in projecting this to the public. This was a big deal. Obviously management said it would enhance transparency, employee accountability, get more grad applicants in etc. and, get this, management quoted *HR Expert* magazine's take on it as a 'minor revolution in organisational reform'. Obviously, there were emails straight away headed 'more pointless bullshit'.

Paul was chosen to lead the culture assault, and present the *Thought Points Lecture* for June: 'The ethics of legal accounting'. Personally recommended, the pensions and accounting superstar — only twenty-five and already earmarked for partner.

But in his office, Paul was distorted, distracted, hot, lagging. There was a drag in the electric field of his vision. He wasn't getting things done, and the lecture wasn't finished. The bosses had noticed this, even before he got the call from Aiden.

In the church, before the coffin was brought in, he checked his work emails. Nothing new — even though this was *the* Friday he was supposed to be delivering the lecture — nothing new, and he'd been dropped, for sure, for some future projects. They thought, obviously, he was just trying to get out of doing it. He could confirm his situation with a photo, but imagine it: sending your bosses a photo of a coffin fuck's sake.

At the reception, Lily comes over to Suraj, he tries to say something but he doesn't, and she tells him to go talk to the family having a party in the tent a few doors down — since, actually, they're Indian, and they might understand Suraj better?

Paul laughs. He's tired, but he laughs. Felt tired for ages now, actually. He lights up another cigarette and it's a bit like when Judy used to roll him one, but it's not really like this. She had beautiful hands and she'd roll them up so quickly, cleanly — but remember when she cut her

thumb deep? Fuck. And he had to push her out of the way of the falling kitchen knife, and force her hand into the sink so the blood could go somewhere, and his mouth was still full of carrots, and Judy wasn't crying, just shocked at how much blood there was.

- I have a strange feeling, says Paul.
 - Strange like how? asks Suraj.
 - Strange like I have no idea why Judy did this. Strange as in I don't get it at all.
 - Yeah, and it's strange what that girl said, remember. We're not to feel guilty because there's more to it.
 - The way everyone's going about their business, it seems like there's nothing to it, says Paul.
 - My God, yeah, maybe that's precisely why no one's mentioning it. Because there is something behind it all.
- Paul's attention vanishes into the distance. His hand touches his pocket, feeling for his phone. Suraj takes a moment to appreciate the quiet. He's relieved he doesn't have to say anything. Paul might take the piss out of him for anything he does say. What the hell did Lily mean with that Indian comment? Why couldn't he get his words out to her?
- Suddenly Paul speaks:
- When's the last time you saw her? I can't recall mine.
 - Who Judy? says Suraj. God I don't know. Now I just feel super guilty I didn't see her more. You know what I mean?
 - Not really, says Paul.

It's weird to have yourself drawn.

This is Hannah's feedback to the life drawing class she's just joined in Paris.
It's not like being photographed, because when that happens, you're still you. When you're drawn, you're as the other person sees you. It's weird.
Life drawing (Thursday evening), five rhythms (*Cinq'ua non*, Saturday morning) and a book club (first Monday evening of every month).
She does what she wants.
She has her routine.
No one gets in her face.
First you sign in, make sure the staff know you're there, and then check your diary. Ensure the General Manager knows what's coming up that week and that day. Prep yourself around the schedule of the hotel — big dinner reservation in the restaurant or sports team staying, for example.

Obviously whatever your rotation that week (it doesn't matter, make sure it all runs), you take care. Maids, laundry, good. Go to the dishwashers — are they working or just like talking, how's chef doing, do the reception staff need anything, who didn't turn up that day.

Make sure the logo is visible at all times.

Whenever Hannah thinks about it, it is kind of funny where she's ended up. It's not like it was *the plan* — she just wanted to get away, smoke and go clubbing, so it is funny to end up in Paris on a long-term basis. And she doesn't do that anymore — smoking yes, OK, sometimes weed still also — but no clubbing, and definitely definitely no poetry.

It's funny that she's the Assistant Manager of a Boutique Hotel in Paris at twenty-five. Funny in the way she sometimes eats *moules frites*, and listens to Django Reinhardt. Funny, but not really interesting.

She empties the *cafetière* into the sink, the muddy water swirls down the drain. Next door again with the trumpet. Always first thing in the morning.

She has a slice of melon, then a cigarette.

She's not that into dating right now. No big reason, just prefer being with friends atm. Tired of being bullshitted around by guys also. Look, it's just so much better to be with people you care about, rather than just like randoms.

And there's routine. A lovely routine.

Even the funeral has a routine: bring the body out, the priest speaks, people go up and read, everyone cries.

But this is a weird routine.

No one knows what they're talking about. When the priest goes up and says Judy's spirit is being kept by God and so on, it's nice — you know, *maybe* — but it's not like the priest knows. *He's* never died. How can anyone believe *him*?

The last time Suraj saw Judy: London, September, last year, before he went to Berlin, her boyfriend Oliver's place. Paul was there too, sitting with Oliver, loudly talking about some director. Suraj felt low. Judy was outside on the phone:

— OK. OK. OK. Dave, Dave. Safe. Dave? I gotta go. She said. I gotta go. OK. Yeah. Love you! Bye. Safe Suraj!

Suraj slid the screen door open and stepped out into Oliver's garden.

They hugged, and Suraj asked Judy for a cigarette. She told him he looked like he'd lost weight, and Suraj calmed down. He told Judy about a girl he'd been seeing. Judy said she thought it was cool Suraj was dating — it made him seem so much more so grown up. Suraj responded he wasn't too sure what she meant but then he lied about liking Oliver.

— Yeah he's a good egg, said Judy

— Is it serious?

— Serious how man? she asks, blowing out smoke. I love him, if that's what you mean?

— That's what I mean.

He will adjust this memory to ask her why what was so special about Oliver in a future hangover, but in real-life nothing happened. In real-life he was distracted by gin, cigarettes and the cool air, distracted by the idea that there *was* something about London in summer, distracted by his need to impress Judy and talk about Israel, and Judy joked that she would go over to Hebron and build a house they could visit, and Suraj laughed, even though he knew there was a joke he wasn't fully getting.

— How did you guys meet? asked Suraj.

— Ah he's a student too, but here in London. No. Not good enough for Oxford like me, she laughed. *You gotta be cool, you gotta be calm, for Pembroke College! You gotta be tough, you gotta be strong, for Pembroke College!* she sang.

They drank first in the flat, and then took Boris bikes South because Suraj knew a bar still open near London Bridge — Belushi's, which sucked, but it was open and where else was there to go?

They drank and danced in Belushi's for an hour or so before Paul got bored and demanded they either go to a club, sit on the street and drink or pick up, and he and Oliver went outside to smoke while Suraj sat with Judy on a couch and she shouted at him:

— There's something I've always wanted to ask you: What happened with you and Hannah in Amsterdam man?

Oh shit. How long had they all known? They'd all been laughing at him right? Now and since it happened — oh God. That's years. The caravan in Utrecht, that funny hostel park outside Amsterdam — when he and Hannah were eighteen, before they went to university. Suraj promised to take Hannah's virginity — something she said she wanted — but for three nights he couldn't perform. Oh God. He was the laughing stock of the entire world. Oh God.

— What did Hannah say? he asked.

— Nothing, man, said Judy. She just said, look — she just said nothing happened. You know, I thought you guys had a fight or something. She said she was really excited to have sex with you but then it didn't happen. Was it a fight?

— Ah she told you that? I didn't know she told you that.

— Forget it, said Judy. Just wanted to know. Sorry.

— Guys, said Paul — come on let's get the fuck out of here. This place is fucking horrible.

They cycled over to Paul's place in Spitalfields. Paul promised that he had some stuff left over from a date he'd had and then, as night lifted, with Judith alive and well, laughing with her boyfriend, they did coke off Paul's breakfast table, grey skies over the city, broken glass in the sink. And then Oliver cried because he said to the three of them: I honestly sometimes just feel like I am a fraud you know, and I'm not good enough for Judy, you know, and Judy hushed him saying no, no, Oli, baby, no, it's all good. Suraj and Paul smiled at one another, and Paul shook his head as if to say, man what a fucking pussy.

Oh God.

Suraj is going to talk to Lily's Indian neighbours.

Oh God, oh God.

The state of this.

Suraj has seen stained-glass Hanuman doors before, but God, here, in Hall Green? This is a posh area. People don't even do this in Handsworth anymore, but here? Even mom would think this was too much. Honestly what the white people must think, big bright monkey on the door. At least they didn't drape the house in lights. But bhangra. So loud.

Indians are so embarrassing.

It's a full twenty minutes before he gets back to the reception. A full twenty minutes and he can't really explain what happened. How those Indians behaved and why. They said they didn't care if there was a funeral, today was their daughter's wedding. Street full of flash cars. That's Gujratis for you. They take the piss out of Punjabi people, but then they go on and play Punjabi music and show no respect. Punjabis — *Sikhs* — would show some respect, for sure.

Why didn't they send Aiden for this? He's so sensible. God.

Actual dark clouds — not even a pathetic fallacy — and yes, the Indians, right on cue, have turned the music up. Thank you very much. Now Suraj is going to look like a total prick. He has to explain this to Lily now. When they lowered the coffin and Lily and her two sons went up to it, Suraj thought the bunch of flowers hitting the coffin's top — that hard, sudden thud — was the worst noise he ever heard. But now, those people are playing Punjabi MC, and no, this — *this* — at a funeral, God, this is the worst thing he's ever heard.

He wants to say: Sorry Lily, it got super awkward somehow. They're just scum. Real trash. People like that — they shouldn't be allowed.

But he doesn't get a chance to speak to Lily.

Everyone is in the living room. That girl who said that thing at the Church (is her name June? April? Augusta?) oh God, avoid. But hang on, really, *everyone's* in here.

The room is full, with May or April or whatever she's called standing in the centre, with her hands folded and her head down. Oh no, is she going to pray? Or a poem? Is she going to say a poem?

— What's going on? Suraj whispers to the guy next to him.

— Ah sorry mate. Yeah, well, Aiden just called everyone here so May could make an announcement.

— About what?

— Well, remember what she said at the — thing earlier? About how there's more to Judy's death than we all realise? Yeah. So, something big. I think anyway, seems big. She had to ask Lily if it was OK for her to do this.

— Oh shit really? What is it?

He shrugged.

Suraj stuck his head round to find Hannah and Paul — but they weren't on the couch, near the doors, anywhere. The screen door is open and rain crashes on the patio, but not into the room. Oliver's crying on the couch. Lily is not slumped anywhere, in fact, she looks OK, holding a photo of Judy in one hand, and a sandwich in the other. Does she even care?

No Paul and Hannah. Everything feels like it is and it is not happening.

Suraj needs to piss.

— Hang on, I'm going to the loo. Tell me what I miss.

— Uh. Sure, whatever, says the guy.

Ah this toilet. Suraj remembers this bathroom, the door handle.

He pisses, and there's some powder, he notices on the sink. Paul's been in here, then. Fuck man, as if you'd fucking do that at a funeral. What the fuck is going on? The bhangra is so loud, God. So embarrassing. The girl is downstairs revealing something about Judy's death, to the sound of *Punjabi MC*.

Where are Hannah and Paul?

Why would Paul do coke at a funeral?

Oh, that sounds like them. Is that them? Where's that coming from?

Judy's bedroom.

Oh.

Was she really a good friend of yours?

Maybe Suraj should say: no.

Maybe he should say: but I need material — I need to know what a funeral is like. Will a guy really say *let us pray*?

Maybe he should say: Mum please try to understand this is a difficult time.

But he says: You never listen.

She believes suicides are cowards. This is the Indian way: God has given you a gift, and when your parent gives you a gift do you refuse? Think of her poor mum, your friend Judy or whatever she's called, just think of her mum. No matter how bad it is, ah, your friend should have gotten through it. It takes guts. No matter what anyone tells you or does to you, you have to carry on. You just have to believe you are right and not believe what they tell you. White people never deal with problems properly.

— Guys? says Suraj. What are you doing in here?

— Hey Suraj, says Hannah.

— Sorry am I interrupting?

— Jesus no, says Paul, come in, we're not fucking. Shut the door.

— That girl is saying something about Judy. Should we go downstairs? asked Suraj.

— Shut the door, says Paul.

— What's up man? What's going on, says Suraj.

Paul is on the floor. Hannah is on the bed. Both have notebooks in front of them.

— Look what we found, says Hannah — and she holds up a notebook and then reads: Yesterday, Suraj came round to help paint the house. Was great. Funny and looked good. Hannah crazy for letting him go. We talked the whole day, ended up kissing, but nothing happened. Sigh. But felt erection so good to know it works at least.

Suraj froze. From downstairs, there was an echo of the rain, the bhangra.

Hannah continued.

— You should know, that there's actually an exclamation mark — *at least!*

— You're reading her diary? asks Suraj.

— Yeah, says Paul.

— You shouldn't! says Suraj.

— I don't think she's gonna mind, says Paul.

— First of all, God, it's so weird to be in here, says Suraj. Forgotten what it looked like. Second, for real don't read her shit. Come on let's go downstairs.

— She's not gonna fucking mind, says Paul.

Suraj doesn't say: I can't even picture her, Judy. What did she look like? He tries to find Hannah's eyes, but she's back reading the notebook. The bed, my God, the single tiny bed, the paintings of Krishna and Buddha, the postcards, the map of Israel, the flowers and ashtrays: all this Suraj sees, and it's somehow *wrong* to touch it — any of it. It doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel — pure.

Like an idiot he's standing in the middle of the room, between Hannah on the bed, and Paul on the floor, standing around like a complete idiot.

— Guys come on, let's go hear that girl, Suraj says.

— No, says Hannah. You know what, why don't *you* tell *us* what happened.

— Jesus Han, if he's going to be a coward, says Paul.

— I'm not being a coward — I just think it's wrong, says Suraj.

— You hooked up with her, says Hannah. I can't believe it.

— So? says Suraj.

— Were you ever going to tell us? asked Hannah.

— Well, read it again. Nothing happened, says Suraj.

— *Something* happened, says Hannah.

— Fine, says Suraj.

He hesitates. Should he sit? Should he take the bed or the floor? Hannah or Paul? Judy's books are everywhere. Books which remind him of her. Can they even remember what she looked like? *He* can't. He stays in the middle of the room:

— One day during uni holidays as I said, I came round to help paint the kitchen. We ended up just fooling around a bit — that's all. Literally nothing more. Come on guys.

— Yeah, well, says Paul, I find it fucking gross. Because the date she puts there — what is it? May tenth? Yeah, well we were still going out then. Two thousand and seven.

— No I don't think you were, says Suraj. She told me you guys had broken up.

— We broke up in July, says Paul.

— What? No, says Suraj.

— July.

— Shit Paul I'm sorry man. Shit I'm sorry I didn't know. Really.

— Well. Whatever, says Paul.

— It's also a bit fucking weird for me, says Hannah.

But Suraj ignores this.

— Guys, he says. Come on. Let's go downstairs. Let's hear what this girl's got to say. April or May or whatever.

— I struggled with the name too, says Hannah. It's a month isn't it?

— It's May, says Paul. And no thank you I'm getting enough big revelations as it is. Judy's got a whole fucking shelf of diaries — all this here behind me with the other books, all — all diaries.

Paul reads silently from the notebook in front of him, and then, just as quietly, goes up to Hannah on the bed, and hugs her.

Everyone's quiet for a few moments.

Everything is happening and not.

Does Hannah laugh? Since when does Paul hug?

Hannah laughs a little.

Obviously Paul's not trying anything with this hug, but why can't he be like this more often? It's obvious that he wants to be kind sometimes.

Suraj pulls a book from the window.

— Hey guys, says Suraj, look.

— Oh for fuck's sake, says Paul.

He and Hannah break off the hug and both sit on the bed.

— Look, says Suraj.

He shows them the cover: Testimony, Volume I, Charles Reznikoff.

— What is it? asks Hannah. Philosophy?

Suraj reads.

— No. It's — it's poetry, I think.

— Oh Christ, says Paul. Veto. No thanks, put it away.

The three of them sit on the bed, the floor, alternate positions, stretch out, read Judy's diaries, as in a montage, as something that is happening and not, with the rain echoing and the bhangra playing, and still not much noise from downstairs.

— Listen, says Suraj: Listen. This is from uni times — when Judy was in Edinburgh. Have been thinking about how fake people can be. So many dickheads at uni in lectures/ seminars etc. People pretending to understand. It's OK to say I don't get Aristotelean logic. It is hard. Why not just admit it? Truth so much easier. Girl in my seminar — Sara — really reminds me of Hannah. So fake and pretentious. Talking about how interesting Aristotle is — *so interesting* — but then see her off her face in a pub, tits hanging out — and I think, oh my fucking God, fine get drunk but why do have to pretend about Aristotle? Just like Hannah — totally fake. Talking about Browning/ Plath/ Eliot just

to get some clever boy to pay attention, and then drunk, fucking him. Like — why bother? Why not just fuck him in the first place? Slutty. Sure he wouldn't care if you liked poetry or not.

— Really? She called me slutty? Oh my God!

— Slutty yeah, says Suraj.

— I literally — wow. I don't know what to say, said Hannah. I didn't know Judy had a problem with that. With my you know. With my behaviour I mean. She called me slutty?

They hear May's voice from downstairs. They hear bhangra.

The rain's stopped.

The clouds have broken.

There's no noise from downstairs, and then there's the noise of feet in the hall. Murmurs. The front door opens and closes. Lily starts wishing people a safe journey home.

— Here's one too, says Suraj. Sixth form ball yesterday. Hannah wearing slutty dress. Suraj fat. Paul looked good. But he got drunk and I couldn't dance with him. He can't dance anyway. Danced with Dave. Dave is actually really hot. He invited me back to his — gave me number. Fuck it why not? Paul waking up hungover. Stinks.

— Jesus. What the fuck, says Paul.

— Don't take it too hard, says Suraj, she could have just been joking.

— Yeah not taking advice from you right now thanks, says Paul.

— Hm, said Suraj.

Suraj pulled out a photo from the notebook. It was hard to make out.

— What's this?

Hannah took it from him.

— Oh. That's — that's Dave. Naked Dave.

They turned to Paul.

Hannah:

— Sorry, man.

— Well — it's all a long time ago, says Paul.

— Paul, you can be sad, says Hannah.

— I'm not sad. It was a long time ago.

Hannah laughs a little again.

— It's OK Paul, you're allowed to be vulnerable, she says.

— OK. Listen, says Paul, I found this from one of those diaries over there. She basically writes about philosophy, and then the rest is just stuff about other people. It's weird. It's like I didn't even know her reading all this.

— Paul, says Hannah.

— It's like I know these one or two things which make sense about her, says Paul, like Israel, here she talks about wanting to go to Israel and I get that. That's her. But the rest. It's so fucking weird and so fucking cliché.

— We don't have to read any more, says Hannah.

Paul:

— Listen: Suraj, Paul, me met up other day. Oliver too busy to come — supposed to be introducing my new BF to these guys — but I looked like a loser, just showed up alone. Paul late too so spent thirty minutes explaining stuff to dumb, smug Suraj. He's so embarrassing. Couldn't say anything interesting in response. Just looking at me like an idiot. Thank fuck Paul came when he did, at least he's clever. Suraj sitting there with sad look on face. And I think — God! You're such a user! You're so going to use this talk back when you're with your friends, talk about Plato etc. Act like you came up with it! User! Social climber. Must be sad to be so lonely.

— Jesus. She hated us, says Suraj. She fucking hated us.

Paul smiles.

Hannah:

— Paul and me hooked up. What a mistake. Big mistake. Been years since we dated and I cannot go back there now. He cried after! Said he missed me. Loved me etc. So pathetic! Get over it man. Just a fuck. We're both lonely. Oli not around so much right now. And yes feel bad but whatever. Paul told me to live with him in London. God. Like I want to do that. Honestly can't stand him right now. He is so weak, amazing he wants everyone to think he knows — he's so clever etc. But he is just weak. Weak and scared. Like the other guys at Oxford — just status conscious. Still a boy. Miss Oli. Oh Oli! I'm so sorry!

Wittgenstein: Testimony must be public, and cannot be part of a private language.

Hume: Shared testimony is tantamount to knowledge, but unreliable.

Plato: Knowledge: justified true belief. Testimony is not justified.

Kant: On the contrary, very justified: so long as everyone speaks the truth at all times.

Downstairs.

Humid, house almost empty.

Paul in the garden on the phone, the other two in the conservatory. The evening became blue, a TV movie, grainy, full of broken intensity. Paul was shouting, and the bhangra was off.

— Can you believe Lily made me go talk to the Indians? said Suraj.

Hannah laughed.

— Can you believe they played that music so loud?

— I don't think they believed it was a funeral here, said Suraj.

— Why not? Asked Hannah.

— Ah I reckon Indian funerals are much louder, said Suraj. Lots of wailing.

— This is such a fucking weird day, said Hannah.

He moved to hug her, and she let herself be hugged. Hannah thought they might kiss. Instead, Suraj sat down opposite her.

Paul was shouting into his phone. Lily and Aiden came to tell him the neighbours were complaining, and took him through the screen door inside.

— I am at a funeral! I'm not lying, for fuck's sake! shouted Paul.

— Paul, at this point, I think it's best if you came inside, just for the moment, said Aiden.

— Aiden they think I'm lying! They think I'm just trying to get out of the lecture!

Aiden ushered Paul into the house.

Now it was just Suraj and Hannah alone.

Suraj ate a samosa, imagined he was at a wedding, imagined the barely perceptible smudges on the window made by Judith. He remembered the worst sound he ever heard.

— You know what, said Hannah, I'm really glad to be back in Birmingham. I never thought I'd say that.

— More than Paris?

— So much more. It's weird, I have been here all day, feeling weird and horrible and all I can think is — man I really want to go home, have a bath, relax and eat tomato soup.

— Tomato soup, asked Suraj?

— I know imagine that! said Hannah. Just homeliness. You know. Pure chemical orange homeliness. All I can think is you know, home. Even the word: home. I want to go sit in my bedroom and try to see if I can name all the African capitals without looking like I used to do.

Suraj smiled.

— You know I was looking into that Testimony book by that guy, Reznikoff. He made poems out of people's court transcripts.

— That seems creepy, said Hannah.

— Really? To me it seemed like a good idea, said Suraj. Make something beautiful out of something horrible.

— You know Suraj, when you're not being arty, you're a really good guy.

Suraj smiled.

— Is that a way to get me to stop talking? He asked.

Hannah smiled.

— Knock knock you two.

Lily appeared in the doorway:

— Sorry to disturb, but I just want to explain a little of what May just said right now. You know, everyone's really upset. Really angry. Some of them at Judith, which is fair — but I want to explain.

Hannah and Suraj glanced at one another. Do they say they weren't in the room? That they were upstairs reading Lily's dead daughter's notebooks? Poor Lily.

Suraj:

— Honestly it's fine. We have no idea really, we weren't even in the—

— No no, it needs an explanation, said Lily. You two and Paul, both such good friends of Judith you all deserve one. I know I'd like one too.

— What happened? whispered Suraj.

Hannah shrugged her shoulders, put a finger over her lip.

Lily turned from the conservatory doorway and looked out into the garden. She faced the dark, blue evening. She breathed in.

Lily turned back to face Suraj and Hannah, and spoke.

— I want to be able to explain why Judy did what she did. I want to be able to explain not only why she took her own life, but why she did all those other things — those things May was describing. But you don't know what it's like. Trying to explain something like this. You don't know what it's like trying to explain why someone you love did the things she did. What it's like to explain something you don't understand.

— Oh Lily, said Hannah.

She rose from her seat to hug Lily.

Lily spoke into Hannah's shoulder:

— But it's hard. She is my daughter! My little baby. You know! Everyone sees this person, this grown up, who's done these things — but I just see the girl who brought a cat home one day because it was a stray. You know?

— Honestly, Lily, you don't have to, said Hannah. Would you like to sit?

Lily let Hannah go. Hannah sat back down. Lily breathed deep.

— No no, please, she said, I'll just stand in the doorway, get some air. You know I see the way people have looked at me today. They're surprised I'm not crying. They think I should be in pieces. I see their judgement. But you know, they don't know what I feel inside. They don't know.

— Mmm, said Hannah.

— They must think I'm angry at Judy, or that I don't care. They must say Lily's not upset because of all those things Judy did. But they don't know. *They don't know at all.*

Suraj whispered to Hannah:

— What did Judy do?

Hannah put her finger on her lip again.

— And anyway, said Lily, this is also, if anything, good for my spiritual practise, to explain all this. Let me try.

She took a breath. She did not look like she was about to cry.

— How do I explain, said Lily. At school, there was this boy. Jonah Patterson. He was tall, maybe taller than you — much better built.

— Hey! said Suraj.

— He was. No offence, said Lily.

— Hmm, went Suraj.

Hannah whispered:

— You owe me like two-hundred Euros by the way.

— So, Jonah? said Suraj.

— Jonah, said Lily. He was incredibly good at football — the whole school knew it. All of the girls fancied him — plus he was the only black boy in our school, which was a bigger deal then. Exotic, you know. There was this added mystery to him. Anyway, one day, we stayed behind to watch them play — it started raining, and hitting the grass really hard — it was very heavy, in fact, really torrential, like today, actually.

— Mm-hmm, said Hannah.

— And everyone, the opposing team, our school, even the coach, our science teacher, were stuck in the mud. Only Jonah was running on top of it, like this —

She made her fingers run in the air.

— And some time later, we heard he was leaving our school to go to Aston Villa — they did an assembly for him.

— Oh cool! And did he make it? Said Suraj.

— That's the thing, said Lily. A few years pass and I never think of him again — until I run into one of his friends in town, some guy called Andy or Antony I think. And we talk about the old days, how's he, how's she, all that. And then finally comes Jonah — did he make it? Well it turns out the answer is no — he went to Aston Villa, and instead of becoming the next big thing, he fell into some gang and started selling drugs! You know it occurred to me you kids may have bought some stuff off him even — oh, don't act surprised, I've known all about you four for a long time. Nevermind. Jonah, he

got caught, went to prison, developed an addiction, became a Muslim, got off the drugs, got fat and is still living with his mum in Aston.

— Oh that's shit! That's fully shit. I was expecting you to say he made it, said Suraj. Poor guy, he's probably from a background like mine if he's from Aston. Man. Makes me love him more.

The house made its night noises. Suraj continued:

— But no, I get it — I know what you're gonna say: who cares if he's successful if he's happy right, and Islam and being fat makes him happy. Easy.

— No, said Lily, no. Jonah was a drug dealer and a gang member, he did bad things and went to prison. So he's a bad man. But Jonah also converted, became a Muslim, and got fat and he's happy and doing good things, so he's a good man. Or he's a Muslim and he's thin and unhappy, or a drug dealer or fat and whatever. Maybe Jonah is a bad person, maybe not. How do you know? How do I remember him? Yes, he dealt drugs. That's Jonah. But this is also Jonah—

She quietly did the fingers in the air again.

The wind starts, as does the bhangra.

Suraj and Hannah watch Lily's fingers, see what she sees, and with the future delayed in the grainy dark, they look on in awe at the beautiful young man run like Hermes above the mud in the rain.



Gurmeet Singh

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