

THE RECRUIT

1 The Proposal

My grandparents came to London from Pakistan in the 50s and settled in Tower Hamlets. They edged their way in. It was, of course, hard. I was born in 1987 of their fourth son and he always wanted me to be a policeman. My grandfather and my mother had their doubts. But it was Dad's dying wish. So I gave it a try. With a good degree in Maths, I was assured by the recruiter at the Jobs Fair that a great career path in the Met stretched before me - or some such bullshit. I am 28 and still at the threshold of that stretchy path. Don't get me wrong - I'm fairly happy with my lot. There is no open hostility in the nick - and on the street it's usually the drunks who shout the obvious abuse. Most apologize when they sober up. I think I'd rather have the hostility because it *is* so obvious. I have done okay as a PC - my main achievement was nicking a garage owner - Pakistani - who was flogging MOT certificates. The Chief actually slapped me on the back and even smiled. Till then, he'd never spoken or looked my way. His was one of two approaches I face; either I get ignored like an unfashionable bore at a party - or - people go out of their way to be nice. Both ways say - you are not one of us and never will be. I bet some think I've got my head on the mat and my arse in the air for Allah every quarter-of-an-hour; they would be amazed to know I enjoy a pint of London Pride and am a Gooner. Often I'm sent to deal with crime in the Muslim community - to put the complainant at ease or the suspect of his guard. These things are usually chickenfeed; the Big White Bobbies deal with the Big White Villains. I suppose it's like a WPC dealing with the rape victim or the new widow; needs sensitive handling. Send Aalim; he's got the right skills; sensitive; no chance of being accused of racism if the copper is copper-coloured. I suppose it's understandable considering how the Met was shredded after Steven Lawrence; part of me smiles in resignation at the way things are. I could raise a stink like somebody ethnic did in the next patch; only the tea-lady talks to him now.

There's a white villain in Hammersmith with the reputation of being untouchable; slippery bastard with a clever, oily lawyer. I'd love to nick him, but dream on, Aalim. I am Aalim Chaudri; nice guy, easy-going, level temper, obedient, hard-working, looking-to-please. They call me Ali, of course. Who knows, one day he might get promoted - if he doesn't complain. So, who is this guy sitting opposite and what does he want? Against strict station rules, he's smoking, tapping his ash into a green canteen saucer. He's studying a file. After a period of silence - he'd told me without looking up *sit down* - I realize with surprise it's my file. He's non-uniform - in fact a scruffy git. He's got a pillared red jumper on and faded jeans; I imagine having to describe him in court; he's early forties? Overweight and pale - bad diet? Too much chair, too much office air, too little fresh? His hair is light brown nearly ginger and sparse, combed back. Chubby face. Where would I expect to see him out and about? Outside a pub on the windy pavement, fag and pint in hand. I smile. Maybe a market trader, trying to flog books and Cds, looking miserable, freezing his balls off.

"You have an exemplary record, PC Chaudri," he announces in a surprisingly fine accent. The face and the voice don't go. "You should really make detective."

"Wow! Thanks." I say with a little too much enthusiasm. Which means, I'll believe it when I see it. He frowns. He detected the sarcasm.

Having written up a report, I had been on the point of leaving the station for home. It was past five. I had just crept past the open door of the Chief's office when he called me in.

"PC Chaudri - Interview 3 - now!"

Bollocks. Arsenal kick off at 7:45.

“Can’t it wait, Sir?”

“No. Urgent matter. Somebody important” - he looks at the ceiling - “wants a word.”

“What about?”

“Don’t know. He’ll tell you.”

Or he won’t. *Sit down* - as if I’m in a classroom. I’m obedient. I sit.

“Right. It’s getting on. I won’t beat about the bush. How would you like a change, something really worthwhile?”

“Worthwhile? Like what?”

“Can’t go into detail at pres. Just need to know if you’re keen to move on and up. If you’re happy here, you’re no good. I’m looking for a clever, ambitious, brave and cool-headed Asian officer. Above all, clever. You got a Maths degree, 2.1. Which mosque do you frequent?”

“I don’t. I stopped at Uni.”

“Why?”

I shrug. “It’s bullshit.”

“You don’t mind missing out on fifty-odd virgins then? How do you vote?”

“BNP”

“I don’t do funny.”

“Labour.”

“Why?”

“My dad did. Said he’d come back and haunt me if I didn’t. Habit.”

“Can’t think why anybody bothers. Says here you’re single. Got a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Gay?”

“No. Are you?”

“Do any risky sports?”

“Did some rock-climbing at Uni.”

“So you have good nerves. Smoke?”

“No.”

“Drink?”

“I enjoy a pint. After the game.”

“Worn glasses long? Are you long-sighted or short?”

“Long. A Levels ruined my eyes.”

“What bothers you most?”

“Pardon me?”

“Global warming? Bankers’ greed? Racism...cruelty...intolerance....crime?”

“Cruelty. Stupidity.”

“Isis?”

“They’re crazy.”

He lights a fag. Second since I sat down!

“If this lighter was a wireless detonator and you could blow the bastards up, would you press it?”

He flicks the wheel again to light it.

“If it didn’t harm anybody else, sure.”

“What if it did and some child close by was killed? But what if ten more were saved?”

I blow out my cheeks and shrug. “A tough one. Somebody planning to nuke ‘em?”

“Yeah - with Trident next week.....great value for money.....Ever done any acting?”

“No....yes! Nativity play. I was a shepherd.”

“Ever thought of becoming a Christian?”

I shake my head in amazement. “Are you some kind of priest?”

“Just answer the fucking question.”

“Hoy! You can’t talk to me like that.”

“I’ll speak to you any which way I want Chaudri.”

I lean forward to to stand but something brakes me. He is testing me, provoking me. I’m easy-going, right? Level-tempered. Why dance to his tune? He’s watching me for the first time, not head in my file, and I see how thin his lips are and small his mouth is. Like a hamster’s arsehole. The joke makes me smile. I sit back, arms folded, in friendly defiance. He flicks through a few more pages then back to the first and puts his elbows on the table, round head in hands. He stubs the ciggie out.

“Christian?”

“Nope.”

“Christian values?”

“I was a shepherd wasn’t I?”

He almost smiles. He lights another fag!

“They’ll kill you!”

“Something has to. So how did Dad feel about that? The nativity? You, a good Muslim?”

“No prob. He was a tolerant guy. Like all good Muslims. Jesus was a prophet for Islam.”

“So. Those psychos cutting off Christian heads and stoning non-believers have got it a bit wrong then?”

“They’re not Islamists - I hate that word - they’re nihilists.”

“Nihilists! Impress ive! So. How do we stop them?”

“Pardon me?”

“Reason with them? Bribe them? Wait and see if they grow out of it and come crying back to Old Blighty?”

“Kill them. No choice. They’re making it hard for our people. Race hate crime is up. Can hardly believe it hasn’t kicked off in Burnley and Leeds, etc.”

“How?”

“Race riots. A hot summer might do it. But that’s what Isis want - a race war..”

“So how do we stop them? Bombing is hit and miss. Soldiers? SAS? Politically impossible. And militarily. Iraq is the size of Western Europe. Iraqi army makes the Eyeties look formidable.

Can’t do Syria - where the brain of the beast is - Parliament not got the balls.....”

“Hopeless then? A few thousand loonies rule the world. How many trillions do the Yanks spend on defence? A sick joke.”

“Pretty much. D’you care?”

“I TOLD you!”

“Okay, thank you,” says he closing my file and stretching. “Fancy ‘em to beat Leicester tonight? Might not be that easy.”

“That’s it? We’re done?”

“Yep. You’ll hear if I’m interested.”

“You? Just you? Is it some kind of race liaison job? Promoting race awareness among Met recruits?”

“You have a nice evening. Hope they win. I’m a Leeds United man.”

I take my leave but as I do, I glimpse him reaching for his phone. I hang around and stick my ear to the door.

“Think we might have our man,”

How does he know I’m a Gooner?

Arse win 2-1. A close call. I’m eating a take-away about eleven when I get a text.

IF U WANT TO GO FURTHER, TXT YES

How has he got my number? Without hesitating, I text YES. There comes straight back this mysterious text,

I AM UR FAMILY LAWYER. MEMORIZE 07977 932407. DO NOT SAVE. SAY ZERO, WHATEVER HAPPENS. USE YOUR BRAIN. NOW DELETE BOTH.

I do as I’m told, watch Newsnight for a bit, turn it off in despair and, intrigued go to bed.

2 Consequences

A great bang. Running footsteps on the stairs. “Armed police! Do not move!” The light goes on. A hood over my head - I am turned onto my belly and cuffed. Then lifted up and rushed downstairs. The cold of a February night hits me. I am naked. Doors slam open and I am thrown onto the rutted floor of a van? I bang my eyebrow. The pain is sickening. The van drives off at speed. “Where are you taking me?” I say for the first time. Silence. I remember Liam Neeson in a Taken film and begin to count - one and two and three and four...

After fourteen or so minutes, at breakneck speed, lurching left and right, the van descends as if falling off a cliff and stops. I am grabbed and carried out. The hood comes off, the powerful lights blind me. “Fuckin’ Jihadi.” I am pushed forward. The dazzle eases and I see I am in a concrete basement. There are black Marias, police cars and three blue uniformed bobbies in front of me looking worried. “Fuck did you have to hit him for?” “Accident,” growls a voice behind me. “1,2,3 - Lift.”

I am picked up under the armpits, put down in the empty lift and turned. Five special officers in black balaclavas with guns slung around their necks, in black fatigues..... The three bobbies cram themselves in next to me - someone’s breath is really smelly. Fag smoke over bacon. The doors close. A kindly face - he’s a sergeant - looks round as we glide up. “You’re okay now, son. Expect you want a cuppa. We’ll just get you into a paper onesie and take your details, then you can go back bed.”

“I’m a serving police officer,” I manage.

“So I hear, son,” says he very sadly. “So I hear.”

Say zero. First thing I think when I wake. Then the throbbing pain. My finger probes it. It is very swollen, no blood though. *Use your brain.* He must have known this would happen. Planned it. I’m a Jihadi. Why have I been set up?

SAS? Politically impossible. The storm in my head is like the one I get after I have too much to drink. Not a hangover. Just a blizzard; snippets of conversation, flashes of images, guilty feelings, bad memories from the night before.....and all the way back to childhood. The whitewashed wall is depressing. I turn over and see a bloated me reflected in the stainless steel toilet. What time is it? No watch. Nothing, just me in this blue paper onesie. Disposable.

“What you want for breakfast?” Half a face at the hatch. Blue shaving shadow.

I sit up, dizzy.

“Tea, coffee?”

“Black tea, no sugar.”

“Bacon sandwich?”

“Don’t eat bacon, I’m....”

The half-face sneers and the hatch closes. Then it flashes onto my inner screen. FAMILY LAWYER! 07977 932 ?? 407.

“I do not want this man to represent me,” I say in the interview room. “I have a right to phone my own solicitor.” I mean to give the bastard a good piece of my mind.

The Duty Solicitor, a man of fifty-odd with a grease spot on his red silk tie does not look sorry. He mutters something, snaps his briefcase too, gives us all a stiff back and goes.

“Who then?” asks the detective, a grey man with saggy eyes. His left index finger is missing at the first knuckle.

“I have a number. I have a right to a phone call.”

“Okay. Here.”

He pushes his mobile over. I dial.

“Hello, Paul Jayson.” It’s his voice. Keep your temper under control.

“Mr Jayson, I’m Aalim Chaudri. Your firm always dealt with my dad’s affairs. Waseem, remember? I’ve been wrongfully arrested. I’m at Bow Street. They want to question me but I’m saying nothing till you get here.”

“Well done,” he whispers; then louder “I’ll be with you as soon as.”

I push the phone over and sit back. The grey detective’s colleague, a slender man, mid-thirties? in a sharp navy blazer, bright-looking, eyes too big, like an alien, for his narrow face - doesn’t belong here? - sniffs and raises an eyebrow.

“Good memory for numbers, have we?” An Oxbridge voice. He deffo doesn’t belong. I’m saying nothing.

“Only, if you asked me to come up with a mobile number - even my own - wouldn’t have a clue. What say you, Detective Inspector? What’s your solicitor’s mobile number?”

“Not a clue, Sir.” Broad Essex. Romford? Ukip? Ex - BNP?

“So why would *Mr Chaudri*” (- deliberately? - and worryingly not PC) - “carry it around in his noodle, unless he knew he would need it? Unless he thought he was about to be arrested?”

“Good point, Sir. Suspect, ain’t it?”

They look at me sarcastically. I’m saying ZERO. ET frowns and tries again.

“And you’d think, him being a serving officer, he would at least say good morning and whatnot - or I’m innocent, this a colossal balls-up. But not a peep. Only to send poor Mr Starbuck on his way. Looks like strategy to me. Now, why would an innocent man need strategy?”

“Quite. You’d think he’d be playing hell-up. Sits there cool as a cucumber.”

I’m pretending to be away with the fairies. This Extra Terrestrial is Special Branch, I reckon. Has something rotten in his nostrils; a gentleman condescending to enter the foetid world of suspicion and guilt; frequents fine-dining restaurants; flat in Canary Wharf; member at Lords Cricket?

Fuck him. Sneer back at him. He wearily puts the top back on his pen. I am walked back to my cell to wait.

“Sit down and just listen.”

I have been taken to a small room. Behind the table sits “Jayson” transformed. What a suit and tie can do for a street bum!

“You’ll have to stew here until they’ve been through your house and computer” - he condescends to look up properly from his papers - “good God, who gave you that bump?”
I’m saying nothing.

“Did you resist? Did they hit you? Come on.”

“Floor of the van.”

“Stroke of luck!”

“Yeah. I’m such a lucky man.”

He’ll lay it on thick outside, he says. Reporters waiting. Not only a crass case of Met incompetence, but a racist assault on top.

“PCA job. I’ll involve everybody I can think of - short of the Archbishop of Canterbury.....no, *and* him.”

“Okay. So will you now tell me what this is all about?”

“Not today. Wait till it’s matured a bit. When we’re up and running.”

“My mum is poorly. She’ll worry to death. It must have been on the news.”

“Yes, top story. Your name, neighbours on camera, amazed, quiet street, quiet chap - a policeman, God help us! Pictures of your nice door stove in, police lugging stuff out, pavement closed off.....quite a drama.”

“And the star of the show fucked.”

A rap at the door. Are we ready? Yes, we are.

“Let me do the talking.”

And can’t he do indignation! His client is a serving policeman of exemplary conduct and record; someone up on a cloud has made a colossal error; he isn’t a betting man, but if he were, he would put money on me being the wrong Chaudri whom the spooks have had under surveillance. We all look alike, don’t we?

“And now - because of gross incompetence, the real villain will have no doubt put two-and-two together and gone to ground.”

ET listens in a defiant but scarcely concealed pained silence as each blow lands. The DI looks from one to the other, a non-combattant out of his depth. He has placed his good over his bad hand.

“We are double-checking, then checking again,” says ET at last. “As you rightly say, National Security is paramount. Why does your client refuse to speak?”

“Have you seen his eyebrow? He’s been in shock. Dragged out of bed naked at four and punched. Would you feel like talking? I’d see you in hell first!”

“It doesn’t smell right,” says the DI weakly. “Doesn’t add up.”

ET looks at him as if he doesn’t smell right.

“We shall be holding PC Chaudri for the statutory 72 hours,” says he, “in case other evidence from searches etc is turned up. No point applying for bail - no judge worth his salt would let him out, in case he goes off the radar.”

“You wait till I get outside!” retorts Jayson. “Can the Met afford another scandal? You have blundered big time and the whole world’s going to know.”

I am asked a few desultory questions and photos of defiant brown faces are pushed under my nose. I do not respond. ET has put in just the right amount of interest to save face and is now looking at the clock. Soon I am walking back to my cell where a suitcase of my clothes is waiting. I begin to feel human again. Jayson comes in and assures me he will go round to put my mother’s mind at rest. He’ll be a policeman in this scene - my colleague. Your son has been the

victim of a hoax, Mrs Chaudri - everybody at the station is disgusted - there will be exoneration, compensation and a month's leave.

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But it is not a month's leave. At his granite-faced sternest, the Chief tells me a week later that I am suspended on full pay.

"Someone has made an allegation against you - that you assaulted an officer in the exercise of his duty. Counter to your allegation. He's suspended. You're suspended. Police Complaints decision. Not mine."

"Till when?"

He raises his eyebrows and his hands as if I'm asking who will win the Cup Final.

"But how could I assault anybody with my hands cuffed?"

He looks at my purple eyebrow. "Head butt?"

"I was hooded! Couldn't see a thing."

"Lucky guess? Anyway, Chaudri. Out of my hands. PCA will contact you. Go home. Take it easy."

"Take it easy? It's my career."

Clever Jayson hasn't foreseen this. Take a swing at the Met and even if you miss by a mile, they'll floor you in retaliation.

Or was it his idea?

*

"Have you seen this morning's Indy?" says Jayson over the phone. "Go out and buy it."

I walk to the corner. There's my face on the front page. Vindictiveness is the theme, the revenge of the useless Met. **WRONGLY ARRESTED PC SUSPENDED.**

The Sun is more succinct. **BOPPED COP SHOPPED.** Bottom of the page, below some X Factor hoo-ha.

"Did you leak it?" I scream down the phone.

"No, not me," he swears.

"This is a nightmare."

"Don't worry. Whatever looks twisted now, will straighten up in the end. It's a windfall, believe me."

*

3 The Deal

He passes me a cheque. It is for two million pounds. Neither dated nor signed. We are sitting in a post-war semi in a very tastelessly furnished lounge. Great orange and brown whirls on the carpet are making me feel queezy; the corderoy sofa has those bloody awful rests for bloody awful idle fat feet. Blue smoke drifts, rises and sinks in the paltry sunlight. He had sent a car for me which drove in a maze for nearly an hour south of the Thames in districts I don't know. The windows were of darkened glass. I got tired of peering out in the end - and the driver wouldn't speak. He had driven straight into the garage of the house.

"I want you to work for me, Aalim, as you agreed two weeks ago. Recognize him?"

He puts the photo down of the man most fear and despise. A man clad in black weeds, masked, holding up a machinegun. I utter a name and he bobs his head in that exaggerated manner which people use to cast doubt on obvious answers.

“Yes and no. The identity the press gave out some time back is one they were leaked - by us. It was just to make him feel safer and, we hope, make a mistake if he thinks we’ve got him wrong. JJ draws attention away from this guy.”

The second photo shows a very handsome, open face, friendly, intelligent, kind.

“This guy is even more cold-bloodied than JJ. We code him as Brain. Northern Syria based. Somewhere near the Turkish border, or could be Raqqa. JJ does the chopping, Brain orders it; he buys the weapons, steals the oil and does the logistics; he negotiates the ransoms; does the accounts; plans next steps. He’s a graduate of the LSE, 1st class Maths degree, worked as an actuary. Smart as paint. Mad as a hatter. The hawks in government would give their back teeth to pinpoint a drone onto his hidey-hole if we knew where, but Parliament says no of course.”

“How do you know all this?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“I want to know.”

He stubs out another fag, nibbles a biscuit and finishes his coffee. “Just a tidbit, then. Until a month ago, we had a source in Syria, Uni pal of his. He was uploading snaps of Isis people to our satellite. We have quite a gallery of villains for the glorious day when they come home. We mean to prosecute, build a special nick for ’em - and throw away the key. Trouble is, we’ve lost track of the leading men. They move around. If we can lay hands on this guy and his lieutenants, it would be a great coup. They are still recruiting here because they’re on a roll. Putting ’em on trial, depriving ’em of their black mystique could turn the tide, save lives, damp down those English Defence League prats, cool things in Syria and Iraq and pacify the Izzies et alia. It’s win win win win. The Yanks were crazy to assassinate Asama. Made a martyr and victim of him. We will make *criminals* of ’em.”

“Hold on. This source you had...”

“He was unlucky. Killed, we reckon in an air strike when he strayed over the Iraqi border. It’s gone dead his end, so we assume the worst.”

“So you want me to take his place?”

“Of course, nobody would know it was down to you that we tripped up - even stopped Isis, but you would retire early a rich man, a man content to know he had done his country, his people and the world a favour. Fifty years on, you would be recognized under the FoI act. Nobel peace prize?”

“Yeah, probably posthumously if I go the same way as your other guy. So, you deliberately fuck up my career without my permission and then let me choose stagnation here or being useful over there. How ethical is that?”

He produces a gizmo from his pocket and presses a switch. I hear myself say “No, kill them, no choice. They’re making it hard for brown people here.” He puts his phone under my nose and I read IF YOU WANT TO GO FURTHER TEXT YES.

“Well, I wasn’t exactly put fully in the picture,” I protest.”And Arsenal had won. I’d had a couple of pints.”

“Your career will not be fucked. If you decide not to go ahead, the PCA will suddenly decide you have no case to answer. Ten thousand quid compensation will be paid. A full apology will be issued by the grovelling Chief Constable. Within a month people will say *who??* In ten, fifteen years you might make DS. This whole drama was scripted for your cover-story; the

abused PC; victim of English injustice forced to resign in disgust; the PC radicalised by his gruelling experience who rediscovers his roots, his faith and commits himself to the cause; who, when the heavies raid his house again - this time with good reason - has flown the nest and disappeared fuck knows where; who, despite a watch on ports and airports turns up in Turkey and slips across the border, all with our help of course.”

“But they would suspect a copper - even an ex with a grudge.”

“They suspect everybody. The best tale is the truth. You can say hand on heart how it felt when you were dragged bollock naked into custody. No phoney i.d. to get muddled, no phoney background to get tripped up over. Now you believe in the Caliphate; you want to hoist the Isis flag over the Palace yourself and shaft the queen. Britain is corrupt and beyond redemption. You want war.”

“But won’t they want to put me to the test in some way?”

He reached over and lit up his nth fag. Yes, he admitted, taking in the blue and blowing out the grey smoke, that would be the tricky bit - apart from the threat to life and limb; mine.

“Let me tell you something now though. If you tell a soul about this - even your sisters or your mum - you will put them in danger and yourself. This has never happened and its consequences never will.”

Part of me - and I loathe this part - keeps saying Isis has a point. Britain *is* corrupt. I loathe its nasty press and its gross obesity in brain and body. One aspect of gluttony is never discussed; the blight which fat white pasty ugly people impose on the eyes of everybody else. It can’t be discussed because it would be upsetting. I have to smile when EDL types, foul, fat and full of beef burger, onions and beer sneer and hurl insults and stuff at the slim Asians in the Anti-Nazi League we are kettling across the road. The PM talks about British values. I would love to ask him what British values were behind the attacks on those shores of my ancestors in name of Empire? I saw on the internet that of all the countries in the world only 37 had never been invaded by the British. The British think they are the best, levellest, calmest and fairest in the world; their atrocities, unlike those of the Nazis and other fuckers have not been registered or have been downplayed. Why did Mum and Dad come here? For a “bettter” life, meaning more money. I see newsreels of the forties and fifties. People look thin and wiry. There are lots of bikes and few cars; other way round now; everybody ate rabbit because they were hungry; now it’s fine dining. But we have stopped hanging people on flimsy evidence. I have read that everybody’s pay packet is borrowed from the rest of the world. We live on tick. Who knows and who cares? If another bank advert tries to put its arm around me and pull me inside for caring service, I shall fucking scream! Yet Children In Need raises squillions. I know this all is shit and confusing but who can I blame and should I complain when millions are starving? Should I just buy the Daily Mail, despise the wreckers and scroungers and believe? People are passive and easy-meat. Why are we not angry that Gazprom - okay, it may be a trivial example - is still allowed to sponsor the Champions League while Putin attacks the Ukraine and after a bunch of his drunken disciples shatter an airliner and kill its passengers? Why have we lost our moral bearings? Where is the public anger which helped free Mandela? In such a void, the amoral void of apathy, bad things can happen, because the demons are tempted to take the ground deserted by the angels. I imagine the newspaper and advertising magnates in their exclusive clubs whispering into the ears of the politicians - we’ve softened up their brains, so over to you! Is there a conspiracy to make the people more stupid and compliant? Shall I get a meerkat and / or a Brian toy? How does that square with improving education? Is there a Committee For Decreasing The

Astuteness Of The Body Politic And Increasing The Power Of The Utter Bastards which sits once a week somewhere in Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire? Probably not, but why does it feel that way? When the mega-rich go to their lofty windows and look down on the world, what do they think about the poor easily-seduced thirteen year old girls in those far away derelict northern towns which their power, indifference and wealth has helped to blight? And how disgusted am I that Pakistani men twice and three times their age have no qualms in abusing their callow bodies - with the self-excuse that they thereby keep their own virgins pure. The hypocrisy - in every quarter - makes me want to puke. This Sceptic Isle - why do I wish to defend any of it? Because there are, I keep telling myself, nice, simple people here in the main .

That was a brainstorm brought on by the nausea and anxiety I am feeling. The earth is like a sphere wobbling out of control. The next earthquake may shatter it. Before I was driven home Jayson insisted I watch a video. That man in black had calmly without one second's hesitation turned to a good man from the north of England who had left everything behind - friends, job and family - to bring aid to Syrian refugees - and cut off his head. The blood leapt up like a fountain and stopped immediately. The face turned instantly grey and the eyes half shut. He squints at me and says I sacrificed everything for people I did not know. And you?

Jayson seemed to read my mind. He gave me a week to make it up.

I am at my elder sister's house where Mother lives upstairs. She insists on coming down to see me. She refuses to pay for or put Mumtaz to the expense of a stairlift - "when there are crippled women in the villages back home crawling round to prepare food." She has heart failure but you would never know to look at her. She might be Mumtaz's elder sister. I unpick her desperate hands from my shoulders and sit her down. I repeat what I have said over the telephone; I must go out to Syria. To do a little good. I swear on my father's life that this is the truth.

"The newspapers have ways of finding things out. Whatever they say about me being gone - and no doubt they will think the worst - you know the truth because I have told it to you. You know I never lie. And if they ask, tell them that."

She sobs. She will never see me again. I tell her that she will and she will be proud of me.

"How can you do this to her," demands Mumtaz, great eyes ablaze, in the porch. She has her hands hidden by her folded arms out of reach.

"I will tell you everything when I get back, sis. Till then, do as I have said - with the press I mean."

"There is more to tell! I read your face like a book!"

I kiss her on the cheek and she unfolds her arms to embrace me with a shudder of grief.

"There are some wicked people out there, sis, but you must believe I am on the side of the angels."

Am I? I drink more than I do normally. I do not usually drink at home but am making an exception. **AM I?** Images and flashes of thought tumble in my head like the three rollers of a fruit machine. Good and evil are competing, now 2:1, now 1:2. Come on! you joined the police to foster and defend goodness. The people you deal with are the exceptional ones - the cynical, the unconscionable, the parasitic - and the weaklings who simply do not have the power to resist temptation. Why would God lead us into temptation? That's the devil's job. The majority are moral; the moral majority closing their eyes on the Unpleasant and hiding behind the Mail and

their curtains; goodness afraid to speak up and show its face; descendants of those who never locked their doors now shelter in their cabins behind five-lever mortice locks even in daytime. There are Jihadi brides out there, Aalim, of fifteen, sixteen who were seduced by the website; auctioned off, teeth inspected, like camels. There are women stoned to death for looking wrong and others for not knowing their Quoran. There are children your niece's age dying of hunger and disease in the rubble. And Chelsea are so far in front, Arse can't catch them. In disgust at my shallowness, I pour away what is left in the beer bottle. I text OK to Jayson. I shall, I have decided, submit my resignation.

*

My close friend Gurjit and I were at school together and we looked out for each other. The picture which Jayson has just shoved under my nose makes me gasp. It is of Gurjit pushing open the door of a pub - my local - near the Emirates stadium. The faint gleam makes me realise the photo has been taken through a car window.

"Old friend of yours," says Jayson, licking a cigarette paper which I have watched him fill expertly and roll.

"He was."

"Pity. Befriend him again."

A fellow Gooner, ex-Sikh, and a great guy. He had been active in the Labour Party and Anti-Nazi League, but in the spring of 2010, after a major fall-out with a local New Labour councillor following Clegg's decision to go in with Cameron, he had resigned. Our friendship had cooled, as if by tacit agreement, when I joined the police. I knew it would not be good for my career if it came to light that I was close to a man on the extreme Left; he knew it too. I had sold out to the Enemy. He never went that far in his criticism but it was in his eyes. We met up less regularly on match days. One July evening, he texted me to say he wasn't renewing his season ticket, he was getting involved with the SWP. SWP? I resisted the temptation to counter his jibe that I was wasting my time joining the police.

"Send him this email," says Jayson, spitting out a strand of tobacco. He slides a piece of paper under my nose. "Your own turns of phrase, of course."

Hi Gurjit!

Long time no see. You saw I had a little difficulty, no doubt. Hands up, I was wrong, you were right. Am having a major rethink. Fancy a meet-up at the Pins? Name your time and day. Am suspended and am resigning so can make it whenever.

I look at Jayson. "What's the point?"

He looks surprised, almost embarrassed for me.

"Come on Aalim. Use your loaf. How come I have this photo of him?"

"He's on your radar?"

He claps the heels of his hands like a sealion. I tell him I wish I had a wet fish to slap him with.

He shakes his fat head. "Not my radar. Somebody else's. They keep the streets safe at home.

They keep a routine eye on people like Gurjit whenever VVIPs are on the move."

"People like ET?"

"Excuse me?"

“*They* I mean. That snooty guy at Bow Street. Special Branch? It was all a big act that interview, wasn’t it? You and him sat down and wrote the script!”

“That prat has as much idea of what I do and who I am as you do.”

“Come off it. You were probably at the same Oxford college. You talk the same language.”

“I can do lots of voices,” he says with a northern burr.

“So. Where are you from then?”

“Somewhere you never ‘eard of - well off the beaten track.”

“Somerset? Devon?”

With a look of disgust at the disintegrating fag, he stubs it out in anger.

“When you email Gurjit with news of a major rethink, however you want to phrase it, certain ears will prick up. One major fear is of an Isis / left-wing terrorist link-up. I think it’s bollocks but it’s their job to dream up shit like that and get gullible Home Secretaries to allocate extra funds.”

“Sheer paranoia!”

“They’re paid to think the worst. If the worst happens and they haven’t foreseen it, they’re in the shit. Heads rolled after the tube and bus bombs. They look for conspiracies and err on the side of caution these days. So, right up our street. It was easy to get them to believe the crap tip-off I gave them about you in my poshest voice.”

Now he slides a glossy photograph over.

“So, when you start attending this place starting the day after tomorrow, paranoia will go red alert.”

The building is familiar but I can’t place it. I look at him and shrug.

“You walk past it often enough. You’re a Gooner.”

Of course! It’s a mosque a couple of streets away from the ground.

“But it’s a ten minute tube ride and ten minute walk for me. There’s one round the corner from my house.”

“But this guy isn’t.”

It’s a photo of an imam.

“He comes across as a moderate - even been on the London TV News to pour oil on troubled waters. But we know better. Let him get close to you - but gradually. Play a bit hard to get. He’s bound to know who you are. Even if he forgot, your resignation will be in the news when the time is right. So, footloose and free you want to rejoin the fold. The rest will follow. I want to know the route-map he has in place for delivery of the followers.”

“What’s his name?”

“That’s for you to find out. If you go in all clued up and confident, he’ll smell a rat. Let him make the effort. Ask no questions, just give answers. Play shy and reluctant. Let him drag it out of you - how badly you’ve been treated, how guilty you feel to have trusted British fair-play and to have abandoned the true faith, how stupid you feel. But don’t lay it on too thick. Less is better. Can you act that out? Always bear in mind that quote from Hamlet “The lady doth protest too much””

I nod. He says we will practice as soon as he has been out to get some decent fags.

“How well do you know the Quoran?”

“So, so. Went to classes when I was a kid. My Arabic isn’t so hot though.”

“Better develop a patchy memory. You lapsed for a few years, don’t forget.”

He goes out for his fags, leaving me to think over what sorts of persuasive comments I could make. But I find myself thinking more about Jayson. His exterior is like a suit of armour. How

does he keep it up, this inscrutable act? Can I make him feel uncomfortable? Or is he too well practised? The front door opens and closes and in he comes, sucking contently on a fag already close to the filter. As soon as he settles I take him by surprise - I think.

“Been meaning to ask, Is this just a job for you Mr Jayson - or whatever your name is? What makes you tick?”

He usually ignores questions he has no wish to answer. For some reason - the pleasure of a good cigarette? - he responds.

“I get well paid and I’m good at it. That’s all you need to know.”

I shrug and shake my head as if disgusted. And keep staring at him.

“Look, if you expect me to come out with some bloody mission statement, forget it.”

He is still annoyed over the roll-up! Or perhaps he would love to tell me but protocol prevents it.

He is obviously astute, and a sarcastic comment he made about the Great British nuclear deterrent - of all things - is sticking in my mind. Perhaps we are closer in scepticism and opinion than at first sight we seem. I have a urge to yank on this lever to reveal the inner man.

“Well, you let something out about Trident which surprised me. Was it a slip?”

“I knew your politics. Was just trying to get your confidence. Forget it.”

How can I? He is my manager. I need a rapport with him like a footballer does. It isn’t just about the money or the winning. Briefly the words father-figure flash through my mind - whose fucking voice is that? I hate it when that happens.

“Why are you down this road, Aalim? You want to trust me but can’t? Is that it? Can’t you just be happy to know I think you’re a good investment?”

“No!”

“Look, I think highly enough of your ability to stake my credibility and reputation on you. If I’ve got it wrong, I’m fucked.”

“So, it’s really about getting the job done and your professional standing?”

He stubs out the fag in fury. “Of course it isn’t! Don’t be so childish. Self-esteem is one vital element - but a tiny corner of a bigger picture. We’re far from perfect and will probably get no better; we’re unhealthy, overcrowded, overwrought, exploited, unequal and have our intelligence insulted. But there are far shittier places to live and there are blessings to be counted. I can call in after work at any number of ethnic shops for any number of ingredients for any number of dishes. I can get a decent bottle of wine for a tenner and listen to a concert or sit in my back garden and watch the sun go down. I can afford Lords and Wimbledon. If I’m ill, I can get treated for nothing. Yes, there are stupid, narrow-minded people - always were and always will be. Our culture is a gaudy kaleidoscope. Those fuckers in Isis see everything through the wrong end of a telescope. And” - he bangs his fist on the coffee table - “I am fucked if they - if I have owt to do with it - are going to carry on ruining other people’s lives with their insanities.”

He is suddenly ashamed of himself. He takes a great drag on his new fag and asks if I am satisfied. He realises he has been provoked.

“Yes, Mr Jayson. That’s all I wanted to know.”

He gets hold of the ashtray and scrapes in the butts and ash which have jumped out.

For an hour we run through the same role-play, him as imam, me as reformed aspostate. From time to time he plays back what has been recorded on video and tells me to look less defiant and to sound less sure of myself. Afterwards, he sends out my driver for fish, chips and curry sauce and white bread and margerine. While we eat, we watch the whole video again.

“Make him think he’s got a potential recruit he needs to work on - that will make him

concentrate more on his own powers of persuasion and less on his natural scepticism about whether you're genuine. We need to play on his ego which is considerable. His weakness. So look and sound uncertain, unconvinced. Be angry - yes - but have reservations about commitment."

"I could mention my mum, her poorly heart...."

"Brilliant! Let him play you like a fish. Jump into his arms and he'll wonder. If he catches you after a struggle, different outcome. Now you've got a month reading homework. I want you to go onto these Isis websites and read what they're saying. Learn the lingo, get the feel, get the look. July 7th is D-Day."

"To go to Turkey?"

"No. We're months away from that."

*

4 Setting The Trap

I saw my old friend Gurgit in May in the Twelve Pins but it was not a happy occasion. Our reminiscing was not enough to keep us going and after an hour he said he was meeting someone. We parted with vague promises of getting in touch. As soon as he had gone, the fellow who had been reading the paper on a bar stool folded it up and sauntered out after him, leaving most of his half pint.

Time has moved on and it is summer - and hot. Wimbledon is into its second week. I have resigned from the police and a couple of tabloids have mentioned it on inside pages. Today I am to make my first visit to prayers at that mosque. It is July 7th, the tenth anniversary of the 7/7 bombings in London. After the minute's silence on the radio I go upstairs and, from the back of my wardrobe, drag out a suitcase which, over the years, I have glanced at now and then, and almost disposed of at one point. I lay it on the bed and unzip it. A wave of nostalgia sweeps over me. Inside, neatly folded, more radiant than I remember, are my white kurta, pajama and faqiyah skullcap which my grandmother had embroidered with blue thread. I remember exactly when I last dressed as a Muslim - at my College's A Level awards ceremony. My father, dying slowly of brain cancer, had looked on in tearful pride as I received my certificate. Three months later he had passed on and, thinking no kind thoughts of Allah for arranging the removal of such a kind, hard-working man at the age of 56, I refused to wear the outfit at the funeral; I wore instead, to the consternation of the imam and the brethren a hired black suit. Some members of the extended family had also frowned but not my mother who was outraged to have to stand at the back with her sisters, daughters, nieces and cousins, apart from the men whose grief might otherwise be tainted by unseemly thoughts of their charms. This slavish adherence to rules which had rankled more and more in my teenage, ultimately so revolted me that it caused my revolt against the Faith. Underneath the garments in the case - and I hesitate to lift them - sits my black Quoran. I take out the clothes with care as if they are fragile ancient weeds and lay them out on the duvet. Slowly I take off my jeans and T shirt until I am stark naked. I stare at my light brown body in the long mirror. I am over ten years on from that sixth form college boy but the mirror is assuring me that I have scarcely altered. The full beard which Jayson has insisted I grow and my longer hair are the only differences. Trembling with an eerie emotion, I step first into the pajama which although tight goes on fairly easily, and then lower the kurta over my head and watch it fall to just below my knees. Finally - and it feels like a coronation - I don the faqiyah and push up my fringe into it. I am astounded by my beauty. I am transformed. Nostalgia pierces my heart again and I sob and shake uncontrollably - for the things I have lost: my faith, my childhood, my

father. I weep for my poorly mother still grieving in dignity - and for my father's dying eyes filled with joy when I promised to join the police; for the dead-end job it became and for the disappointment I imagine him unable to bear in heaven; ultimately I weep for me and my terrible fear. But there is something else. I sit down on the edge of the bed and summon the courage to open that dread book. It falls open at a page where the apostate is condemned to death. I shiver and put the book to one side. A terrible guilt and feeling of disloyalty have taken their grip of me and do battle with my protests that, yes I am an imposter, but I mean to do good! - and that no rational man of charity would take issue with that end or argue that the deceitful means of reaching it is unjustifiable.

After a wet start it is a warm, sunny day and I decide to walk from where I live near Victoria Park to the mosque, about an hour away. In my gleaming white costume I feel a great pride in myself although my deep heart is troubled. I hear self-whispers of hypocrite and apostate but reply that I am working for a peaceful and generous Islam and that I am on a mission to restore it to respectability. As I walk along the busy streets I sense and see glances of admiration and when I am about five minutes away I pass a pub where I have spent many a happy pre-and-post match hour and cannot help but smile at the laughing drinkers, young men and women at the tables on the pavement. I am not however prepared for the reaction of one heavily tattooed muscular individual whose face is set in a scowl.

"Off to plant a bomb, Mohammed?"

Considering the date, this is utterly tasteless and I cannot let it pass.

"I am a man of peace, Sir, as most Muslims are."

"I ever asked for a comment," he sneers, flicking a fag at me.

I should have left it at that. "You asked a question, Sir, so an answer is natural."

He jumps up and grabs my cheek, digging in his nails. I fall backwards into a puddle, remains of an early shower. My kurta is ruined. I scramble angrily to my feet but my assailant has managed to melt away. Shocked and ashamed, a group of drinkers come to my assistance and a young woman begins dusting me down.

"The rotten -" I mean to say bastard but stop myself in time.

"He's not worth it!" declares the woman who is looking up at me with beautiful, earnest blue eyes. The lashes are heavy with mascara. Her hair is silver blonde. I can smell sweet wine on her breath. She is looking at me intently and I realise I have lost my glasses. A young Englishman steps up and carefully puts them back on my nose before retreating. The woman's face, clearer, is so beautiful that I am tempted to kiss her and she actually comes closer as if attracted by the same thought. A small tattoo of a spider's web on her neck stops me. She must see horror in my eyes and holds up her hands.

"He wasn't one of us. I mean, not with us, if you know what I mean. You're bleeding from a cut. Hold on."

She takes a pack of hankies from her jean jacket pocket, wets one with her tongue and dabs at my cheek.

"I'm sorry. He's not typical of us. Sorry. I've had a drink and it ain't coming out right."

"Don't worry. Those bombers on the tube aren't typical of us either."

God, I'm dying to tell her I would love to buy her a drink. She steps back and I cannot resist taking in the whole of her; her small pretty face, her tight, modest bosom, her tight faded jeans.

"My name is Aalim."

"I'm Zoya. My father is Polish...I don't know why I'm telling you that..... If you want to call

the police, here's my mobile. I can show you....."

From a deep pocket I retrieve my i-phone 6plus and she closes her eyes in smiling embarrassment. I tell her it's okay and that I'm feeling okay. I take the hand that has finished dabbing my cheek and try to shake it. It is the wrong hand - left - and I instantly feel silly. She laughs and begins to pump it. There is only goodbye left to say and I walk on feeling my wet kurta clinging to the back of my legs. I have to wait at a pelican crossing and glance back left to look at Zoya. Is she looking in my direction or at the fellow on the chair with his back to me? But there is more to see. Twenty yards away beyond the pub, a chavvy young man comes to a sudden halt and stares stupidly into a shop window. It occurs to me at once that it is a bridal wear shop. This confirms that Jayson's plan is working and I feel pleased to discover more than I am meant to know. ET is being taken in hook, line and sinker. I press the back of my hand against the wound and see a faint smear of grease and blood. Now the shock is wearing off I feel the pain - and wonder, curiously, in a flash if a merciful God, guilty about necessary violence and fury, spares with numbness the victims of unavoidable cruelty about to die. The red man turns green and, as I cross, the man at the distant window resumes his shambling walk. It occurs to me then - was that tattooed idiot also one of Jayson's men? Or would he exclaim with a drag on his fag, bonus, Aalim, bonus!! ? As the crescent moon on the roof of the mosque comes into view, I debate how to exploit it. Jayson smiles in my half taken-over mind.

But the decision to exploit is wrested from my hands. A combination of shock, throbbing pain, the stuffy smell of breath, feet and body I remember all at once from childhood make me swoon to my knees as I enter and I fall forward onto a prayer mat, burying my forehead into it. I am vaguely aware of hands picking me up and concerned voices babbling, some in foreign tongues. I am being carried again as I had been from my house but this time kindly.

When I open my eyes I am looking up at the imam whose photograph Jayson had shown me. He lays his small palm across my forehead and offers me a glass of water.

"Peace be with you my brother," he whispers. "You have been hurt? Who has done this?"

"A drunk."

"You have been attacked in the street? This is shameful. May God confound the wicked infidel!"

I see Jayson take a shred of tobacco from his nether lip and smile. I am in the stable looking down at the doll of Jesus Christ. A tear rolls down my cheek, an involuntary sob escapes me and I am weeping for my father who is smiling from the back of the school hall, camera in hand. Oh, but would he be proud of me now?

I cannot help but clasp the hand of the imam as if it is kindness itself. Jayson smiles and stubs out the rubbish fag. I am in.

I am sitting in a lovely white airy room. I will remember dark green potplants with burnt orange flowers. I think they are canna lillies. The imam is behind his desk and we are drinking tea. His face is serene and holy. He surely cannot be what Jayson says he is. He asks me if I am feeling better and I finger the plaster which someone has put on my face as I was sleeping.

"Yes, thank you. I was not hurt more shocked to be attacked for no reason."

He opens his palms and looks skyward, mumbling a prayer. Then he fixes me with his large intelligent eyes and I am whisked forward from playing the shepherd to playing Aalim Chaudri, dissembler.

"I think I would like to go home. Could you call me a taxi. I don't think "

"Brother Aalim. Stay here until you are well enough to go home. Eat with me and my brothers.

We have a goat curry.”

Brother *Aalim*. Bait I should ignore? How might he have found out who I was? My phone? The newspapers? I decide to maintain silence.

“Why did you decide to come here, Brother *Aalim*? Are you not from Victoria Park?”

Now I must give reasons.

“I am ashamed to say, Imam. Please call me a taxi.”

“Please, Brother *Aalim*, stay and enjoy our hospitality. You might wonder how I know of you. But we recognize you as one who has been punished severely and undeservedly by the unholy alliance of powers beyond our control - the police and the newspapers. You are *Aalim Chaudri* who was beaten and disgraced by the agents of *Shaitan*. You were a child of the mosque at Victoria Park who became misguided by those agents to leave and serve the interests of the cruel, the rich and the powerful - those with riches and no morals, men and women whom Allah will cast into eternal fires.”

He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes again in prayer. I tell him I am thirsty and ask for another drink. His eyes flutter open like butterfly wings.

“What brought you here, my brother?”

“Do I have to confess it, Imam? I would rather go home. It was a mistake to come here. Allah has shown me this by what has happened today. I should have been brave enough to swallow my guilty pride and gone back in shame to where I belong. This was a coward’s way out and I have been rightly punished by one of *Shaitan*’s agents.”

Now he takes hold of the tea pot and fills my cup. He is smiling.

“Allah has shown you the true way by guiding your footsteps here, my dear brother and I give thanks to him. He placed a slave of *Shaitan* in your path to provoke and tempt you to turn back. Did he have a white woman there with him too? An alluring woman to fill you with sinful thoughts?”

Surely this is a lucky guess.

“Er....Yes, Imam. Her beautiful throat was marked with a cobweb. I shuddered to see it.”

“Did you feel a lustful desire?”

I take a deep breath. “Until I saw the cobweb I was filled with lust. Was it a sign from Allah to bid me pause?”

He looks skyward. “Allah be praised!” he exclaims.

At once, I know I am acceptable. I have made an impact without any effort. He thinks I am and shall be his. All the rehearsals we have had will prove unnecessary. As long as I appear passive and suggestible. All I have to do is gradually give way.....*Jayson* be praised!

*

“I have a book to show you,” says the Imam a few days later, “To give to you.”

I manage a wan smile, while inside I am scowling, thinking it will be a book on themes repellant to me. He slides the book over and I recognize a white face which I have seen where?

on *Newsnight*? Over a plate of curried prawns ?

“You may have seen this person, Brother *Aalim* on the television,” he says, taking off his cap and shaking down his long hair to the middle of his back. “He is *Jones*, a gifted infidel and keen critic of the corrupt status quo which rules Britain. I urge you please read it,”

It is called *The Establishment* and the comments on the back page invite enlightenment and

indignation. This political book is the last thing I expect from a religious leader. I am confused for a second and then see the best response.

“I have little interest in politics, Imam. Why should you think I need to read this? I came here for renewal.”

I allow my voice to falter and avoid his stare.

“Why should you read it? Because it shows how close this country is to falling finally and for ever into the abyss which Shaitan has prepared. Read it and come back to speak it over with me.”

The next day, genuinely enlightened and indignant, I take the book back to him.

“You see, Brother Aalim, how corrupted the powerful are by their own greed? How ignorant and passive the people with their vulgar newspapers and television shows to distract them? Can this go on?”

I say nothing and look at him cow-eyed, waiting for him to teach me. It proves to be an interesting, uncomfortable lesson.

“Shaitan rules in their hearts. The powerful are obsessed with wealth; the powerless by gambling, alcohol, trivia, disfiguring themselves with inks and shopping. In the absence of their god, Shaitan has planned this. His victory is almost complete There are a few voices which protest - as this man Jones does - but Shaitan has sealed the ears of the many. Our brothers and sisters live in fear and disgust, surrounded by a depravity and ugliness which their grandparents and parents who came here did not foresee -”

“But Imam, my own father experienced much racism. It is surely better now?”

His eyes betray scorn and pity. Flickering, they study mine, as if gauging the distance he has yet to go with me before I am his. His hand tightens on the handle of the teapot and his brown knuckles whiten. He comes closer and looks pointedly at my cheek, and, with a dash of irony tells me that my wound seems a little better. I decide I must show I have understood the implication

“The man was drunk. It was an emotional date. He is not typical. The majority of the English are generous and tolerant.”

His eyes widen to question this. His face comes further into my own space and I retreat, looking at the table in confusion.

“They drag you out of bed, beat you, suspend you, insult you, force you to resign. The vulgar newspapers sully your name. People believe you are guilty because of your colour and your religion. Is this the behaviour of an enlightened and moral society?”

My face is hot with shame! He leans back satisfied, eyes closed, lips moving in prayer.

“What is to be done, Imam? I thought I knew things and my own mind. My career is gone. What can I do?”

He pours tea and offers me biscuits, ginger nuts. He tells me that Shaitan has corrupted Britain by design - by the will of Allah. And it will destroy itself.

“It grows so obese and drinks so much that the hospitals will fail. Its poor will rise against the rich before the rich grind their faces into the dust. It is in huge debt to the Jews and their allies and can never repay it. Who will prevent the collapse? The police? Weak and venal. The army? Drunk in their barracks or drunk in foreign places where they have no business to be. And sober, they go in pursuit of our sons and daughters.”

“Isis? You mean Isis?”

“They are the soldiers of Allah.”

“They kill innocent people!”

He studies my eyes in turn for signs and then opens the Quoran.

“What does the prophet say about the infidel?”

“That they should be killed. But -”

“The true faith can only triumph if it is as brave as a lion. Twenty determined believers will slaughter a hundred. A hundred will slaughter a thousand. These are the words of the prophet.” Reverently he closes the book, mumbling in prayer.

“We are surrounded by millions who believe in nothing. Not even Christianity. They are not even free-thinkers. Not even thinkers at all. Indeed, they are too lazy to think, preferring to mutter what the vulgar papers write. Are these proper people? I say they are as the dust on our shoes.”

“Then does Allah really wish me to go now into the Holloway Road and run amok with a sword? Kill old men, women and even children - infants in prams?”

To my astonishment, he reaches forward and fetches me a stinging blow with the palm of his hand on my healing wound. Before I can protest and rise to go he pins me against the back of my chair which falls against the wall behind me. He is on his feet glowering down at me.

“Do not DARE question the will of Allah and the sacred words of the prophet!”

Jayson tells me quietly to be calm. I breathe deeply.

“I am sorry, my brother,” he whispers. “But there are much greater matters to consider than the deaths of those who despise us here. We must prepare to flee the swamp before we are sucked down with the unbelievers. But we cannot flee unless we have a home to go to - as the Jews had in the aftermath of the war by the work of the imperialists in Palestine. Do you not understand? Our lions in Syria and Iraq are, even now as I speak, preparing a new homeland for our people. Who cared after 1945 that the Jews murdered Palestinians and who cares that they still do murder them? How many British wish us to be gone from here? Well, we shall go! Our nurses and doctors will leave these fat racists on their hospital gurneys gasping for breath! See how they like it then that we have gone back to where we came from! Do they think we would rather remain here in filth and decay of their backstreets if we have the chance to return? Your people came here, like mine, because they were too poor to stay in lands which the noble British had stripped of their wealth. We are as oil and water, we and the British. It cannot hold.”

I cannot help but express an obvious thought.

“But, the plan is to fly the flag of Isis on Buckingham Palace.”

To my surprise he laughs, the aspect of himself he has wilfully neglected.

“A fairy story to annoy the good readers of those filthy newspapers. But, who knows - maybe in a hundred years. But we must be patient as the Prophet tells us. Practise hadith, my brother. All will be well, even in calamity, as Allah promises. Hadith!”

*

5 Getting Ready

“Please to follow me upstairs, Sir,” says the amazingly short Asian man who greets me in the secret house when I have been expecting Jayson - two weeks after my welcome at the mosque and a subsequent period of indoctrination - the most significant parts of which I have reported above.

“Who are you?” I demand, staring down on him, more than a little annoyed to be so curtly addressed

“I am Mr Kalsi. Please to follow me, Sir. Please?”

I follow him onto a landing where five doors stand closed. I notice they are glossed white with ugly paint runs and conjure up my father, an excellent decorator, shaking his head.

Mr Kalsi pushes open the farthest door and it squeaks on its hinges. This makes me feel more uneasy. My heart is unreasonably pounding. Is that faint, familiar medical smell the cause? There is something else mixed in, the faint sweet smell of people. Perhaps the red and orange swirly carpet is the source, the residue of unwashed feet. A sudden nausea, a horror of human beings grips me. I imagine unhealthy bodies, absurd conversation, private despair. Where are they now? "Please to *follow* me, Sir," says my companion with a mixture of cold courtesy and irritation. By now he is removing his jacket in the doorway and donning a white gown. And a white mask. He extends his right arm and beckons me in. I enter. A pretty young brunette in a blue tunic is busy putting out instruments onto a roll of fabric, and in the middle of the room is a dentist's chair. I am invited to take a seat and make myself comfortable.

"What for?"

"Part of the prep," says Jayston who has come out of the door behind me. The blood singing in my ears had deadened the sound.

"Kindly extinguish the cigarette," orders Kalsi. Jayson pushes past me, opens the top light of the window and throws it out. For the first time I notice a collapsible table on which sits a tiny metallic object like a bead and a pair of tweezers. Kalsi waves his hand again towards the chair and snorts.

"What are you intending to do to me? My teeth are fine!"

"You are a nervous patient, Sir?"

"Patient? I have nothing wrong with my mouth!"

The pretty nurse looks at Kalsi and cannot help a smirk. She is, of course, an habitual and neutral observer of terror. I think immediately of a pretty nurse who was cruel to me when I was admitted to hospital at the age of nine. She drops a spatula and goes down on one knee to pick it up. Her tunic opens and reveals a bronzed thigh. Her eyes glance at me, knowing and mocking. I feel myself stir and am horrified. Jayson approaches Kalsi and whispers something. He nods in agreement then turns to me.

"Mr Chauderi, this will be a difficult procedure so I shall administer a sedative as well as novocaine. Now, please sit and try to relax."

"Not until you tell me what is going on. I'm not your victim to do with as you please. This is my head, not yours."

The woman steals another glance and puts a strand of hair behind a perfect little ear, letting me admire her lovely profile.

"Zoya," says Jayson "will you please leave us for a few moments while we have a chat."

"Zoya! You're the girl.....?"

"Who dabbed your cheek? Yes."

"But you look wholly different!"

"The uniform?"

"But you were silver blonde!"

"And you were half-conscious."

Kalsi clears his throat. Obediently she puts down her clipboard and leaves the room.

"You too, Mr Kalsi, if you don't mind," says my mentor. "And close the door behind you.....Aalim, if you're shit-scared of a little dentist, how can you face Isis?"

He lights a cig and takes a deep drag, blowing the smoke out over the chair. I am meant to feel shame and I do.

"I have an irrational fear of dentists. I was hurt as a child."

"Ok. I hate big black spiders. But you will be witnessing executions and may be called on

to execute an innocent victim yourself as proof of commitment.”

This has been the tacit understanding between us but to hear it mentioned chills my blood. I stare at him and shake my head.

“How can I do that?”

“Not now you can’t. That belongs to the next part of your training. Now, for the time being just sit DOWN in that effing chair.”

I comply. He comes close. I smell his smoky breath. He open the palm of his hand and there sits the tiny red bead in a crease.

“This little piece of genius is going to lead our men to our quarry and get you out of that hellhole. Kalsi is going to remove a molar and drill it out while you wait, insert this transmitter and glue the tooth back in. You will be out of it. Afterwards, you can have a lie-down. Maurice, your driver, will fetch us some chips and a few bottles of Bass and we’ll watch DVDs. Okay?”

“Does it have to be a tooth?”

“Where else do you suggest?”

I make a quick mental tour of my body, reject the obvious and cannot help but grin.

“Precisely. They’ll search there as well as ears and nose.”

“Beard? Hair?”

“No and no. Now relax.”

“How will it work?”

“Later. Just close your eyes. The next thing you’ll see is lovely Zoya smiling down on you. Isn’t she a dream?”

I do not see Zoya. I feel a prick in my arm and within seconds I am drowsy. I feel a clamp inserted into the corner of my mouth and wound open. There is a tug of pliers on my top right molar and then nothing else.

The first DVD of an execution I am shown is disturbing without being horrifying. It is a grainy black and white film lasting a minute of a guillotining taken from a respectable distance from behind. A fat, stubby man is taken, or rather half-carried from a black limousine by four gendarmes and his neck is forced down onto the bottom half of a frame beneath the high blade. The top half of the frame is dropped into place, trapping the head. The gendarmes step back. His backward pointing arms gesticulate and his legs wriggle, and I imagine his shouts of anger and horror, and his unheeded protests of innocence. The blade drops. The legs stiffen, twitch and relax.

We watch the DVD perhaps five more times before moving onto more Isis executions. Horror recedes.

“Death is instant,” says Jayston. “Not for nothing were aristos deprived of their heads rather than being hanged and drawn.”

“How do you know those heads have no terrible thoughts? The brain is still oxygenated, for God’s sake! How do you know they don’t suffer?”

“The shock of the blow must stun all thought. Okay, a second maybe. Then oblivion. If a man must die, it is the kindest way. A paradox, considering the callousness of Isis. You know, they are even forcing children as young as eight to join up? They are akin to an alien species.”

“They disgust me.”

“They would no doubt argue that their end justifies their means. Want to watch a video of a man burnt alive? The Iraqi pilot?”

“God no!”

“But you will be put to the test. You have to accept cruelty in the short term.”

He takes another bottle of Bass, removes the cap and hands it to me.

“Drink it, then I’ll show you.”

The man is in a cell, on his knees in prayer. Incendiary liquid is pumped at him and he disappears in flames. He topples. His death seems mercifully quick. Whatever horror he experiences is seamed in by fire and he has entered a dimension removed from the cell and the rest of the world. Perhaps God has been merciful and numbed his pain and distress by shock. Did my father suffer in his final coma?

Bemused and drunk I tell him I wish to leave. It must be nearly midnight. He shakes his head.

“Maurice had to go. Wife poorly. You’ll be staying here tonight.”

“Call me a taxi.”

“Not allowed. Security. There’s a nice bed made up for you.”

“Are you staying?”

“No. Walking. I’m half-an-hour away. Things to do. Breakfast at nine. Tomorrow we talk about communications. Pyjamas, a towel and a wash bag on your bed. First door past the bathroom.”

I am dropping off to sleep when the door creaks open and in the light on the landing a silhouette briefly appears before slipping under my duvet. It kisses my forehead and presses its soft warmth against my trembling naked body. It is naked too.

“Is your jaw hurting?” it asks in a whisper.

“No,” I breathe, deprived of all strength as in a dream.

“I heard the boss tell Maurice he could go. I crept back upstairs when Kalsi had gone. I’m not Jayson’s gift. I’m mine. I fancied you the moment I saw you. I - oh, bloody hell, what the - ?”

“Your fault for being so gorgeous. Let go, or ...”

“No! Just lie back!! Let me.....”

There follows a frantic five minutes. And then, a half-hour later, a slow, intense passage of pleasure and joy.

The birds are singing just as merrily in the first dingy light of morning when I wake. Zoya has taken her leave.

“So, how does it work?” I ask, finishing off my toast while Jayson, cursing under his breath, already stale with smoke, searches his briefcase.

“The little bead, how does it work?”

“It has a tiny battery which is constantly charged by the pulse of blood in your gum. Ah, here ‘t is.”

He produces a photograph.

“Kalsi took this.”

It is of the inside of my mouth. He points with a pen to a very tiny hole in the side of my molar.

“It transmits a steady signal on short wave which our people in Turkey can pick up. We can track your movements by GPS. We can also send a signal which you will feel as a tingle. We will have a team on twenty-four hour stand-by for when the time is right.”

“When will that be?”

“When the main players are gathered for a council.”

“And how do I let you know?”

“You bite as hard as you can on the molar and count ten seconds - one and two and three and so on.....no more, no less. That way we avoid a cockup. You might bite on it in your sleep....The pressure makes the beep go double speed. After ten, you make an excuse, hold your gut or

whatever and go to the lav. And there you sit until our men have done their bit.”

“Which is?”

“You do not need to know operational details. Nor is it wise for you to know. If you don’t know, they can’t torture it out of you.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“Team leader will have a photo of you. You will be safe. Eventually.”

“Eventually?”

“Whenever we buzz you, bite hard for a count of three and we will know you’re fine. If you bite for five, we’ll know there’s a problem.”

“Then what? Will you send a limo for me?”

He raises his eyebrows and grins.

“I have to sort it myself??”

“It won’t come to that. Your cover is first class. If anybody starts coming down hard on you, I’m sure you can stick up for yourself..... Did you and Zoya get on well last night?”

“I resent that! Did you bug us??”

“It’s vital that you do.”

“What business is that of yours?”

“Nothing personal. Only, you’re going on holiday together soon.”

He takes a map from his briefcase and places it on the table. The Mediterranean.

“Syria, Turkey.....Cyprus...British airbase at Akrotiri in the south....it’s less than a hundred miles to the Syrian coast, but the Turks will let us get even closer, just here, over the border. The attack helicopter could be with you within half-an-hour. Rooftop height. If you bite for ten and we can’t come for whatever reason, say weather, you will get a single long buzz to tell you it’s off. They won’t come in darkness either. Dawn would be ideal, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

His finger hovers over the island of Cyprus, and leaves the north-eastern sword-blade of land threatening Syria, before coming down on the southern coast.

“But you’re going here, Pafos in the south. Lovely hotel, the King Alexander. All inclusive. Zoya is your cover.”

“But what about Ashraf’s secret route? Won’t he be suspicious if I just fly off?”

“Change of plan. Things are hotting up and the Russians are planning something with Assad.

Yes, our friend, Ashraf, would be suspicious if he knew where you were headed. But he will be off the scene and incommunicado. He won’t know and he won’t make a peep. Listen.”

He takes out a mini tape recorder and presses a button. As clear as a bell I hear Ashraf pouring his poison into my ears.

“How did -?”

He leans forward and searches my beard with tweezers.

“Ah, here ‘t is. Clever Zoya smuggled this little burr in when she cleaned you up.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have acted as naturally as you did if you had known? ET et alia will be sent this recording with a note when we are good and ready. Ashraf will be woken up early one morning and invited to become a guest of Her Majesty. They will find your flat empty. That’s when a hue and cry will go up in our blessed mee-ja. You’ll be in the hotel by then, beard cut shorter, new passport and new I.d., locked in your room away from public-spirited nosy bastards. Just in case.”

“And from there?”

“Zoya takes over from me. A very talented lady of many parts. She will brief you.”

A thought occurs to me.

“That bug was in my beard last night. Did anybody listen in?”

He sneers. What do I take him for?

Before I take my final leave, I have two photos taken, one in which I am wearing the faqiyah on my head and staring as murderously as I can; the second bare-headed and without my specs, relaxed, my beard trimmed back to a stubble.

6 On Holiday

This afternoon, having waited in for days and having called the imam to say I have a cold, I finally receive a text from Jayson. I am to pack my case with holiday wear and my Islamic clothes. I am to be ready and waiting at one thirty a.m. sharp. *Best of British* - end of message. It is a warm August night after days and weeks of unseasonal dull chill. I walk, as instructed, to the tube station to wait. At twenty-five to two, the taxi draws up like a hearse, glinting evilly under the street light and the cabbie takes my case to stow in the boot. Zoya takes my hand and hugs me briefly. After a while, the chatty cabbie subsides into silence when we answer only in monosyllables, finally taking the hint to reach behind him and pull the glass partition across.

“Passport,” says Zoya under her breath. “You look quite handsome with the stubble and without your glasses Mr Martinez. You did get rid of the old passport?”

“Black bin on Monday.”

“Good. When they raid you at three, they’ll search but won’t find it. Ergo, you will probably be heading for Turkey. In fact, someone with a passport in your name flew out to Ankara last night.”

At Gatwick we have time for breakfast. By five we are boarding.

It is a relief to be quiet and safe in our hotel room. I take out my glasses from the suitcase and the fuzzy world becomes clear. The room is white and stylish. The gap in the curtains is deep blue. The rolling news has me in my faqiyah, looking very dangerous just as Jayson wanted. Ex-PC Aalim Chaudri, possibly radicalised by his recent tribulations, has flown to Turkey and the reporter is voicing concerns that he might have been tipped off by a sympathetic insider in the Met. Amongst the guests who were on our airport coach, are there any watching this item now recalling the swarthy man in the front seat with the pretty brunette? After half-an-hour, after the door has not been knocked down by Cypriot policemen, I begin to relax again. We take a shower together and end up in bed.

I wake at two to see Zoya in the armchair reading a magazine, naked. The air-conditioning is purring.

“In a day or two we might go for a walk together. The coastal path. I researched it.”

“No way,” she says.

“Not when I’m not news anymore? When the Mail and Express have moved on and today’s copies are in the bin?”

“Nope. We’re going to have to put up with each other here. I brought scrabble and chess.”

“I can’t play.”

“I’ll teach you and play for sex.”

“I’ll lose.”

“I don’t mind honest. And we’ve got wifi. If you want sun and air, there’s the balcony, screened from the neighbours. Hungry?”

“Starved.”

She picks up the phone for room service.

“My partner has a bad back and can’t get down for meals. Can you bring food up to our room until further notice? No, he doesn’t require a doctor. It will pass.”

She has ordered fresh tuna and a green salad and a bottle of white. We polish it off and return to bed after I let her beat me at chess in three moves. Afterwards, naked on the balcony in blazing sunshine we look out on the sparkling sea. A yacht is drifting lazily, hardly moving, on the horizon. On a headland to our right a hazy lighthouse is shimmering in the bright sun. The scene below us is a peaceful one of sunbathers mostly reclining under parasols of thatch. It must be nearly forty degrees. Children wearing broad hats are splashing noisily in the pool. A sprightly, cheery waitress steers herself expertly around the beds with a tray of drinks. It is hard to believe that less than two hundred miles away to the north-east, other families are crouching amidst turmoil in terror as barrel bombs rain down. A turmoil I am soon to enter. I shiver with fear. These here below possibly think about it now and then, before they turn the newspaper page to other stories.

“You’re thinking fool’s paradise?” whispers Zoya embracing me from behind.

“No, Zoya. Just paradise. Uncomplicated and pleasant, just as life should be. For everybody. They just want to relax. Isis have another reason for being alive. Death. That’s why I’m doing this.”

“But it’s pure hedonism down there. Doesn’t your er strict upbringing make you recoil at it?”

“Doesn’t yours?”

“A bit. I was a Catholic. But my dad believed strongly in confession and in the forgiveness of sins the priest kept forgiving him so he sinned plenty.”

“And you?”

She draws back and I worry I have offended her. I turn. Her body is radiant in the sunshine and she is smiling. She comes and leans on the balcony rail, indifferent to who might be looking up.

“I think they are ignorant, fat pigs.”

I look at her in surprise. She is still smiling - a little. Sardonicly.

“They prefer not to know what’s going on and what they have helped to pay for!”

“God, you sound like bloody Ashraf!”

She disappears inside and pours herself a whiskey. She dresses quickly as if I’m not there.

“You mad with me?” I ask. “Why?”

“Because you’re one of them. Paradise? My arse.”

“One of them? What, a terrorist? Islamist?”

“No! An ignoramus, a moron. What do you know about Reagan shelling Druse villages in Lebanon? You any idea who happened to be there while women and kids were being blown to bits? One Osama Bin Laden. If Netanyahu or the Yanks hit a clinic, what is it? “Collateral damage”. Nowhere near as offensive as a picture of a toddler in pieces. What are they reading down there, those inhabitants of your paradise? Celeb magazines. They’ll die without reading a word of Hardy or Camus - or hearing a note of Mozart. They make me fucking sick.”

“So, why are you.....?”

“Because killing innocent bystanders is wrong, even if they are thick fat and disgusting.”

“God, I’m effing confused. Pour me one.”

“Perfect!” she exclaims.

“Can we stop now? I’m exhausted.”

“We’ve hardly started. Okay, ten minute break. Cup of tea?”

We recommence.

“At this point, they might well decide to put you to the test. You know, of course, that they have taken many young Christian women as sex slaves? Killed the older ones who refused to convert. They are all expendable. They might hand you a machete and tell you to behead one.”

“That will be it. I would have to confess. End of story. End of me.”

“Not necessarily. Jayson didn’t mention this, but we have a plan. He didn’t mention it in London in case you withdrew. It won’t be pleasant. You’re right-handed?”

“Ye-es. Why you ask?”

She explains. As usual, she is right. It is most unpleasant, but compared to taking off the head of a woman it is nothing. I tell her I’m too far in now to turn back.

She sets up the chessboard.

At seven twenty the next morning, we are waiting outside. In Zoya’s rucksack are packed lunches; in mine, my Islamic garb. It is going to be another very hot day and the sun is climbing steadily, beginning to turn the deep blue sky into silver blue. We stand in the shade of an amazing canopy of scarlet flowers which Zoya tells me is of a bottle-brush tree.

The coach arrives a couple of minutes late and we begin a tedious round of visits to various hotels to pick up other passengers. Our relief at being on the open road is short-lived, for soon we are heading into Limasol to pick up others. My relief has been paper-thin anyway, for I know I am not coming back.

On any coach trip to the Turkish sector, a passport is necessary. At the border all tourists have to disembark to have their documentation inspected. Zoya has told me that mine will be found wanting and we are loitering at the back of the queue as Zoya has planned. I am breathing slowly and deeply in anticipation of a hostile reception from the border guards who seem to have been selected for their grimness. Zoya has left her rucksack on the coach and will return to retrieve it in high dudgeon and to make it clear that I have been refused entry for no reason and that we must make our own way back. We are in a building which looks like a large bus shelter. The Turkish guide, an astonishingly squat, ugly woman with bulging eyes, is in attendance to usher us through, and is obviously troubled that the guard is pointing something out in my passport and jabbering to his colleague who is looking at me and my photo.

“There seems to be a discrepancy in your passport, “ she says.

“What discrepancy?” I loudly retort. “It’s a brand new issue.”

The jolly couple from Stockport who have preceded us - and who have been entertaining their neighbours on the coach with a tour of their holiday destinations previous and imminent - turn to look at us and are shooed out of the other end. There follows more birdlike twitter from the officials and increasingly dark looks at me. The guide apologizes and tells us we have to follow one of the guards to the main building over the road. Zoya protests but this provokes only stern shakes of the head. If the Turks are in on the charade, their play-acting is impressive.

“At least let me fetch my belongings from the coach!” says Zoya.

The guide translates and the guards nod. I watch her hurry off, and, with a show of reluctance for the benefit of the guide - who seems genuinely alarmed and sympathetic - I exit with my swarthy

escort.

In the building, which reeks of exotic tobacco, I am directed to a dilapidated door in the corner. I knock and enter. The fog only thickens - a smell I recognize - and there at the table with his hands behind his head with a briefcase in front of him, sits someone I had never expected to see again.

“Trust you’ve been enjoying yourself Aalim. Have a pew.”

“Thank you, Mr Jayson. Up till now it’s been great. Looks as if I’ll be missing out on Famagusta.”

“Oh, you’re not missing much. Long past its best. Since 74 when our Turkish allies invaded. The Greeks fled and were never allowed back. Whole quarters completely gone to pot. Beachful of hotels standing empty. Dump if you ask me. Now, the monastery tour up into the mountains is far better. Bet you didn’t know there’s proper skiing up there.”

“Amazing.”

Zoya has not arrived. I turn to the door.

“I’m afraid Zoya isn’t joining the party. Her job here is complete.”

She could have said goodbye. He tells me not to look so down in the mouth. That it’s time to get my head fully on the mission.

“There’s a car waiting out back. Need to go somewhere first? Only it’s a good two hours and we’re stopping for neither man nor beast.”

He turns around a map for me to see. He points to the narrow north-western peninsula and now Cyprus reminds me even more of an aggressive swordfish. A rap at the door proves to be the guard bringing in my passport.

“No need for that anymore,” says Jayson, dropping it into his briefcase.

I have slept most of the way. It is mid-afternoon when we reach our destination, about as far along that sword as possible. It is the modern resort of Algialousa, built as an extension of a fishing village. Jayson says it is full of rich Germans. We check into a small hotel tucked away from the centre and stroll to a restaurant on the quay to enjoy a late lunch of crab and sardines. In view of what faces me, small talk seems absurd and Jayson is quite happy to sit with a bottle of wine and silently watch the world go by. I drink water.

As we emerge into the broiling sun of late afternoon, a slightly tipsy Jayson indicates a small boat tied up at the end of a row.

“How are your sea-legs?”

Via alcohol, his vowels have been darkening.

Not counting a short trip on the Thames, I have never been on water before.

“Not a sailor.”

“Well, you’re becoming one in a few hours. You’ll be heading for a tiny cove in Turkey, near Samandag, a few miles from the Syrian border. A 4x4 will pick you up and head for Aleppo.

Then you’ll be on your own. I take it that Zoya explained how you will be found?”

“Yes, you left her with a nice little job there. It must have slipped your memory.”

“Promotion has its benefits. When I was on her pay grade I had to handle shit like that. If you fall into the wrong hands, you’ll have to bluff your way out. If you fail to make contact with Isis after a week, then try to make your way back to the beach, bite teggies for five, hide in the scrub and we’ll send Theo to get you. Theo owns the boat.”

Back at the hotel, he shows me my route on the map. It looks very short, like Dover to Paris. He googles the forecast. Good. Calm sea.

“You should be okay.”

At seven he orders some pizza from a take-away. Then I am told to get some sleep. Distant balalaika music and sounds of laughter take me away to a dream of Zoya. I do love her. I am suddenly awake and determined to get the job done and come back unscathed - for her.

I lie there in the darkness. The telephone on the bedside table rings. Reception. Am told that the taxi I ordered has arrived. I say I'll be ten minutes. I turn on the light and see a scrawled message - *Remember, no mobile, just the moneybelt and rucksack. Best of British.*

7 The Mission

The gentle motion of the little boat and the good-natured chuckle of its engine had lulled me back to sleep, aided by the good glass of Metaxa which the fisherman Theo had forced into me. Good manners meant I did not resist. After leaving the taxi and standing around on the deserted quayside, I was picked up gently and lifted on board. Theo was huge and jolly with a thick beard and he spoke excellent English - almost too precise. His vocabulary soon led me to deduce that fishing was not his only or even his main pursuit. I had watched the harbour lights of the town and then the tiny lights on the hillside blink out one by one and had then gone below to a bunk. Now, awakened again by the night chills stealing down into the cabin, I have positioned myself on the prow as the first hint of dawn steals into the sky above the land towards which we are steadily chugging. The contours of the soft hills are gradually revealed and pinpricks of lights are increasing as people entirely strange to me - in Asia - decide to leave their beds.

“Can you see the headlights flash?” shouts Theo at the wheel behind me in his little cabin. That is your transport. You will be wading ashore. Ten minutes. Get your belongings”

This is it. I undress and become a Muslim again. I strap on the money belt, throw my shorts, tee shirt and rucksack overboard and watch one self sail away in the calm water. It is now daylight, and I see my other self staring back at me from the mirror of the sea - in fear.

The calm water, so inviting, is surprisingly cold to my sandaled feet. I hold my kurta high to avoid the waves and paddle onto the beach. The headlights flash briefly and I make out the offroader in the gloom. Apart from the clapping of the waves, the scene is silent and nothing stirs. There is something magical and hopeful about dawn, something unspoilt and naïve. I had never minded the night shift in London. Even the wicked must sleep. Well, most of them.

I clamber up the slope of thorns, cactus and scrub very carefully and reach the open black rear door of the car. I jump in and greet the driver, a figure with body and head clothed in black. A woman? There is no response. Immediately the door is closed, we set off slowly across wasteland towards a thin stream of lights crisscrossing - the early traffic on the coast road. We wait until all is clear and then turn right onto it. The sun is now just visible within the grey shroud of mist over the mountains, dull like the yolk of an old hard boiled egg. On the plain I make out buildings slowly turning white, and here and there the brown cupola of a mosque. Charging lorries, tarpaulins flapping, are our main fellow-travellers. I feel obliged to make a little conversation but my driver does not respond. No English perhaps. I close my eyes and settle back to doze.

I realize that we have stopped. A layby. The sun is much higher and beginning to dazzle. A distant cupola, having peeled back its dull wrapping, is glinting gold. And two dark eyes are staring at me through the slit of a burka. A hand reaches behind to undo it and a small face is revealed.

“Surprise, surprise,” says Zoya.

I lean forward to kiss her and she holds up her hand. With her other she offers me a packet.

“Strictly business. Smoked salmon wrap okay?”

“How did ?”

“Secret. Here, you must be hungry. I am.”

We devour breakfast and are soon on our way again. I ask her where we are and she says that we crossed into Syria about an hour ago.

“A little cross-country shortcut.”

We pass a sign in Arabic and she says Aleppo. She speaks Arabic. Her mother is half-Egyptian. I tell her mine is very rusty.

“Youre quite a mongrel, Zoya.”

“That explains why I’m so clever.”

“Am I allowed to know which hotel we are staying at in Aleppo? Five star?”

“There aren’t that many left standing. Aleppo is was a beautiful ancient city. Remember the witches in Macbeth? The sailor’s to Aleppo gone, master of the Tiger?”

“We did Julius Caesar at GCSE.”

“I did English - at Caius.”

Caius. I imagine her being recruited. By Jayson?

“We’re staying with friends in the north-west of the city. Free Syrian Army. The north-east is being infiltrated by Isis. The south is held by Assad, the Iranians and Hezbollah. The FSA know we’re coming. They know we you are on a vital mission, but not the details.”

The outskirts seem at first normal. People are on the streets talking and popping into shops. But when we take a left, we are confronted by a large apartment building whose corner is a series of collapsed balconies like bracket fungi. Amazingly, there are windows adjoining from which bed sheets are hanging out to dry. Further along the street there is more and more rubble we dodge until eventually a ruined lorry bars the way.

“The barricade! This is where we turn off.”

She slowly turns and sticks her head out of the window to check the street sign. The way is narrow and sullen faces stare after us. Some businesses are boarded up but a supermarket is open and people are crowding around it. They have an air of panic and, like meerkats, every so often they look anxiously at the sky. Zoya has stopped to ask a passer-by for help. She climbs back in and keeps muttering directions to herself. After a left and two right turns we pull up outside two green wooden gates and she sounds her horn. The gates eventually open and she drives in.

In the courtyard stands a group of about ten men, on the alert, eyeing us with suspicion. The gentle, bearded fellow in jeans at the front, approaches us, gun slung over his shoulder.

“Mr Chauderi? Please to follow me.”

He tells me he is Baz, an Iranian. His English is accented but accurate and polished. He says he had studied dentistry at Liverpool University..

“I lived between Anfield and Goodison Park, which was absolutely ideal for me.”

“I’m a Gooner.”

He is not interested. Zoya is just behind me. He turns to her with a dramatic look of anxiety and expectation.

“Miss Jolob! Please, please tell me you remembered it!”

She frowns, then smiles and from behind her back produces a jar of Marmite.

“Jolob?” I query. (How can such a lovely person have such an ugly name?)

“My dad is Polish, remember?”

“I bet you can’t wait to change it.”

Baz takes the jar and stuffs it lovingly into the kitbag attached to his belt.

“I thought the Iranians were fighting for Assad,” I whisper.

But Baz overhears. He smiles.

“My father was a communist and a radical opponent of the Mullahs. He disappeared five years ago when I was finishing my degree. Come on - follow me upstairs and freshen up. You must be hungry and thirsty.”

He barks an order in Arabic and the men clear a path. We are led to a small but tidy bed sitting room with a kitchen corner. I pet the bed to encourage Zoya in from the doorway where she has remained. Since we reached the outskirts of the town, she has been wearing her burka. She shakes her lovely head.

“Business, Aalim. I have to stay in role. Besides, there are men down there who might want to have me stoned if they knew I had entered a man’s room.”

“But, you’re not a Muslim.”

“Only Baz knows that. Drink the lemonade on the table and lie down.”

She blows me a kiss and closes the door.

That bloody lemonade.....

As I begin to wake, my first thought is that I am still in that police cell back in February, and that I have dreamt the intervening months. I am very cold. I open my eyes a little, expecting and hoping to see my distorted face in the shiny steel toilet bowl. But I am lying in wasteland in twilight. Morning or evening? My right hand is near to my face. It is bruised and swollen. My forehead feels as if it is on fire. My head is aching like my worst ever hangover. I force my eyes wide open and raise my head. Nearby there is a nasty, spiky plant with lovely tall flowers, reminding me of my mum’s favourite, red hot poker. Something white is wrapped around the highest spike. My cotton money belt. On the sand lies a wallet. There is a photograph between it and me. The growing light shows me it is of my mum and sister in happier times. How on earth had they come by it? *Secret* - I hear Zoya whisper. Scampering noises in the undergrowth alarm me. I hate rats and mice. I screw my head round to another angle and see a round white bowl on the floor. It puzzles me for a while until I realise what it is. My fakiyah. A black lizard pounces on it and I cry out in horror. I roll onto my back and stare at the millions of brilliant stars fading, washed away by the tide of eastern light. Something smells bad. Me? I strain to look over my right shoulder, and catch my sore eyebrow against something sharp. Agony. Now I can see a body - a naked old man with his throat cut. His amazed face has recorded the horror. Zoya failed to mention this part of the charade. Perhaps it was an afterthought. *Certainty creates doubt, and doubt certainty*, says Jayson from nowhere, cigarette lighter in hand.....

I wonder how they had decided to snap my wrist. In a vice? With a lump hammer? On Cyprus, I had not wanted to know the gory details from Zoya. And someone had been so coldblooded that they had had no qualms about fracturing my eyebrow. Perhaps my being in a deep sleep had made it easy. Besides, no doubt once you have killed, lesser violence is easier. I think of the numerous beheadings I was shown. I hear Jayson speaking and then Zoya again.

“You’ll say that you got a train from Ankara to Gaziantep near the border and hired a taxi - no idea which company - you can’t remember. Suspicious if you do. The driver agreed to take you after nightfall for five hundred dollars. All of a sudden, in the middle of nowhere, the driver stopped and demanded an extra three hundred. You refused and got out. The last thing you remember is him coming at you with a car jack and holding your arm up to protect your head.

End of story. Now tell it back to me. Gaziantep.”

The smell of the corpse is growing as the sun strengthens, but at least I am warmer now. I realise I am naked.

I have no idea when I wake again how long has passed, but the sun is hot on my face. I cannot be far from a road because I can hear an engine ticking over. As I stare at the sky, two bearded faces beneath black turbans peer down at me.

“Help me, brothers,” I manage. “I’m dying.”

One kneels and takes my pulse.

“You’ll live,” he says in a northern accent. Yorkshire. Lancashire?

“I’m dying, I can’t swallow.”

“Trust me, I’m a paramedic. I’ll fetch you a bottle of water.”

The other face comes closer and the nose wrinkles. “You smell badly,” it says in a foreign accent. French?

“T’ ain’t him,” says the other. “Look over there.”

Now he spots the corpse amongst the scrub.

“Bloody ‘ell. How long ‘as ‘e been out ‘ere?”

Now I notice the Frenchman is wearing the shiniest red boots.

“You kill zis man?”

“Me? No way.”

The Brit asks me to try and sit up and, without thinking, I throw my weight on to my right hand and yell in pain. They both look appalled.

I am picked up and laid down in the open back of their truck. My belongings are thrown in and I am covered over with a sheet.

“My phone?”

“No phone mate.”

“Passport?”

“No. And your wallet was empty. Just the photo.”

“The robbing bastard. Credit cards?”

“Nothing. You’re like the guy who fell to earth. Here, take this other bottle..... Hoy, Rizwan! Let’s get going.”

Rizwan climbs into the cab and we speed away. Every jolt, I am almost pleased to register, makes me feel decidedly worse and therefore more deserving of sympathy. It only dawns on me later that I could well have died.

I am in a clinic with fresh, clean smells. I am stared at by a beautiful woman in a *hajib*. Not Zoya. She is asking me in a strange accent how I feel. My arm is in plaster from the knuckles to the elbow. On the back of my left hand a sticking plaster holds a tube in place.

“Where am I? Are you French? Belgian?”

She frowns as if insulted. She replies curtly that she is an Arab “mistakenly” born in Hamburg.

“As *you* are misconceived in England. Now we are come to reclaim a homeland carved up in 1916 by the treacherous British and French. At least, I am come for this.”

This makes no sense.

“But where am I?”

“Near Raqqa. East of Aleppo. Do you need more pain relieving?”

I feel numb more than sore. I tell her I am thirsty and she holds a tumbler close to my lips. I ask her if she is a nurse or a doctor.

“My name is Adiva. It is just my job to make you better. You are come to join?”

“I am Aalim.”

“I know who you are.”

“How?”

She says nothing, only looks at me dubiously as if she finds my question too naïve. Through the window opposite I see a cloud shaped like a horse drift past. I close my eyes and for hours drift in and out of sleep.

“Here is warm soup, Brother Aalim,” Adiva’s soft voice says. “Just sip it.”

I open my eyes and there she is, her huge dark eyes on me. Behind her stands a pleasant man I recognize. It is the man in his thirties whose photo Jayson showed me. Codename: Brain. He holds a small mirror to my face. I am appalled. Not only is my brow swollen and dressed but my lips are monstrously swollen too.

“Who did this?” he asks quietly - in a gentrified northern English accent, reminding me uncannily of Jayson.

“The taxi driver.”

“Why?”

“He wanted extra and I refused to pay.”

Should I say more? His face seems to expect it.

“He came at me with his jack. Last I remember.”

He thinks this over.

“You should have paid. When you’re better, we will talk, Aalim. You have to explain quite a few things.”

This sends me icy cold and I am also terrified that the assault has damaged my transmitter. Surely not. I realize I am not supposed to contact them without being contacted first. So it is a relief when a tingle wakes me that night. I bite hard and count three for fine, smiling at the irony. But wonder in the next second which few things I will have to explain.

*

“The Yanks won’t bomb the building we’re in. We’ve painted a red crescent on the roof. Even if they suspect it’s a fraud, they daren’t run the risk because we can produce film of injured women and children and put it out there online. I think your face is less swollen, Aalim.”

Speaking so gently and quietly of casualties - appalling casualties - he makes them almost seem innocuous. I am in two minds whether to ask him his name. All Adiva had told me was that *he* wanted to see me in his room and I had been put in a wheelchair and taken down the corridor. To ask who he was or not to ask might equally arouse suspicion. I am wondering if it is his plan to make me thereby uncomfortable. But then the decision is taken away from me.

“Do you know who I am?”

Truthfully - well half-truthfully - I shake my head. *Never tell a lie, Aalim, never* always rings in my ears from childhood whenever I tell one. I feel my skin prickle. He waits, watchful.

“You are obviously in a position of some authority.”

“You don’t know my name?”

“Nobody has told me. How can I?”

“Did Ashraf not mention me? You were twice or thrice at the mosque, were you not?”

“Three. He never mentioned anyone. Just sort of - lectured me. Made me think.”

“Lectured you how? Think what?”

This is easy and natural. I am pleased I do not have it off pat and have to pause to recall stuff and go back and add stuff I've genuinely forgotten. Though I never look at him directly for longer than a second I can feel his dark, clever eyes drilling into me. I imagine him not dressed in a kurtah but in a very sharp suit with a clipboard. I would have to put him down, if forced to guess, as an estate agent or similar. There used to be a very cool, even frigid, Tory politician whose name escapes me - he reminds me of him.

I am on the last lap of my tour of Ashraf when Brain abruptly interrupts me.

“Were you shocked to hear of his arrest?”

I open my mouth but nothing comes out.

“Your visits and his arrest seem connected.”

I stammer a denial.

“You *know* he was arrested?”

“Yes, you just told me so!”

“You didn't know until now?”

“No.”

I feel hot. He looks doubtful. He wonders aloud if it could be a coincidence that I had taken off on the same night as Ashraf's arrest.

“Why did you not wait for his instructions and route?”

“I was phoned out of the blue - *get out, raid imminent* - I packed what I could and got a taxi to Heathrow....is Ashraf....?”

“Charged with conspiracy. No bail. How did they gather evidence, if not via you?”

“I have no idea. They bug places, don't they? I played no part in that. It must be the police, the spies....they ruined my career.”

I was about to add *the bastards* but Jayson whispers - do not protest too much. So far, all true, more or less. Brain sits back and claps his hands very softly as if in appreciation.

“They ruined your career *apparently*.”

“Apparently? Definitely.”

“So, what do you want? Revenge?”

“To join.”

“To do what?”

“Whatever I can to be useful.”

“To kill? Not much use with a broken wrist. Did you come to kill?”

“Anything. Anything you want. What do *you* do?”

He fails to reply, and his eyes tell me he is examining the question. He doesn't like it and he doesn't like me. He doesn't trust me and who can blame him? He gets up smartly to summon a guard. He gives instructions in Arabic and I am wheeled back to my room. I am stood up and quickly stripped naked by Adiva and she watches while a burly man in jeans and tee shirt politely and gently searches my armpits, my groin and beyond, even between my toes. He keeps repeating - *allow me please* and *that is very well, thank you* - in a Scandinavian accent. His friendliness perplexes me and I want him to be stern. When he finishes probing in sensitive areas he tells me to open my mouth as wide as I can. I cannot help asking him to put on new gloves for that task and he throws back his head in laughter. He shines his torch into my mouth, shifting my tongue around with a spatula. I pray that the molar has been well restored and am relieved when he spends no longer on that part of my teeth than any other. He even looks in my nose and ears before combing my hair and beard. I catch sight of Adiva looking at me strangely. When her sad

eyes avoid mine I understand and smile.

*

“Adiva mentioned something about 1916, and the French and the British which I don’t get.”
God bless Jayson for leaving me in ignorance. Brain is only too eager to give me a history lesson.

“You have never seen Lawrence of Arabia? You had no idea that the British promised the Arabs self-rule when the Ottoman empire collapsed?”

“I gave up history at school when I was fourteen.”

“Fucking liars and deceivers! They see the world only from their perspective and are too arrogant and stupid even to realise there is *another* way of seeing *our* way of seeing. To us, they are the terrorists. They still interfere in Arabia as if it is their natural right. They assume ownership and think they can send over their armies and planes as and when they see fit - not to protect local people but their investments. Turn it all round. How would they have liked the Arabs to have sent forces to defend the English miners against Thatcher’s police brutes? They condemn our ruthlessness. But who enslaved, raped, murdered and pillaged most of the world? Who encouraged and still encourages the Jews to murder out brothers and sisters in Palestine? Who hanged those who dared to rebel in India? Who said one cannot have an omelette without breaking eggs? Who killed the native Americans, the Aborigines and the Maoris? Whose crusaders slaughtered seventy thousand of our people in Jerusalem? We will not be lectured and condemned as murderers *by* murderers. We will win back Arabia for Arabs and Allah. We will destroy the fat-arsed Saudis and their lecherous allies and drive the Israelis into the sea. If we have to break eggs and heads for a homeland - as they did - we shall!”

I blow out a long breath in admiration and tell him I had no idea of any of this. But he is not listening, imagining himself perhaps addressing the world, not me.

“How dare you look down on us as the little people! Our fathers were writing philosophy, studying the stars and mathematical theorems while yours were in filthy rags, shitting in ditches. You imagine you have some kind of paternalistic right over us and can push us around! Chop one of your ugly fat heads off and you go crazy. But if you kill our wives, our sisters and children with your bombs it’s just an inevitable and sad by-product of the means to achieve *your* goal - our destruction. Well, our goal is homeland and anyone in *our* way will be scythed down like rank weeds.”

His eyes blaze, his fist thumps the table, he looks ready to murder millions. I wonder, what would deter such a man? Certainly not Trident. Then he remembers I am in front of him.

“Drink your tea, Aalim. It will be cold”

This makes me smile, almost laugh. But what he comes out with next, out of the blue, as I am sipping the bitter tea, makes me splutter.

“Why should I trust one who threw over his faith?”

“It was after my father died.....I foolishly blamed Allah.”

The burly man in the corner, hands folded in front of his crotch, sniggers. Brain appears not to notice.

“That you should say such a thing makes me want to take your head off now. You must prove to us that you have truly come back in full obedience to His Will.”

An icicle of fear pierces my heart. The burly man leaves the room and soon returns with a girl, once pretty, face fallen, dirty, a girl in mid-teenage.

“This girl is a Christian who refuses to convert to the true faith.” says the burly man. “Her parents too refused and were justly punished. Our brothers have been trying to persuade her, one after another. In her own way, she has been useful to us.”

Her face tells in exactly which way. Her bully stands and looks down on her, speaking to her in her language, asking, I assume, the question she dreads. Grimly she shakes her head and two large tears roll down her dirty face. He asks her again, this time taking her by her shoulders. The cheeriness of his features makes the scene the more appalling.

“You see how stubborn she is, Aalim?” says the Chief. “What shall I do with her, now the men also tire of asking her? What does the holy book demand?”

It says she must die.

“But she is a child Sir. Does she speak English?”

She nods and whispers “From school.”

“Then let me speak with her alone. If I cannot persuade her, then.....”

“You will order her execution. But we will stay.”

“But she is afraid of you both. Grant me this one wish. If I fail, I will take her life myself with my left hand. Or I will offer to take her place.”

The burly man laughs and points. “Like Jesus Christ himself!”

I stare at him with utter loathing, wanting nothing less than to kill him with my bare hands. The girl is trembling. I offer her my chair.

“You have five minutes,” says Brain.

We are left alone. I ask her her name. She is Salima. She is nearly sixteen years old. I tell her to listen to me carefully and to say if she does not understand. I will speak slowly and clearly. She nods and, amazingly, almost smiles. I crouch down and, whispering, take her hand.

“I know how much you have suffered, but I have come to save you. I am not them. Jesus does not want you to die. He wants you to live and have children for him.”

“No, no, no.....”

“He wants you to live and when this is finished, you can swear fresh allegiance, I mean go back to the cross. Understand.?”

“It cannot be finished”

“It will be. I promise you.”

Now I take a huge risk. If this is a trap, I do not care, because one way or the other, I am dead meat.

“I have friends. They will come soon to help. You will come to England with me. When that bad man comes back in, say - I have changed my mind. No, no - look out at the sky, the clouds, the sun, and say to yourself, I do not want to give up all this beauty. Be strong. All ends well, I promise. You understand?”

“Yes, yes, but I cannot refuse Jesus to a man who kill my mother and father.....”

I look up at the clock. The sun is setting. I wonder if I will ever see it again. From my knowledge of Easter, I have one argument left to try.

“Here, wipe your eyes and listen. Remember Peter? He denied Jesus. Said, I do not know this man. Not once, not twice. Three times! But later he became a saint and Jesus still loved him. Deny him just once, now, here.....please.....if he forgave a strong man like Peter, he will forgive a child like you. He is merciful.”

The door opens. I cross my fingers behind my back and pray. Brain bids her stand and asks her gently the same question. Slowly she raises her face up bravely into his and stares at him in stubborn hatred. But then she nods and looks down.

“I am all amazement, Aalim! What did you say to her?”

“That there is one true God and he loves her and wants her to live. Allah wants her to live and serve him.”

“So few words? That was all in five minutes?”

“Her English is basic. I had to paraphrase.”

He barks another question at her - a long one - and again I hold my breath. She sullenly nods and I close my eyes in apprehension. His hand on my shoulder makes me look.

“I was saying, you have a golden tongue. Perhaps Allah has sent you for a different purpose to the rest - and even set the taxi driver on you to break your hand!”

Tempted though I am, I do not say that terror is not always the best way to persuade. *Let them make the running*, says Jayson, making a chip sandwich and smothering it with vinegar and ketchup - *play passive*. But then another voice tells me that saying nothing to such praise might be just as unwise.

“I cannot help only being an organizer. I am not a killer.”

The thought of my dad brings tears to my eyes.

I am lying in bed as the darkness comes, reviewing these events and seeing with horror a number of different outcomes, when the light is switched on. It is my nurse, Alima. She has a basin and a towel.

“I sense you are not like them,” she whispers, unbuttoning my pyjama top. She is wearing a burka now, not a hajib, so I cannot tell by just looking into her huge eyes whether she is sincere. Although I am weary of deception, I manage to flinch and look defiant.

“No, no. You do not see my meaning. I think you are a kind man. I have heard of what you did for the poor girl.”

Jayson has nothing to say about this. A sly woman. I have nothing to say and close my eyes. Gently she rubs me with a flannel and I feel pleasure.

“I am here since two years with my husband from Hamburg. Last year, he is killed near Aleppo. I am stayed to look after the sick and wounded. Many widows are run away. They are slaves. For sex.”

“You too?”

“Once only, because I have wept too much. They leave me then. I am come for Allah and to kill our enemies - not families and girls. I am not prepared for this. I want to go home.”

The door opens. It is the burly man. He finishes the Twix he is eating and throws the wrapper down. He orders the nurse out like a cur. He sits on the edge of my bed, takes the towel and, tenderly, dries me.

“Oh, Aalim, Aalim...I know you are wrong. I smell it on you. Deceit. My Chief is suspicious but wants to believe. I am suspicious and only want the proof. What did you really say to that little prostitute? Of course, you will not tell me! And I have slapped her and slapped her but she refuses to speak. But I am sure you will give me the proof sooner or later because a liar, you know, always tells one lie too many. Why are you here? To harm us. But how? We find you naked. You are not bugged. You are too good to be true! Too innocent, like an angel.”

He puts his nose close to my chest and inhales very deeply.

“Ah - how sweet you are! I shall just be across the way. Good night.”

As he leaves, he blows me a kiss and wishes me sweet dreams, smiling uncannily like my father once when I had a fever. In the silence I can hear the blood pounding in my ears. *One lie too many*. I know he is right. An urge grips me to clench my teeth and count to ten. I could hide

under the bed. Brain is present as well as his henchman. If the king is here, then so are probably other courtiers. Even if that is wrong, I can always plead I have acted on persuasive evidence. Sleep comes and goes as I debate whether to summon the helicopter. They will not come in darkness, says Jayson. At last, after more shallow sleep and troubled dreams, daylight is coming. I begin counting, wondering how long to leave it before hiding under the bed. I have only reached seven when the bomb drops.

I have no idea how long I have been concussed. At first, I think I must have dreamt it, but here I am, lying under debris mottled by sunlight. Guns are sounding and there are vapour trails criss-crossing the fragment of sky I can see. I realise I am on the floor under plasterboard, because the paper flapping near my face is the poster of the sea which was on the wall. To my left there are splinters of wood and broken porcelain. There is a corner of a sink with a tap. I almost laugh in surprise to see it. I can hear voices and the sound of things being lifted and shifted. I cannot move my legs because they are pinned by something heavy. I raise a hand - it is red and sticky with blood. So much blood - it cannot be mine as I would have surely bled to death. I raise my head and a foot away make out a dissociated face staring at me under a ceiling tile like a red hat. It is the burly man no longer enjoying a private joke. The clenched hand which patted me dry is to the right of the face on the end of an arm blown off at the elbow. I realise that the pulpy rest of him is lying across my legs. I suddenly worry that I too am not a whole being and raise my head as high as I can. I look left to see my arm as I raise it. Then I notice my nurse who is staring at me in death like my friendly enemy.

Cries are getting louder. I conclude that the bomb must have dropped in the corridor and that the wall of my room, this wall, must have saved me. I shout out - that I am here - and the cries stop. Then the partition wall is heaved up and most of the sky appears and then faces.

I recognise the black kurtas and turbans of Isis fighters. As I am lifted up and out, I see that the whole building is a jagged, tangled ruin. My ears are ringing so loud I cannot hear what is being said to me. Hands dust me down, a cloth wipes my face and the cool revives me. Were it not for the black Hillux truck which brought me, it would be impossible to know, because of the debris, that there is a road here.

To my instant dismay, leaning on the passenger door, dusty and dishevelled, is Brain. He looks at me in disgust and climbs inside the cab. I am slid on a stretcher into the back and I watch my northern rescuer clamber in with me. The Frenchman closes the flap. I become aware that my companion is training his rifle on me. He is eating an apple and I would love the other one resting in his lap.

“It must have been a missile,” says he through a munch. “Chief’s as mad as hell. Lucky escape for you again, pal. A-fucking-mazing.”

“Why are you aiming your gun at me?”

“Cos I do as I’m told. Brace yourself.”

We move forward, lurching left and right over rubble. I ask him where we are going but he shakes his head. Looking up at the sky, I start counting and soon the tall buildings are diminishing until, after thirteen minutes, we are in open country.

*

“You go to Ashraf and he is arrested. You come to us and we get targeted, even though we’re a hospital. Can this be a coincidence? There’s a toilet hut here out back where we’re going to put

you to bake for a few days. If you are a homing pigeon for the Yanks, sooner or later they'll blow you up."

I have been tied to a chair. My face is swollen. I have been given a good pounding which after a while has stopped hurting. Numbness has taken over. I'm at the point now where I'm ready to fight back, caution to the wind.

"Why would I volunteer for a suicide mission for those bastards? Do the enemy work like that?"

"A fair question, but let me tell you this much. If they would blow up their own twin towers to launch a war on terror, of what consequence are you? Here are a few "what-ifs". What if they recruit you to gather intel - that's what they made you think - but fail to tell you the truth? What if they drug you before you fall out of the sky and insert some kind of tracker inside you. You bleep, bleep, bleep and then in comes one of their Maverick air-to-surface jobbies and whoosh! What if you've been used, Aalim?"

"But you searched me - and that would be crazy!"

"How so?"

"How would they know the target was any good? For all they know, I might be bleeping in a fucking cemetery. Blow up a few corpses?"

Surely not. Surely I have not been used. But I have not felt a signal since the explosion. At least three days. But the bomb or the beatings might have affected the device. Or do my "friends" think my tooth is lying amongst rubble in my dead head?

"Ah! I can see this gives you much food for thought. A mistake, I think, to think it over."

"No, Sir! I was just thinking how paranoid you are."

But as I say this, I am thinking of my predecessor who Jayson said had disappeared.

"Not paranoid. You have been used, Aalim. These are ruthless people. If they would murder thousands in the towers, on 9/11, what significance have you? Trillions of dollars in arms sales for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan against a few tiny lives such as yours! You now have a choice. We either take your head off on video and post it, or we can use you as bait and lure their men to destruction. A great coup for the cause. First we must know the truth. A few days in the hut should sweat it out of you."

I have a bucket and inedible food is thrown in at me daily with a bottle of water. A few cracks allow in a little light. My primitive clock. Some air is blown in too, but scarcely enough to relieve the intense heat. I have no need of the bucket. Four days have elapsed. Should I clench my teeth and bite to five = not fine? There has been no account taken of this; apart from counting to ten, I am not supposed to initiate, only respond. If five means I am in the shit, what does that mean to a ruthless operator like Jayson? It would mean I am surrounded by enemies, and if so, another missile or whatever it was might be launched to take them out. A count to ten would produce the same result. Or maybe I do Jayson a disservice. Perhaps he is only a slightly bigger cog in the machine than Zoya and me. Why have I been so naïve? If they could take out Brain remotely, why risk the SAS? But these are precisely the sceptical thoughts Brain wants me to have. Maybe the bomb on the clinic was a genuine mistake. Collateral damage? Perhaps even as I wrestle with these thoughts Jayson is wondering where I am and what I'm into. Perhaps I have been signalled but damage means I cannot receive or respond. My mind turns over and over again to the deal on offer. I lure the SAS into a trap and Isis have their triumph. They take their heads off, then mine. Unthinkable.

It is the fifth day of confinement and I am so weak and starved by heat and hunger that I can no longer care. I can tell the sun is getting low now and I clench my teeth, counting to ten. I count

down another half-hour listening hard for chopper blades. But there is only a heavy, sun-baked silence and I feel more alone in the world than I ever have. It will soon be dark and they will not be coming.....

A huge roar. I am flying backwards with wooden planks from the shithouse into the wasteland, seeing the farmhouse consumed by a huge fireball. The Hillux rocks but does not quite roll over. I land with my kurta around my neck. I manage to get to my feet and stagger towards the blaze. Nothing, absolutely nothing, not even a cockroach can have survived this fierce heat. Amongst the snapping and crackling of timbers I imagine I hear screams. I mutter a thank you to Jayson. "If you can hear this, Brain and his pals are burning to death as I speak. I'm going back to Raqqa."

There are scorched corn cobs around me and I eat greedily, sitting on my haunches. In every direction there is wilderness. The only lights are the stars. I wait until the fire has more or less consumed itself and then venture further in, looking in the moonlight for any body throw clear by the blast. A smoking pile of black rags and something red draws my attention. Red boots. I drag the corpse of Rizwan clear and throw dust over the clothes. The Frenchman's face has burnt off and his teeth are grinning. In the pajama pockets I find a phone, a wallet stuffed with notes - but no keys. For the scorched black rag, I swap my filthy kurta, and wind his turban around my head. I smear my face with dirt. I walk to the truck and find the keys in the ignition. But can I drive? If I stick the gear lever into second with my left hand first, I should be okay to steer one-handed. Looking up, wondering which way to go, I see a faint glow on the horizon where the sun has set. I have to go west.

It is painful and awkward and slow, but I can manage. Eventually I find a track heading roughly west. A number keeps plaguing me and it is a good ten minutes before I realise what it is. 07977 932407. FAMILY LAWYER. Jayson.

I pull over and look at the phone. I have a weak signal. I dial. It rings for ages and I am on the point of driving on when he answers.

"Who is this?"

"Aalim, you fucking bastard."

"What? Where are you? Who said you should phone?"

"You did, remember? You tricked me. I was your stoolie all along."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know? Blown me up twice! Well, congrats, Brain and all his oppos are dead."

"How?"

"Missiles, bombs - don't pretend you don't know."

"How many? Victims?"

"I didn't stay to count them. I'm going to Raqqa."

"No- too dangerous! Get yourself back to Aleppo and then the coast. Count five. Our man will pick you up."

"There will be one more passenger."

"Who?"

I cut him dead and painfully ease the truck back into gear, this time with my plastered right forearm. It is time, as I drive slowly on, to practise my rusty French and reacquire a least something like the accent of my smoked rescuer.

As I approach the sky-glow of the city, a building - or more accurately a monument - comes into my aching head. After that first explosion in Raqqa, it was passing overhead as the truck in which I was slumped went rocking and rolling over debris. I recall it appearing fifty-three

seconds after our departure. It is white and tapers curiously upwards like an obelisk. The HQ in which I was held must be easy to find from that point, being the only collapsed building in the street - in which I recall seeing a hotel, an apartment building and a row of shops as I was carried out on the stretcher. If Salima survived the bomb, perhaps she has been put to work in the kitchen of the hotel. It is, I admit, a long shot but I promised to bring her to safety. Under the cover of darkness I have a chance to bluff my way in. There is an Isis flag attached to the aerial. I am a messenger bringing bad news about the Chief. I can play the exhausted man easily. My face must be a terrible mess after the beatings and I am emaciated. My tormentors have unwittingly provided me with the perfect disguise.

The engine whines now in third gear as I take it to its extreme and rumbles as I slow down, but the glow of the city has slowly increased and spread. The monument will not disappear from my inner-scape and I realise quite suddenly that I have seen it before during my training. The fuzzy image of a circle at the top becomes a clock face. This is the clock tower on the main square - execution square, place of beheading of hostages and crucifixion of Christians. I am hurtling - or rather trundling - to my probable doom.

The first streets of the outskirts are deserted more or less. Even Jihadis must sleep. There are just a few scavenging dogs. I begin to count seconds and manage to drop the truck into second gear, creeping further into the ill-lit town, strictly following the main thoroughfare. After a count of nearly twelve minutes, as expected, I glimpse the clock tower and approach the square. At a checkpoint, I wearily insist that I must get to HQ.

“I have an important message from the Chief. The Americans have bombed the farm. There must be a traitor at HQ.”

I wait while the cab and the back of the truck are inspected as well as the underneath with torches, more, I suspect, as a matter of routine than out of genuine suspicion. The man in charge stares at my plastered arm which I am holding in agony, and offers to drive me. He has an American accent. I move over gratefully into the passenger seat and in the headlights I notice for the first time ghastly heads staring from spikes. The thought that mine could shortly be joining them, I instantly suppress.

“Tell me what happened.” says my companion.

“I don’t know whether it was a bomb or a missile. I was lucky. In the toilet in the back garden.”

“Did the Chief escape? You said you have a message from him.”

I shake my head.

“Dead?”

“I think so. All dead.”

“So there is no message.”

“There is. From me. Someone is getting out signals to the Americans. Two bombs in one week?”

“You are French. Vous êtes Français?”

His accent is no better than mine.

“Oui. De Paris. Je m’appelle Rizwan.”

God bless old Mrs Wallbank, the dowdy French teacher we tormented half to death.

Then he asks me another question, but his French is so bad that I do not understand. I shake my head and emit a long breath of exhaustion. But he is not deterred.

“I *said*, I met another French guy called Rizwan a while back here in Raqqa.”

“Il y a beaucoup de Parisiens ici. . . . lots of brothers from Paris. The French treat us like shit.”

This leaves him silent. I dare not look round at him. I am in a bind. I only have one option if I am

to get away with it. I must pretend to be unconscious and see where it leads.

The truck stops. He shakes me several times but I play dead. The door slams and I wait a few seconds before stealing a crafty glance at the ignition. I take the keys and put them under the seat. A moment passes before my door opens and I slump into the arms of someone. Other hands take my feet and I am carried in. Another quick glance reveals that I am in the lobby of the hotel. I am heaved onto a bed and left. The room is small and besides the bed there is only a wardrobe and a wash stand. Although my arm, face and head are smouldering with pain, the softness of the bed sends me to sleep.

I am woken by the tinkle of pouring water. The light is still on and the window is dark.

“You are thirsty?”

I look round and a woman clad in black head to toe is holding a glass over me. I take it and drink greedily. She pours me another. I decide to throw caution to the wind.

“Listen. I must find Salima. Do you know her? She is a young -”

“I know her. She works here, as I do. What you want with her? She is only fifteen.”

“No. You misunderstand. I promised to help her leave.”

“No. She is happy here. She has become a sister.”

“I know but she is a child. She should not be in Raqqa.”

The door opens and two armed men enter. One is my driver. He asks if I feel better.

The other tells me he is in charge and asks me to tell my story.

“Everyone is dead, burnt to death or blown to bits.”

A wave of futility washes over me. Like the teeth of the hydra, ten more warriors will rise up for every one fallen.

“You. Why not you?”

“I told this man already. I was in the toilet. It was a miracle. Allah be praised!”

This makes him snort. Why would Allah spare me, he protests, but allow El-Sayed to die? This is the first mention of the Chief’s name. I declare that we cannot know the ways and means of God. He studies me for signs of irony. He tells me I will be held under guard until they have had a chance to investigate out at the farm. The night seems to have a gone on for ever and it surely cannot be long before dawn. He barks out orders to the woman and I am left with her. Is she trembling? Is she disillusioned too like my previous nurse and yearning to escape? I have few cards now left to play.

“I mean to get to Turkey by tomorrow. You can come too, if you bring Salima to me.”

“I cannot come. My husband is fighting here.”

“Where are you from?”

“Lebanon.”

She presses both palms against her forehead in despair.

“I understand. At least allow one girl to escape this hell-hole. She has no business here. I’m begging you in the name of Allah.”

She leaves the room and five minutes later returns with a sleepy girl. I get up. Salima falls into my arms and I hold her tight, telling her that she must be brave. I thank the woman and ask her if there an easy way to leave the building.

“Through the emergency door at the end of the corridor. Down the back stairs and into the kitchen. Salima knows the way. But before you go you must save my life. You must hit me. I was told to guard the door with a rifle.”

“You have a rifle?”

She brings it in and I thank her before, eyes closed, swinging my plaster round to knock her out.

Agony. Salima gasps.

“Come on. She’ll be okay. Show me the way.”

The kitchen is in darkness. Salima tells me to wait while she fills a bag with fruit and grabs a bottle of water. She leads the way to the back door. The yard we find ourselves in is rank with the stench of overflowing bins. I tell her we need to get into the main street out front.

“This way.”

We squeeze past a skip into a narrow alley. The gate at the end is padlocked. There is no way I can climb it.

“I know. Wait here.” says Salima.

She comes back from the kitchen with a wicked carving knife and uses the point like a chisel to dig out the screws. I look up at the sky anxiously while she works. We have to be away before dawn. The last screw hits the floor with a ching and we creep out into the street. The truck is still there, mounting the pavement. The street is empty. I feel underneath the seat for the keys and start the engine, telling Salima to lie on the floor. The clock on the dash says it is a quarter to five. There is the first threat of daylight in the sky back in the direction I have come.

“I’m relying on you Salima. When we are out of town you can read the signs for me - and change gear. Because my hand is useless.”

I waggle the gear stick with my elbow and she nods. She pushes it into second as I show her and we move off.

There are a few figures on the streets as we head west and few show any interest in us. At moderate speed, now in third, I follow the major road out of town. A truck similar to ours with soldiers standing in the back passes us in the opposite direction and I say my prayers, hoping they will not turn around to pursue us. A glance in my mirror at the brightening sky shows me the road behind is empty. With relief I watch the city gradually give way to the emptiness of the desert.

My training has instilled in my mind a very detailed map of Syria. There is a huge lake between Raqqa and Aleppo named in honour of Assad. On its banks I find a clump of trees well off the main road where we can hide for the day. I reckon one more night should be enough to get us to Samandag in Turkey where I landed God knows how many days ago. The petrol tank is three quarters full. Texts to Jayson however go unanswered and I have a horrible feeling that I will never see my ferryman, Theo, again. So I shall have to improvise. We eat half of our fruit and we sleep off and on in the drowsy heat. As the sun settles for the night, I remove the Isis flag and throw the rifle into the scrub.

“We are near the border,” says Salima. “Five kilometres.”

“Then get ready for a bit of a bumpy ride.”

We have taken a long detour to avoid Aleppo and patrols. Once, seeing a convoy approaching, I pulled well off the road. Now safety is within our grasp. The moon is bright enough for me to drive without lights so I leave the road and drive slowly, trying to keep the hills remembered from my walk ashore, in the centre of the windscreen. To the left of them must lie the coast. My eyes keep glancing at the odometer as I avoid tussocks and cactus. Five, ten, fifteen kilometres are clocked up. Those bright lights to our far right we passed a while ago, were, I have to assume, at the border post. I stop to have a good look at the topography but find no landmark I remember after Zoya picked me up. Zoya! How I would love to see you again!

That the coast road is still more or less parallel is shown by occasional passing headlights. It is just gone four o' clock. I decide to drive on through wasteland for another ten kilometres to be absolutely sure. What then? I can only hope that yet another call to Jayson might be answered. In more hope than expectation I clench my teeth and count to five.

*

An angry voice. I open my eyes to see men in uniform, a lot of them, peering at us in the pit of our sand dune. I recognize these as the uniforms from the border crossing on Cyprus. Behind the policemen stands a group of curious locals. The bird soaring above us could not care less.

"I'm very sorry. I don't speak Turkish. I am a British citizen and this is a Syrian girl, a Christian refugee I rescued in Raqqa."

"How you here?" asks a different man.

"Truck. It's a couple of miles back there."

"Why you *here*? *Here on beach*?"

Salima has woken up and is clinging to me.

"I am an agent of MI6 sent on a mission to destroy Isis. We're waiting to be picked up by a boat from Cyprus."

This is translated for the superior officer who looks decidedly sceptical. And who can blame him? I am in rags. A cripple.

They took us away in separate cars and I never saw Salima again. I only hope that amongst the many cruel people hating the homeless invaders from the south, she found a loving pair of welcoming arms.

8 Debriefing

"Mr Chaudri, are you some kind of Walter Mitty character? You say here in your statement that you were used by some agent of British Intelligence called Jayson as a live target to take out someone called - hold on - El Sayed, a Jihadi terrorist?"

"If I have made it all up, how come I know the name El Sayed?"

"Well. I assume there is a huge amount of propaganda stuff on the internet. And if you have been soldiering for so-called Islamic State -"

"So-called? They are no more so-called than you are a so-called diplomat from the British Embassy! They exist, so what the fuck does it matter what they are called?"

"- soldiering for the SO-CALLED Islamic State, then you would have extensive knowledge of their propaganda and key players."

The pale, pudgy man of around forty on the other side of the table reminds me somewhat of ET at the London police station on my second day of arrest. Public school? Oxbridge? He is impatient and rude, clearly annoyed to be dragged away from his cushy routine to this unpleasant place of detention.

"HM Government are keen to get you back to face charges of being actively involved with a terrorist organization. This story of yours holds no water. Enquiries have been made by our competent authorities and no-one of the name Jayson and no young woman of the name Zoya

Jolob exists within the circles you allude to."

I touch my molar and go into a detailed explanation of the implant while his eyes roll around in

his ghastly face. God, he must have hated being posted to a hot country. What diplomatic sin has he committed to deserve it?

“Mr Chaudri. Please, do you honestly expect me to take such a cock and bull story seriously? Expect the ambassador to pay for a dentist to come into this stinking hole to take your tooth out to look for a transmitter?”

I shrug. I have been here a month. It is October. Wherever this is, it is better than Syria despite the food and the smell. I have found out from an inmate that the British have begun bombing targets in Syria. So much for my puny effort to destroy Isis.

“Well, I welcome the chance to have my day in court. Tell the ambassador and your higher beings that I shall have plenty to say. How I was betrayed by MI6 for one thing and nearly killed.”

I said this fully aware that apart from the tooth I had not a shred of evidence.

How I wish now I had kept the tooth a secret until my return to Britain, because three days later I was held down in my cell and injected. When I woke up, the tip of my tongue felt a gap where my molar had been.

10 Home

“The decision has been taken, Mr Chaudri, after much deliberation, not to bring charges against you. It is felt that it would not be in the public interest.”

“But I want to be charged! I want the whole country to know what an evil bunch of bastards you are.”

“Evil we are not. Isis threatens us all. You cannot deny that you fled London, went to Syria and joined Isis in Raqqa, their stronghold. However, in view of your change of heart demonstrated by your brave act in rescuing a Christian girl from her tormentors, an exception will be made.....”

I chuckle and sigh. This really is the Alien opposite and he has brought me papers to sign in a zip-up attaché case.

“It is felt that no good could accrue from any story - however outlandish - you might be tempted to tell or even attempt to sell to a newspaper, unlikely though it be that any editor would be so foolish as to publish it.”

“I was used not as a human shield, but as a human spear, and you expect me to sign this and forget all about it?”

“May I reiterate, Mr Chaudri, that there is no corroboration whatsoever of this extraordinary story. Let me also stress that in many countries - most countries even - any person could, by dint of uttering such absurd allegations against the powers-that-be, put themselves in extreme peril.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Not at all. Simply reminding you that this is indeed Great Britain and that you are fortunate to be a subject of Her Majesty, and that we pride ourselves on the due process of the law. To sign this document will only oblige you to maintain silence.”

“Only? Really? And if I refuse?”

“There is no duress. You are free to choose. But you must bear in mind that to launch any publicity campaign you might be planning would be deemed detrimental to the State. In that case, the Home Secretary might order that you be kept here until she is sure that your release would not endanger the public. You have been with Isis after all. You might therefore be kept

here for the foreseeable future.”

“So much for the due process of the law! I assume you have heard of Habeus Corpus?”

“Of course I have. Normally that would apply. But this is an abnormal situation. We are at war. Were you to be brought before a court, you would face a lengthy process, a guilty verdict and a long sentence. You should view this proposal as a genuine gesture of clemency.”

“Tosh. You want to keep the smell of the shit inside your trousers.”

He winces. He taps the table with his pen and looks at his watch.

“Mr Chaudri. Discreet enquiries have been made. It seems your mother is quite ill. It would be a great relief for her to know you are safe and free. To see you of course. You can tell her - truthfully - that you rescued refugees. Indeed, it could be arranged, as part of the rehabilitation of your reputation for a story to appear about the girl Salima in a popular newspaper. It could also be arranged that you be given some kind of desk job with the police - in view of your disability.”

“How can I possibly sign?”

He blows hard and looks up in frustration at the artexed ceiling. I have no idea where I have been interned. There are no windows in any room. At the airport I was taken straight from the small jet and driven off through fog in a police van.

“No, *how* can I sign? - I’m right-handed. Useless!”

“Ah! Right. Just make a squiggle with your left, here here and here. I will fill in the date.”

It is February 2nd 2016.

The next morning, when I have finished in the bathroom, I notice that the green metal door is ajar. The two pleasant middle-aged gentlemen who have been bringing in my meals and watching in silence while I pick at them, are nowhere to be seen. I slip on my shoes and grab my jacket and push the door open. A corridor. I walk out and down some steps and enter a small garden. On a bench the Alien is sitting, reading the Daily Telegraph. He smiles and asks me how I slept and pats the bench.

“It’s nice, isn’t it, to breathe fresh air again?”

The daffodils are already wilting. The air is mild. Birds are singing that should be silent. My companion unzips his black leather case and produces a stiff white envelope.

“Take this please, for starters.”

I open it and count five hundred pounds in twenties.

“You can get a taxi home not far from here. Go through the gate and keep turning left. You’ll come to a road you will recognize. Best of British!”

I walk out onto a gravel path hemmed in on both sides by tall Victorian buildings. A face - a woman - looks down on me from a high window and darts back. I turn left and left again and see traffic stopping and starting beyond tall black railings. A man in a uniform appears from a hidden doorway and opens the gate, touching the peak of his cap. The gate clangs shut behind me. I look back into what seems to be a labyrinth and carry on, trying to place where I am. I turn another corner and see, of all things, the Cenotaph.

11 Aftershocks

You do not need me to update you on the progress of the so-called War on Terror. So I shall not mention it again, apart from saying that my scepticism about bi-lateral guilt and innocence has intensified. News that the British are selling weapons to the Saudis which they deploy against civilians in Yemen makes me wonder where terrorism begins and ends.

El Sayed’s crazy assertion about the World Trade Centre and 9/11 kept surfacing in my head like

moles. A man I play chess with online - yes, I am hooked, but I have not improved much - put me onto programmes made by “truthers” on YouTube and I could not resist looking. Theories about controlled demolition, dustification via directed free-energy technology - and even the generation of holograms of aeroplanes, kept me busy for a month. I only know that the official version no longer stacks up for me - take a look yourself - but I fear that the proliferation of conflicting conspiracy theories will serve to keep, by a terrible, deep and perverse irony, the true conspiracy, if there is one, safe. The conspirators may have posted their guilt into the maw of an amoral universe and if, one day in the far distance, history roundly condemns them, will they care, after living on the fat of the land so lavishly, will they give a damn in the oblivion they are contemplating? A bit like Jimmy Savile, lovvl. The world is like a giant abscess of woes fit to burst.

The story in the newspaper - which I would have rejected anyway - never materialised. Likewise - and likewise - the job making paper darts left-handed. In the first instance, I wanted to attract no attention to myself or my family - who were amazed and delighted to see me that February morning - from any avenging angel. In the second, the thought of being re-hired out of pity was nauseating. Four thousand pounds arrives monthly in my account and the two million pounds promised by Jayson will have materialised when I reach my sixty-eighth birthday, if I ever do. In the spring I took to walking around Highbury in the vain hope of bumping into Zoya. Then I got myself banned from the Nine Pins when I got drunk and told the whole bar how corrupt Britain was, how evil the Americans, how we were not much better than Isis. A bloke offered to smash my fucking muslim face in but the landlord intervened to save my skin. In July, after I had been prescribed anti-depressants and I was feeling a little better, I called into my mother’s and was given a letter addressed to me care of her. The sender had included no return address.

Dear Aalim,

I heard from a little bird that you got back okay. I do miss you and our games of chess. You must not blame Jayson that things went so wrong. Out of the blue he took early retirement and went back up north to cultivate his orchids. In case you are wondering, I am beyond reach. I am married to a lovely man who really believes I am the secretary of a FO bigwig and that’s why I’m away from home a lot.

Hey, have a great life!

Z x

P.S.

I found this account when we were clearing my poor brother’s flat. I find it very hard to believe, but he always did tell the truth.

Mumtaz