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The Way Things Look to Me

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Published by Pan Books

Extract

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First published 2009 by Pan Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-46315-7

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by SetSystems Ltd, Saffron Walden, Essex
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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There were doors all round the hall, but they were all locked; and when Alice had been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out again.

Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

I'm working on making myself all-seeing. It's about arriving at the unknown by disordering all the senses. It's wrong to say: I think. I is someone else.

Je travaille à me rendre voyant. Il s'agit d'arriver à l'inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens. C'est faux de dire: Je pense. Je est un autre.

Arthur Rimbaud

As If He Wasn't There



Asif Declan Kalil Murphy has a brooding resentment of his name, and by extension, of his deceased parents, although he resents them for many more things than his name, up to and including their untimely departure from life. The trouble with his name, he thinks, is that it promises so much more – it promises that he will be interesting and exotic and larger than life, Irish charm and whimsy blended with South Asian mysticism and romance. Asif finds it impossible to live up to his shining name, and so shudders moth-like just beneath it; avoiding introductions and hiding behind initials. He finds it much easier to be A Murphy, a Murphy like any other, just one of the crowd of immigrants of Irish descent littering north London. Or better still, simply AM; I am what I am, thinks Asif, as his tube rumbles into the disappointing depths of Finchley Central, where the rain has made the edges of the platforms slippery, and there is a strong smell of ammonia from an unidentified source. I am what I am, he muses, not special or flawed or creative, just unimpressive, dull as dishwater, little old neutral old

nothing old me; at a certain point, he thinks, he really needs to stop blaming his parents. But not just yet. He's still young, he's just twenty-three years old, and he suspects that he has years of grievance left in him. He's an accountant like his British Asian mother before him; he lacks her strong will, but he has inherited her fickle constitution; his father was a hero who died on a peace-keeping mission several years before his wife's congested heart was to claim her; Asif knows that he has nothing approaching his father's courage, but he shares his sense of duty, and propensity to follow orders. It seems a bad joke that the very things that got Asif's father killed are the things that deny Asif his own life; Asif is not the sort to swear, but he admits to having experienced a secret, soaring thrill the first day he heard the Larkin quote, from Lila, of course: 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do.' It was so brilliantly and starkly true. Like a song he'd been humming his whole life had finally been put to words.



He walks up the steps at Finchley Central, and away from the gritty high street down the narrow, tree-lined roads towards the family home that he has inherited from his begrudged parents and that he shares with his youngest sister, Yasmin. The higgledy-piggledy streets are untidy and the knobbly, sore-looking trees are not slightly picturesque, but despite this, the walk to and

from the tube is his favourite time of day. It's when he doesn't have to be at work worrying about his performance and whether he'll Consistently Meet Expectations or Consistently Fail to Meet Expectations at his next appraisal, and when he doesn't have to be at home worrying about pretty much the same thing, waiting to be appraised wordlessly by Yasmin's NHS-assigned specialists instead. During the walk he is in between things, and no worse than anyone else; certainly not any different. During the walk he imagines that he has secret superpowers, as he is invisible, in his smart suit and precisely ironed shirt, and good shoes and tattered briefcase, which he inexplicably carries like a prize, as one might a broken nose, as though it has a scent of history about it; he is the sort of pleasant-faced young man that no one would notice.

His mobile phone rings as he turns into his street, and he stands at the corner shop in full view of his house, watching the curtain in the upstairs window twitch. Yasmin is looking out for him, as she always does between 6 p.m. and 6.30 p.m. He knows from past experience that if she doesn't see him there, she panics, and so he never digresses from his usual path without warning. He has got so used to seeing the curtain twitch in the upstairs window each and every evening that he wonders whether he'd panic himself if he didn't see it, as though Yasmin's symptoms might be contagious; after all these years of accommodating her infuriating demands for consistency and routine, her habits and neuroses, it

would hardly be surprising if he unwittingly adopted some himself. He searches for his phone in every pocket, with mounting panic, until he finally locates it; he is relieved to see that it is just his other sister calling, and answers hurriedly, aware that Yasmin is waiting and watching. 'Hi Lila, what is it?'

'I'm fine, thank you for not bloody asking. You're losing your manners spending all your days locked up with Yasmin, I've always said it would happen.'

'I don't spend my days locked up with Yasmin, just the evenings. I spend my days locked up at work,' retorts Asif, feeling guilty that Lila has managed to sum up so swiftly and with so little premeditation what he has been wondering himself.

'At Accountants' Anonymous?' sniggers Lila, pleased with her joke. 'Same difference. I'm returning your call from yesterday afternoon.'

'Oh good, you got the message. That bloke who took the call seemed really out of it.'

'Mikey? He owns the record shop. He *is* always out of it; I think he did too much dope as an adolescent or something. Still does. Has a fantastic arse though, I'm considering sleeping with him when I'm single again.'

Asif, becoming rapidly appalled at how quickly he can lose any sense of conversational control with Lila, ignores the merits of this unknown Mikey's arse and asks, 'So you're coming round tonight, at eight-ish? I'm getting a curry in for us.'

'What? As if, Asif! Spend a Friday night in with you and sodding Miss Spock. Not bloody likely.' Lila begins to laugh, and then, realizing that her cackle sounds self-consciously cruel, like a cartoon villainess, stops abruptly. 'I'm seeing Wesley tonight, anyway.'

'That's nice. Where are you meeting up?' asks Asif with pointed civility, watching the curtain twitch a little bit more.

'The Central,' admits Lila grudgingly. The Central Bar is only ten minutes' walk away from the house, a fact that hangs unspoken in the air between them.

'Then come around at eight anyway,' asks Asif at last, trying to sound business-like rather than pleading; he often gets lost between these two tones when making perfectly reasonable requests at work of the office support staff. 'You can bring Wes if you want. Or leave him there for half an hour if we embarrass you. Yasmin has something important she wants to discuss with us; she wouldn't tell me what. Something to do with school, I suppose.'

'Why is it always about Yasmin?' mutters Lila. Asif doesn't answer, as, of course, she knows why already. 'OK, I'll pop around, but just for half an hour. And get me a veggie samosa please.' Asif smiles; both he and Lila know that she doesn't really want a samosa; asking him for one is her way of saying that she'll be there, it's her promise, wrapped up in pastry and stuffed with steaming and aromatic vegetables. His smile fades a little when he

sees the curtain at the window has stopped twitching; he hopes that Yasmin isn't sitting in the corner sulking because he took so long on the phone.

When he walks into the house, it is exactly fourteen minutes past 6 p.m., so Yasmin has only had to stand at the window for fourteen minutes that day. He tries to convince himself that he doesn't need to worry about Yasmin; she'll probably be a complete delight all evening, and will behave beautifully when Lila and Wes come round. As if, Asif, he mocks himself, the childish mocking that Lila so perceptively started almost as soon as she could talk, and has never tired of since. Of all the inspiring Asian names available, why did his parents call him an unanswered question, 'As if?' The idea of something still wanting, a road untravelled, an unfinished comparison, which of course it was. They had expected a girl, whom they were going to call Kalila, which is how he had ended up with his third name. Asif Declan Kalil Murphy. A Murphy. AM. Little old nothing old As If he wasn't there.



When Asif enters his house, he goes through to the kitchen, and sees Yasmin washing up plates at the kitchen sink; her hair is pulled back in a sensible ponytail, and she is wearing a grey T-shirt and her soft, baggy jeans. She seems so normal that it almost looks contrived, as

though she has made preparations for a stranger to come in and say Hi-Honey-I'm-Home.

'Hello Asif,' she says with polite, almost rigid formality, but she does not turn towards him or acknowledge him in any other way. He is home as he always is, and that is enough for her. There is something a little bit wrong with the scene that an outsider would take some time to work out, a bit like those spot-the-difference pictures in the backs of magazines, where you have to find the tiny mismatch, a different detail in the background greenery, a strand of hair misplaced. Asif is used to Yasmin, and doesn't need any time to work it out; he can see that the plates that she is scrupulously washing up are already clean, she has probably just taken a stack straight out of the cupboard or dishwasher. Sometimes Yasmin irons already ironed clothes, although he's not very comfortable with her using the iron if he's out of the house, for obvious reasons. And sometimes she launders already clean bedlinen. Just for the calm, soothing feeling of fulfilling domestic routine; the beautifully ordinary things that their mother used to take care of, when not taking care of Yasmin.

He doesn't comment, but puts his briefcase down, and tells his sister, 'Lila's going to be here for 8 p.m. just like you asked.'

'Great, thank you,' says Yasmin mechanically, putting the last clean plate in the rack.

'She might bring Wesley,' Asif adds. 'Or she might

leave him at the bar and come by herself.' He sees Yasmin's shoulders stiffen, not because she dislikes Wesley, but because she dislikes the uncertainty of whether he will be there or not.

'Great, thank you,' she says at last, and this time she remembers to face Asif, and looks him deliberately in the eyes. Yasmin's own eyes are hazel, clear and rather pretty; specialists have occasionally commented on Yasmin's pretty eyes, something which Asif thinks is wholly inappropriate. He never leaves her alone with anyone whom he doesn't know and trust, specialist or not, and especially not with any overqualified creep who remarks on her looks; Yasmin has never had a boyfriend, and he worries that her inexperience, youth and vulnerability would make it too easy for the wrong sort of man to take advantage. After Yasmin has held his gaze for a count of Mississippi One and Mississippi Two, just as their mother taught her to do, she takes the plates out of the drying rack and puts them back in the sink, to wash up all over again.

Asif watches her for a moment, and considers asking her about her day; smarting slightly about Lila's earlier offhand remark, he wonders whether he should remind Yasmin about it being good manners to ask how someone is when she speaks to them. But then he'd have to remind Yasmin to listen to the answer as well, and to respond to it. It suddenly seems too much like hard work, and he doesn't feel up to it, he'd just like to have a beer and watch the TV for a bit. The rest of the evening stretches out

painfully before him, another evening in which he has to entertain Yasmin, or rather, let her entertain herself, while he watches over her. His little sister's warden. Fridays are the worst, as he knows he won't be escaping the next morning, but will have to be there for the whole, aching weekend, making nutritious dinners which will probably be rejected in favour of neatly compartmentalized ready-meals, planning improving activities to get Yasmin out of her room and away from her TV and computer for at least a little while. He imagines that this is what single mothers feel like. He realizes uncomfortably that he would rather be anywhere than here.

Asif tries to console himself with the fact that at least Lila will come round tonight, but he knows that she will only stay for a little while. She doesn't consider looking after Yasmin to be her job; she doesn't even think that Yasmin needs looking after, as though it is all some elaborate game that Yasmin has played for the last nineteen years in the interests of being bloody-minded. And so Asif is left to do the looking after, and the coping, and the caring; as he has his whole life, and especially now that his parents are dead. No wonder he hates them; resents, he corrects himself sternly, I resent them. It's OK to resent your dead parents, but it's not OK to hate them just because they're dead. It feels like just the sort of fine distinction that he'd have to explain to Yasmin.



Asif orders the takeaway and gets his beer out of the fridge; there is a photo of his mum with the three of them as children on the fridge door, with little Yasmin on her lap, but sitting scrupulously forward, to avoid touching her siblings. Lila and himself are pushed out to the side. When he was a child, he used to believe that his mother was the most beautiful woman in the world, practically bridal with her permanently fresh-faced and dewy complexion. Now, as he looks at the photo, he can see that she is smiling with unnatural, strained calm, her expression almost assessing, as though she is daring someone to criticize her or her offspring. He hears his mother's voice, 'Engage with her, Asif; you need to engage with her, or she'll never learn to . . .'

'To what, Mum?' Asif had replied with adolescent annoyance at her deliberately trailing off. 'To be normal?' The look his mother had given him was so disappointed that he'd almost rather she'd hit him; as she sometimes had Lila. A disciplined slap to show where the acceptable boundaries were; a slap issued with sadness rather than anger, along with the quiet command, 'Go to your room and think about what you said.' And how Lila had sobbed that obvious, overused phrase, clutching her sore face, a phrase which probably haunted her now, years later, 'I HATE you, I wish you were DEAD,' before running upstairs.

Sometimes he thinks he should take the photo down, but it seems to him that would be an act of defeat; as though his mother would just say I-told-you-so from the

safe distance of her harp-twanging cloud. How easy, it would be, not to engage with Yasmin. Just to share the house as indifferently as flatmates who've come together through an internet ad, and to coexist like toddlers sharing a set of toys at a nursery, sitting side by side but not playing together. Leading parallel lives, never having to connect. She could sit at her computer, and watch the same episode of *The Simpsons* and wear the same clothes all week without him commenting, and he could go to work and go to the pub and snog a kind-faced stranger and come back drunk and pass out on the couch without having to notice whether or not she'd eaten or done her homework or kept her medical appointments. Engage with her, Asif, his mother tells him coldly. Yasmin's not sorry for herself, so why are you?

Asif sighs; he is unable to be disobedient, even to a memory. 'Thanks for washing up, Yas,' he says. 'So, how was school today?'

'School was fine,' says Yasmin automatically, abruptly putting the last double-washed plate in the rack, and walking away from the sink. She looks at Asif, Mississippi One, Mississippi Two, and then leaves the room, and heads upstairs.

'Did anything interesting happen?' Asif perseveres, calling up the stairwell.

Yasmin pauses and looks at her feet; lots and lots of things have happened today: Tilly came into History class ten minutes late, and had a red bruise on her neck that she tried to hide with a fringed purple scarf, and

there was a spider in the corner of the Great Hall where they had assembly, descending on a silky line which caught the light, and they sang one of Yasmin's least favourite hymns because it had five typos in the hymn book which always annoyed her, and one of the first years had cried in the loos and Yasmin had remembered to ask what was wrong but had forgotten to listen to the answer and left when the bell went for her next class, and she had walked around the playing fields eight times clockwise and eight times anticlockwise at lunchtime, and she had gone to the canteen and had orange juice and grated cheese and bread for lunch, and Mr Hutchinson had read *The Pardoner's Tale* at the afternoon sixth-form lecture in what was meant to be a Middle English accent, but she had counted thirty-one inconsistencies in his pronunciation, and his lip had had a bubble of spittle on it when he'd finished, and in French class they had started reading Camus' *L'Étranger* which starts off with the line '*Aujourd'hui, Maman est morte*,' and the opening chapters are meant to shock you because the character's mother had just died but he still went on a date with a girl while he wore a black armband and watched a funny film starring a famous French comedian, but it hadn't shocked Yasmin at all, as she had wanted to watch *The Simpsons* after Mum's funeral and only hadn't because of Lila . . .

Yasmin looks up from her feet and down the stairs towards Asif, as she tries to work out if any of these might be classified as 'interesting'. Just a few seconds

have passed since he has asked his question, and all these images and many others are melting and swirling with insistent lucidity around her head, each with their own texture and shape and taste and music, each recollected moment as present and loud and impressive as the next, as though demanding that they get plucked out and chosen, even though she knows that they are probably Mostly Irrelevant. Her gaze fixes and focuses upon the drink in Asif's hand, and she says with no further hesitation, 'Yes, I had orange juice at lunchtime. They normally run out by the time I get to the canteen, but there was still some today.' She feels satisfied with herself for this small achievement; he has asked, and she has replied, the perfectly ordinary tennis of conversation, a matter of returning the ball with appropriate speed, and not letting it bounce out of play; there are no spectators at this rally, but if there were, they would be looking left and right and left again, as Asif's words and then her own go thwack-thwock across the invisible net of each other's consciousness. Her response isn't slightly interesting to her, but she hopes that it is interesting to Asif.

Asif smiles at her encouragingly. 'That's nice. Our office canteen doesn't even have orange juice. Just lots of complicated mixed fruit smoothies. You've been there, you remember, don't you?' Yasmin smiles back, to make him happy by showing that she is, but as she is distracted by the importance of returning his smile, she doesn't really register what he says, and realizes that she has let the ball bounce out of play; asking him to repeat himself

would bring attention to this, so instead she makes an assenting sound that follows, rather than accompanies her smile. It seems to Asif as though she is agreeing with unnecessary solemnity to what he has just said, effectively closing the conversation, so he attempts nothing further as she carries on upstairs. A moment later, Asif hears the familiar theme tune to *The Simpsons* playing from her bedroom, a sound he used to love and now heartily loathes.