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Beauty

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1

Some time before dawn in Wolverhampton, Beauty Begum got up from the sofa. She stood in the middle of the living room and scratched her scalp through short hair.

'Feshab,' she muttered, and went to the bathroom.

She used the *budna* to clean herself and flushed the toilet. At the sink, she washed both hands and wrists three times – *Bismillah hir Rahmaanir Raheem* – rinsed her mouth with water, and cleaned her nostrils, face and ears three times. After wiping her wet hands over her hair and shaking them off, she passed her forearms under the tap, and washed her feet in the bath.

Beauty put on a clean salwar from the cupboard and looked in the mirror at the mess she had made, two months ago, of her once waist-length black hair. She'd loved her hair and would brush it for hours, alone at night, after she'd finished cleaning her uncle Mukhtar's house in Bangladesh.

He and his wife would tell her how dark-skinned she was and that no man other than Habib would marry her. She'd overeaten, starved and drunk dirty water to make herself ill, and cut all her hair off when it had started to fall out. Let everyone in the village think she was mad, too. Her uncle Mukhtar had phoned Beauty's father in England; the girl was *faggol*, crazy, and was still refusing

to be a proper wife to Habib Choudhury, the forty-five-year-old mullah of the village.

It had been a good match. He was a Choudhury, high *zat*, and they were *hom zat*. Low.

Beauty put her blanket and pillow in the cupboard under the stairs, and went back to the living room. After praying, she stood and looked down at the Parkfields estate from the third-floor window of the 'Rise' – a long, squat block of two-storey flats on a grassy mound. In the darkness outside, street lamps caught the drizzle and lit up the other blocks and the paths that led from black stairwells to half-empty car parks. Her eyes ran absently along the doorways, looking for signs of life. Between the flats, a taxi slipped past the row of shops on the road into town.

Al-lāh, where are we?

And what kind of a name was *Woolverhamtun*?

She'd been sent to Bangladesh to marry mullah Choudhury when she was fourteen, and since that first night five years ago when he'd come to her room and tried to lie on top of her and she'd screamed so loudly that he'd given up, she had managed to keep him away from her. She was still too young, his family had said, give it time. But Habib Choudhury was desperate to marry someone with a British passport and join his brother in the UK. He'd waited and waited, until finally Beauty had acted loony and her father – the old man – had come to fetch her. Convincing them she was mad had been her only way out. With her passport hidden from her and no money, where would she have run?

When they arrived in England the old man told her that he had moved the family from London to Wolverhampton to be nearer her mum's relatives. By now Beauty no longer cared that they didn't tell her anything. They hadn't told her about the mullah.

*

Beauty had been outside twice since she'd been back; the first time to the shop and the Chick King – Southern Fried Chicken 'n' Kebabs – with her little brother, Faisal. The shop was a newsagent and off-licence, rented Bollywood films, sold overpriced tins and stuff in fridges to the white people who ate that kind of thing, and was the only place in the area that did top-ups. The old white lady in front of her in the queue had put a pound on her electricity card.

At Chick King the kebabs were quite good, not as good as in London where she had grown up, but not bad. Faisal had thought he saw her returning the Sikh guy's smile, so she hadn't been allowed to go there again. He'd poked her in the back all the way up to the flat and called her a *magi*. That night she'd thought about the Sikh's silver bangle and the dark hair of his forearms, and hated herself for it. Maybe Faisal was right; she was like a prostitute.

Beauty watched the lights come on in the windows of a flat in the block opposite. A door opened and a man hurried along the walkway to the stairwell, pulling his coat on as he walked.

What a place this was! Full of white tramps and Sikhs. There were lots of *hallahol* as well, which was good. Black girls weren't as scary as whites.

There were masses of Somalis in this part of town. She liked the way the girls did their headscarves. All the other kids were Somali at the mosque where Faisal and Sharifa, her little sister, went after school. They were the only two Asian kids there. That was one good thing.

If you go near Asians, that's it: 'Oh, did you hear your daughter's going out with this one? Did you hear your son's doing this?'

She went through to the kitchen to drink some tea on her own before the day started. She'd have to make sure the little ones got up to pray and were ready for school. Only they weren't so little any more. Faisal was thirteen now, and Sharifa nine. Her mother would be up at midday. Her older brother, Dulal – she always called him *Bhai-sahb*, brother – worked nights in a chicken processing factory; she would have time to cook for him and get his clothes ready when she got back home at four o'clock.

If she hadn't had to go into town to the Jobcentre course, she'd have spent the rest of the day making lunch.

Whatever they wanna eat, so you've got to cook.

She washed their clothes or cleaned the bathrooms, made dinner, did the ironing and made supper; then tea, tea, tea as they watched Bangla TV or twenty-four hour news into the night. When the old man went to bed she could take the blanket out of the cupboard, lie on the sofa and talk herself to sleep. She played out fights with her family, or scenes with boys whose faces she couldn't see. Mostly she talked to herself.

The old man came into the kitchen dressed in his *longhi*. The darkness under his eyes almost reached the top of his white beard.

'*Sa'haytay'ne?*' she offered.

'*O'eh,*' he grunted, and sat at the table.

She put the tea before him, returned to the sink so she wouldn't have to look at his wet lips, and kept the tap running to cover the noise of him blowing and sucking his tea. She'd never liked the way his eyes followed her, but she'd stay in the kitchen until he'd finished. After that, he would smoke a cigarette in the living room while she went upstairs to wake the little ones.

*

If he prayed that would be something. But he's a monster. If anyone tells him to pray he's gonna fight. He used to beat Mum if she told him to pray, and if the big one did, he threatened to kick us out.

At least he goes to the Mox on Fridays – that's one thing he never misses. Not to the main one, though. He doesn't know the town. No one teaches him. If anyone does teach him, thassit, he's gonna blab about his family: 'Oh, my daughter done this! My son done that!'

Anyway, he's not them type of people that goes to the Mox to talk to other Asians. If someone comes to the house he thinks they're poisoning his wife or kids. So. He's that type.

It was still too early to get the little ones up. Beauty crept into her sister's room and slipped into the warm bed beside her, laying her head on the thick, long hair that covered the pillow. Sharifa grumbled sleepily at the intrusion and turned away to face the wall. Beauty ignored her protests and pressed up against her. Years ago she'd changed her sister's nappies and fed her in the night as if she'd been her own baby.

An alarm clock rang in Faisal's room next door and was quickly switched off. Beauty listened to her younger brother heading to the bathroom. Silence fell again.

He must have gone back to bed.

The door opened and his face appeared, looking irritable.

'Get up, Sharifa, it's time for *namaz*.'

He pushed open the door and light from the landing fell on Beauty's face on the pillow next to his little sister.

'What the fuck are you doing in here, tramp?' he demanded.

'Get lost, asshole. And stop playing with yourself through there. You won't be able to pray.'

He came into the room and advanced towards the bed.

Sharifa had woken up and was stroking her older sister's arm under the duvet.

'Get out of her room or I'll go and wake *Bhai-sahb*.'

'Leave her alone, *Suto-Bhai*,' said Sharifa.

Beauty shrugged her hand off – she didn't need her baby sister's help. Her younger brother was getting nasty, swearing at everyone. Even at their mum. And her older brother had been distant towards her since she'd got back from Bangladesh.

'Fucking tramp – get out!' he shouted.

Beauty got up from the bed and shoved past him at the door. The punch landed between her shoulder blades and hurt, but she didn't cry out.

Later, after the little ones had prayed, they sat round the breakfast table in silence. No one wanted to talk to the old man. Early in the morning his *bud-bud-ding-ding* accent irritated everyone. Faisal slurped cornflakes while Sharifa picked at a piece of toast, her head resting on one hand.

It was nice back home in Bangladesh when people ate *murri* rice and *handesh*, if they had enough money for garlic and ginger. The little ones had suffered without English food. But Beauty had been born there. She hadn't come to England until she was five and, despite everything that had happened when she was sent back at fourteen, Bangladesh – *back home* – was in her blood. She'd missed pizza at first. But she'd cooked for her uncle and his family for five years, and had almost forgotten what it tasted like. The little ones had come over with the old man to bring her back to England, without the mullah. Faisal had spent most of the time crying and swearing at his cousins.

He looked up from his bowl and wiped the milk from the fluff on his top lip.

'What time you coming back from that course?' he demanded.

'You know it finishes at four o'clock, so why arx?'

'Just make sure you're back by twenty-past four. Take the spare mobile from the drawer – I'm gonna call you at four o'clock. There's no credit on it, so you can't phone anyone. And wear a salwar,' he said.

'Who am I going to phone?' she answered. 'And by the way, *doonsla*, you're not *Bhai-sahb* so don't tell me what to wear.

'I'm not a bastard! Tell her, Abu!' he said to his father.

'Cry baby as well.'

'Bas!' the old man commanded.

But his words no longer carried much authority, nor could he meet his elder daughter's eye. Faisal didn't often call him 'Abu' any more; the boy had even called him a 'paki' . . . The old man knew they blamed him for everything. His sons didn't consult him any more on money matters and wouldn't tell him anything – not even where the centre of town was. Beauty stole from the housekeeping to keep him in cigarettes; she felt sorry for him, despite what had happened to her.

She looked at him now. His eyes glazed over as he stared at the box of cornflakes. His nose had become large and fleshy, the nostrils thick with black hairs.

He's still your flesh and blood.

She turned her back on him to wash the plates and wind up Faisal a bit more.

'You gotta go to the Mox after school, so you can't phone me.'

'Don't worry, I'll tell the messab. He'll let me out to phone.'

She knew that the imam probably would. Faisal was a clever kid. He had a *balla mogoz* – a good brain.

God knows what he's gonna do, or what he's gonna get involved with – nobody knows.

'They ain't gonna teach a dumb tramp like you to read anyway,' he said.

After her brother and sister had left for school, Beauty went to Sharifa's room where her own clothes were kept. She would rather have worn jeans, but there might be a row if she did. She didn't mind wearing a salwar.

I'm Asian, aynt I?

But the idea of walking through a new town was scary.

She picked out her pink muslin salwar, a denim jacket and her black headscarf, and spent some time getting the scarf right – tight over the ears and twisted to a ball at the back like Somali girls. Her makeup she applied sparingly – lipliner to show off her Cupid's bow, and black eyeliner drawn to a point at the corners of her eyes; a red nose stud, and the small earrings with the paper-thin gold leaves.

Perfect.

She ignored her father, smoking and watching TV in the living room, and went to the kitchen to take a ten-pound note from her mother's purse.

What's she got a purse for? They never let her go anywhere alone and Bhai-sahb does all the shopping.

And I'm just another sad sitting-in-the-corner-girl, aynit.

She took two pounds for the old man's cigarettes, and put the coins on the arm of his chair on her way past. His dark face looked away. Neither spoke as she pulled on her jacket, took a key from the hook near the front door and left the flat.

A white boy stared as he passed her in the concrete stairwell. Beauty tugged at the edge of her scarf so that her hand covered her face.

'Oright?'

She didn't answer.

Friendly people here, though. As long as they aynt nosy.

It was too early for the *halla* she'd seen every day, hanging around, from the living-room window. Whatever the weather he wore a long padded coat, a scarf that covered his face and a large hat with ear flaps. He drank *modh* from a can, and talked to people he knew as they passed.

At the bus stop there was only a fat white man. His belly stretched his shirt between the buttons, showing white flesh and curling hairs. Beauty wondered why his nose was so large and red, and how he found his *mossoi* when he went to make *feshab*. The man lifted a massive hand to light the stub of a roll-up between his lips.

Beauty took a cigarette from the pocket of her jacket and looked around before lighting it. She could smoke here unseen from the flat, but if the old man came to the shops and saw her he'd tell *Bhai-sahb*, who would swear and call her a *ganjuri*. She risked it anyway, leaning against the window of the shelter as cars hissed past on the wet road. The smoke felt good as it caught the back of her throat.

Across the street an old Sikh woman came out of the shop and stood at the light, waiting to cross. Beauty had time for a few more puffs before she would have to put the cigarette out. Muslim girls weren't tramps.

She threw the long butt away as the woman got to the halfway island, and tugged at her scarf again as the *buddhi* came up to peer at the timetable through thick glasses.

A bus sped past while the woman's back was turned. She looked around in alarm, saw Beauty and squinted at her before smiling.

'Betti, tu janti'hay bus kaha jari'ay?'

'*Ha* bus town *jai'ga*.' Beauty didn't know if all the buses went into town.

'Tussi mu-je decca sa'ti hoo?' the old lady asked.

'Aunty,' Beauty said, 'I'm not from this place. *Me yaha se nehi hoo*, but *me' decca sa'ti hoo*. I'll show you.'

The old lady thanked her. God had sent her to help an old woman, she said, and asked her where she was from and what she was doing here.

'*Aunty*, *me' London se ai ee*. I don't really speak Sikh.'

When the bus came she let the woman get on first. The driver had a black beard and perfectly rounded turban. He smiled at Beauty as she gave him the money.

Just give me the ticket, egghead.

She was sick of Asian men perving at her.

The bus pulled off with a lurch that flung her onto an empty bench. She kissed her teeth in irritation, like the Jamaican girls in London used to do, and slid along the seat to the window. She wiped away the condensation with the sleeve of her jacket and looked out.

The only other time she'd been out of the house since she'd got back from Bangladesh was to the Jobcentre the week before, to sign on. They'd given her a reading and writing test. She'd told them she had a problem with her reading, but they still made her do it. If she had a reading problem, they said, she'd have to go on a course if she wanted to carry on claiming Jobseekers' Allowance. She'd managed to fill in her name, so they set her a date to turn up somewhere in town two weeks later. *Bhai-sahb* hadn't liked it, but they needed the forty-four pounds a week and the housing benefit; and if they wanted her to bring the mullah into the country she'd have to show the Home Office that she had a job and could support him. If she went on the course, it would mean letting her out every day from half-past eight to half-past four for six months, or until she got a job. They didn't like that either. They'd think she was flirting with boys, bringing shame on the family, and they'd soon start talking again about bringing

Habib Choudhury into the country. The old man didn't speak of these things in front of her any more, but she knew he still had a hold over *Bhai-sahb*. If her brother Dulal wanted to get married himself, he'd need the old man to arrange it.

Houses and flats slipped past the window. White people and schoolchildren got on and off the bus, but nobody sat next to her. She dreaded someone speaking. Apart from at the Jobcentre she hadn't spoken English to a white or black person since her first year of secondary school in London. There she'd only had black girls as friends. Not black boys. They were thieves.

Perverts too. Arx anyone.

When she first came from Bangladesh, the Asian children in the primary school in Bethnal Green used to laugh at her accent. The boys liked her, she knew, but the girls locked her in the toilets and pinched her in class. She was often sent home for slapping her tormentors. Her cousins, too, laughed at the way she spoke. Typical freshie from back home. The bullying was worse at the comprehensive, so she bunked off and spent her days catching the bus to Hackney and wandering the streets with older black girls. Her parents couldn't read English, and they ignored the letters from the headteacher. When inspectors came to the house, the old man told them that she'd gone back to Bangladesh; and she didn't go to school again. The mullah's pervert brother, who lived near-by, offered to teach her to read English and Arabic, and her father trusted his future son-in-law's brother. When the man started touching her – *down there* – she acted dumb and refused to learn any more. She was twelve years old and he told her mum that he'd seen her with boys in the street, that she flirted with grown men in Commercial Road. She'd become *hobiss* he said, bad like a white slapper, a *sinnal-fourri*. The best thing to do

would be to send her back home to get married, before she did it with anyone – if she was still *anamo'ot* or *ful*, a flower untouched – and he offered to take her.

They'd be expecting her back from the course at half-past four. Beauty got off the bus in the town centre and followed the simple map, which the lady at the Jobcentre had given her, to the doors of the RiteSkills building.