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The Obscure Logic of the Heart

Written by Priya Basil

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The Obscure Logic of the Heart

Priya Basil



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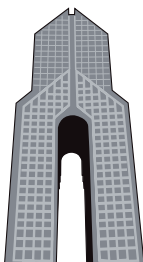
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‘We are our own demons, we expel ourselves from our paradise.’

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
(from a letter to Ernst Wolfgang Behrisch, 10 November 1767)

I



Waiting

SHE IS LATE.

Anil expected this and has come prepared. A newspaper lies by his side, but he doesn't touch it. He just sits on the black leather banquette of a corner table at Café Lafin and watches the glass doors. Waiting.

His eyes flicker on to the white tablecloth. He admires the squared elegance of the shining cutlery – he notices such things because shapes have always fascinated him; often he thinks more clearly in forms than words. Beside the glinting knife is his phone. When they'd first started seeing each other all those years ago – his heartbeat stumbles as he tots up the decades – few people had a mobile. How often he'd waited with no notion of when she might arrive, imagining all the things that could have gone wrong.

He stares at the doors; calm, knowing he'll be here alone for a while, and still ready to forgive her bad habit. He won't check his watch again or strain his eyes to scan the street outside the café. No, he tells himself, I have learned patience. It's all those rammed earth walls I've built. He smiles, thinking of the ancient pisé de terre construction method, the central motif of his architecture, for which he's become renowned. Such walls made of earth need days to dry and harden. Sometimes it can take up to two years before they're fully cured. By then the earth is hard as rock. Yes, he knows how to bide his time. Unlike that younger self who used to pace and sweat and worry when she didn't turn up on schedule. How different I am, he thinks, from the Anil who waited to declare his love for her one autumn day. He can still remember that afternoon, pacing outside St Paul's Cathedral, glancing left and right, expecting her to round the corner any moment . . .

He looked at his watch and rapped its face suspiciously, ready to accept it must be wrong, he must be too early, or else the minutes were trickily swelling in proportion to his anticipation. He still believed she was capable of punctuality – though she had already held him up twice, each time for more than half an hour. But then, even the seasons had been tardy that year. Spring had arrived in June, summer in August. And in late November, autumn was hurrying to an end. The trees, tipsy on an excess of wind, swayed and wantonly shed their leaves.

In three days he would be flying back home to Kenya. At the thought, something fluttered in his chest. Something that needed to be spoken, that would not sit quietly within him for another month. He'd considered staying back, spending Christmas alone in London, lying to his parents about his workload – just so he could see her. Only he'd discovered she was going home to Birmingham for the holidays. Then he'd decided he couldn't leave without telling her – though it was hard to believe she hadn't guessed.

Since the beginning of that semester, when they'd met at a concert, he'd been turning up at the places she frequented, and joining the organizations of which she was a member. His close friends were not impressed by his new-found preference for South London crêperies and halal curry houses. They were even less persuaded by his novice zeal for Amnesty International and Greenpeace. 'Can't believe you're picking up all this sissy stuff because of a chick,' they said. Grudgingly they followed him to venues where he might meet her, because the habit of childhood meant that they banded together regardless of the strange inclinations one of them might have.

The first time he had seen her was in a crowded room at the student union, where members of the Asian Society were seated barefoot on the floor around a group of qawwali singers. At the beginning of the performance, phrases had spilled from the performers into the crowd, like torchlight being cast around a dark room.

Who can measure the distance between two hearts?

Anil listened, enthralled, though he could not comprehend all the Urdu. Soon, sound sparkled from each of the players. Many in the audience shut their eyes against the music's luminosity, afraid to see glints of their own yearning. But Anil kept looking, and his reward was the vision of her.

She was sitting diagonally opposite him, a short distance away, legs pulled up to her chest, arms resting on the summit of her knees. Her bottom half was swathed in a flowing lilac skirt embroidered delicately along the edges with black thread. It was her slim ankles he noticed first. The hem of her skirt cut just above the shapely ankle bones, the left one circled by a thin gold chain. Then he saw the elegant feet. Each second toe, distinctly longer than its neighbouring big toe, seemed to be pointing at him. The painted nails, shimmering silver, were like the heads of arrows aimed at his heart. He felt impelled to bow his head before this stranger. The sheer loveliness of her limbs made him want to pray; something he had never done before. Throughout his young life, everything had come easily to him: each need was fulfilled, each wish granted. There was nothing to ask God for.

But, as he sat at that concert, Anil sensed the possibility of prayer as praise – not supplication. This was the essence of the music pulsing around him: worship not as a petition for something, but as an exaltation of the divine for the desire of itself that it inspired.

The chief qawwal, raising his hand upwards, called out:

Oh my beloved!

Anil could only appreciate the phrase in its most secular sense. No matter how many qawwalis he listened to, he would never understand how such adulation could be heaped on an invisible being, the purported Almighty. For him, the word love was associated first and foremost with romance. His gaze moved over the clothes concealing the stranger's body to her head. In that instant, with the first glimpse of her face, he began to comprehend all the lyrics.

Your body is the map of my longing.

He felt his destiny was written in the folds of the fabric that fell over her frame.

I am a prisoner of your sighs.

People were clapping. He was clapping, though he did not know it. He only saw her hands turn into the wings of a bird.

Your hair is the thread of my memories.

Anil was oblivious to the slumped figure beside him. It was his best friend, Merc, who'd drunk heavily before coming: 'Otherwise, there's no way I can sit through that matope, mazel.' Merc was asleep, but still swaying and snoring to the beat of the tabla, as if the music had invaded and colonized his dreams.

The qawwal slipped from song to speech and back to song again, praising the beloved, pleading for recognition, and then rebuking his lover while seeming to revel in despair. Shaking, sweating, the singer heaved himself, from time to time, off his large behind and on to his knees. Thus raised, he almost shouted at his tormentor. His pupils dilated, his cheeks quivered, his lyrical voice was frayed by passion:

Who else will weep when you turn away your face?

Glancing around, Anil was surprised to find that the whole audience was not fixated on the stranger in lilac but remained in thrall to the qawwal, whose tan-coloured, tussore-silk kurta was turning dark brown in patches under his arms. Anil wanted to live for ever in the poetic preludes that had borne him to this point – and yet he needed the music to stop so he could find out her name. But the qawwal was on his knees again, beseeching, warning:

After me, who will you torment?

When the music stopped Anil could not move. Merc staggered to his feet with the help of two other friends, but Anil remained cross-legged on the floor.

‘I told you we shouldn’t have come. This stuff just wastes you, mazel. Look at Anil, he’s turned into a Buddha.’ Merc prodded him with a toe.

‘I can’t believe *you* slept, man – that’s the waste,’ Jateen said.

‘Ah, shut up, JT.’ Merc extended a hand to help Anil up. ‘Come on, let’s get out of here. You said we’d go to a club afterwards.’

‘No.’ Anil didn’t take his eyes off her. ‘We have to do something first.’

‘What?’

‘I need to find out who that is.’ He pointed.

‘Her? Why, mazel?’ Merc looked down his small, flat nose and blew impatiently out of his full lips. ‘There’ll be way hotter chiles at the club. Come on.’

‘She looks pretty young.’ JT nodded. Her thinness and the bounce of her ponytail gave her a girlish air.

‘Well, she can’t be underage. You need ID to get into the union,’ Hardy spoke from behind the beard and moustache cultivated to fence off the world from the spots that raged on his face.

‘That’s some dowdy outfit she’s got on.’ Merc’s eyes became thin slits of scorn. She was wearing a cream, long-sleeved and collared blouse, which was tucked into the lilac skirt. But even Merc could see that her attire didn’t matter. There was something in her carriage that made clothes irrelevant. The liveness of her long limbs was apparent even though she was all covered up.

She turned away just then, leaving Anil and his friends with a view of the thick hair cascading down her back in big, loose curls.

‘We need to find out before she goes.’ Anil rose quickly as she started walking towards the exit. ‘Come on, help me. Do something.’ He turned to his friends.

‘Just go up to her. What’s the big deal? And hurry up, man. I’ve hung around here long enough for your sake.’ Merc stretched ostentatiously, flexing his muscles, enjoying the glances being thrown in his direction.

He was striking in an unidentifiable way. People looked and looked again, trying to work out the riddle of the shaved head and blue eyes and skin the colour of strong black coffee browned with a drop of milk.

‘I don’t know what to say.’ Each word Anil uttered felt grey in his mouth. She had stopped by the exit and was chatting to another guy.

‘You spend hours listening to love songs and you still can’t tune a chick.’ Merc shook his head and started making his way towards her. The rest of them followed, in height order – first Anil, who was a head taller than the others, then Jateen, and then Hardy. Anil ran a hand through the short, dark spikes of his hair and checked that his collar was turned up.

As they approached Merc recognized the guy she was with as someone from his art history course. He knew the face but not the name. He charged up and administered a punch on the shoulder as greeting, ‘Hey, I didn’t expect to see you here.’

While they talked Anil took the chance to look at her more closely. She was very tall. Perfect for me, he thought. If he stood straight, looked ahead and pulled her close, she would slot right into him: the dome of her head a shelf for his chin. He noticed a white line cutting through the twin peaks of her upper lip. It was as though her creator, stunned by the beauty he’d chiselled, had momentarily let his scalpel slip – and marred his own perfection. Anil could not tell if the scar was from a rectified harelip, or some other accident. He felt only its devastating poignancy – the pain it implied even when the mouth stretched into a smile. As it did momentarily, in response to Merc’s brief introduction of the three friends pressing up behind him.

‘This is Hardeep, who we call Hardy. And Jateen, who’s JT. And this . . .’ he gestured as if to usher someone on stage, ‘is Anil. Except tonight he deserves to be dubbed Nil, because that’s what I’d give him out of ten for dragging us to this concert.’

‘Don’t tell me you didn’t like it?’ The art history student, Zahid, gawped at Merc.

Hardy and JT weighed in with their own approbations.

‘The guy’s a fool.’

‘Where’s your soul, bwana?’

‘All I hear is a fat man straining his voice until it begins to crack. And I can’t ignore the fact that the lyrics are religious. Just knowing that is enough to put me off.’

As Merc continued to defend himself, the girl’s gaze started to wander, scanning the rows of shoes lined against the wall. Then she slipped away while Anil watched in a state of poised tension. He was ready to race after her if she went out of sight. She found her flat gold shoes and put them on before being surrounded by a group of girls. After a moment she turned and beckoned. ‘Zahid!’

Her voice was like a tickle across Anil’s senses: the full, throaty depth of it unexpected.

‘Hey, I better go,’ Zahid said. ‘Look, what are you guys up to? A few of us are heading down the road to my flat. Why don’t you come along?’

‘Nah—’ Merc started, until a kick in the heel stopped him. ‘I mean, I don’t know.’ He turned to his friends. ‘Are you up for it?’

‘Sawa. Why not?’ Anil tried to sound casual. The other two shrugged.

‘Good. Come on.’ Zahid started towards the group of girls.

‘I thought we were going clubbing,’ Merc lagged behind and hissed at Anil. ‘That was the deal, mazeh.’ He clutched at the upturned cuff of Anil’s slim-fitting, charcoal shirt. ‘It’s the only reason I agreed to come to this sing-song of yours.’

‘Who says the night is over? We can go later.’ Anil doubted they would, but it was all he could say to ward off Merc’s irritation. His eyes skimmed the crowd furtively. She’d moved! Within seconds she had drifted to the other side of the room and was standing in a queue of people waiting to speak to the qawwals.

‘Lina!’ Zahid called and waved to get her attention.

‘Who is she?’ A hint of dislike was already tugging down the corners of Merc’s mouth.

But Anil heard nothing else. He saw, instantly, that her name was the mirror image of his. LINA ANIL LINA ANIL LINA ANIL. He ran the sounds through his mind. Her name was the confirmation of his instincts. She is the one, he thought.

Rush

A MESSAGE FLASHES UP on Lina's computer screen, obscuring the document she's trying to read.

Terror alert in Piccadilly.
Severe disruptions to many underground services.
[More details.](#)

She frowns; a little pi-shaped symbol appears in the crook between her brows. She puts her finger on [More details](#) and a new window slides into view, describing the discovery of 'suspect packages' left lying on benches at various tube stations in central London. The site reports that most underground services have been suspended.

There's less than an hour to go before Lina has to meet Anil. 'Shut down,' she says, and her computer begins to turn itself off. Normally, the journey to Café Lafin takes about twenty minutes. But if there really are delays with transport it'll be longer, and she can't be late today, no matter what.

On her desk the debris of the day lies scattered, washed in by the tides of post and meetings and unfulfilled intentions. She has been distracted since morning: read documents without taking in a word, come off the telephone only to realize she can't recall what the conversation she's just finished was about. Now she pushes things into piles suggestive of order, and wonders at the slight tremble of her hands, the tremors in her heart. She gives herself a disapproving shake before leaving the high-ceilinged, blue-walled sanctuary of her office.

'You should make a move soon,' she advises her colleagues as she

passes by and tells them about the alert. 'It's not going to be a smooth journey home.' She could probably walk the whole way if it wasn't for her high heels. But then again, she doesn't want to arrive for their rendezvous a damp, dishevelled mess. She has to look her best.

I'll get a taxi, she decides, as she enters the bathroom and eyes herself critically – though not without some satisfaction – in the mirror above the basin. She remembers what her father once said: 'At the end of your life, your face will show how you've lived.' She's not doing too badly, she thinks, for someone who's about half way through, though she does wish her eyes were brighter. The golden green of each iris has darkened over the years to a more sombre shade. Maybe her tearful twenties leached all luster from her gaze. That decade of crying. Ya Allah. She has not wept so much since; in fact, has hardly been able to cry at all. Except when – her body stiffens. No, she can't think about that now. She uses an index finger to smooth out the crease of pain that's furled at her brow. She doesn't see, despite her father's words, the pertinence in the shape of that wrinkle, that pi-like sign. She is now stamped with this irrational number, which, if written out in full, would never end. A symbol of her own irresolution, the endless contradictory impulses of her heart.

She leans in over the basin, moving closer to the mirror to apply some lipstick. The synthetic colour slides over the contours of her mouth, almost rubbing out all trace of that scar from a childhood accident. She recalls the first time Anil touched it – and she is a student again, running, in flat sensible shoes, towards the moment when everything really started.

Lina came out of St Paul's tube station and hurried towards the cathedral, pushing flying hair from her mouth and eyes. Crisp red leaves skittered diagonally across her path, like panicked crabs. In her mind she rehearsed apologies, trying to find excuses convincing enough to turn her own weakness into something accidental. Having started off with a day unencumbered by any appointments except the late-afternoon meeting with Anil, she had somehow managed to string the hours with a succession of commitments, which ended up jostling each other like too many pendants on a chain.

She still didn't understand how her plan for a quiet day working at the university library had been transformed into hours of unfruitfulness: an unsuccessful hunt for a research paper, a long lunch with someone she didn't especially like, and then an impromptu meeting with her tutor just as she was leaving to meet Anil.

She'd ended up chatting to her tutor for longer than expected, and was already running late when she got on to the tube. Then she'd missed her stop and had to backtrack, losing another fifteen minutes – all because a senseless story had grabbed her attention. She'd picked up a discarded newspaper and started to read an article under the headline: 'NUDE SWORDSMAN SLAYS WORSHIPPERS'.

A naked man brandishing a three-foot-long samurai sword charged into St Andrew's Roman Catholic Church in Thornton Heath, Croydon, during the Sunday service. The man randomly attacked the congregation, injuring several of them before he was finally overpowered.

Witnesses said there was screaming and panic during the incident, and many people ran from the church into the adjoining hall. One parishioner apparently attempted to dissuade the attacker by thrusting a large crucifix in his face.

An off-duty policeman, Tom Tracey, eventually overcame the attacker by using a six-foot long organ pipe. 'Five minutes previously I was singing the psalm – the next thing I was fighting with a sword-wielding madman,' he said.

Victims were taken to a nearby hospital where their injuries were described as 'horrific'. It is not yet clear why the crime was perpetrated.

Slowly, she'd folded up the paper, put it to one side and tried to stem the rush of associations the article had triggered. Here was another story to undermine her old assumption that one was always guaranteed safety in any house of God. There had been enough examples recently. The destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India; the crushing to death of Tutsis in a church during the Rwandan genocide. In the wake of these atrocities her father, Shareef, had said, 'There is only one place

no one can ever touch – and that is your conscience. Only a man's conscience cannot be defiled by anyone else.'

Only one's conscience cannot be defiled by another . . . Lina was turning this over in her head when a voice on the train had warned: 'Mind the gap.' For an instant she wondered if it was an exhortation to watch out for the great chasm between aspiration and reality – between her notions of how she must live and the increasingly strong impulses of her heart. 'Please stand clear of the doors. Mind the doors.' The 'beep beep beep beep beep' that followed the announcement had pierced her reverie and had her bolting towards the exit. Except that the doors had shut before she could reach them, and she'd seen the red letters spelling ST PAUL'S start moving away, faster and faster, until the train entered the dark of a tunnel. Lina had wondered if this was meant to be a sign: if the doors should be closed on the friendship she'd started with Anil, if missing the stop was an indication that she shouldn't go to him at all now. But her conscience had pleaded against standing him up – the same conscience that questioned why she was seeing him at all.

Back at the right station, she ran towards St Paul's Cathedral as if the two minutes she might gain would make all the difference. She wondered if Anil was alone. The first time he had invited her to meet him, outside Lloyd's of London, his three friends had been there and had trailed behind them, arguing about the merits of the building while Anil extolled its virtues and revered its creator, Richard Rogers.

'What do you see that's unusual about this structure?' Anil had asked Lina, one thumb hooked under the strap of the messenger bag that hung over his left shoulder.

Unsure what she should be looking for, she'd studied the armoury of steel girders, pipes and stairwells that dressed the building. She'd found herself wanting to please him with her answer, despite knowing nothing about architecture. Tentatively, she'd described what she saw, and he'd encouraged her like a teacher: 'Exactly. Yes. What else?'

All the while, they were accompanied by a symphony of sarcasm and sniggers. Merc's voice was the loudest: 'Whose idea of romance is a lecture on postmodern architecture?' But Lina was moved by the rapture in Anil's words and the novelty of what he showed her.

‘What’s brilliant is the way the architect has completely redefined the concept of space. He’s turned utilities into ornamentation,’ he said. His chin jutted upwards, the jaw bordered by a thin line of sideburns that met at the cleft of his chin. ‘Just think of the space a lift takes inside a building and then consider the genius of putting it outside, so that it becomes a beautiful piece of glass jewellery decorating the façade.’

‘You have one crazy notion of beauty.’ Merc sneered. ‘This whole inside-out approach just looks gimmicky to me. And rather messy.’

Anil turned calmly to his friend. ‘This from the guy who’s doing his dissertation on the aesthetics of violence? You like your human beings better with their blood and guts on display, but the façades of buildings have to be pristine?’

‘Weh-weh.’ Merc narrowed his eyes. ‘I will smack you to the point that you remember your forefathers!’

Lina pulled at the sleeves of her coat. The lingo used by the guys was impenetrable to her. Worried that a fight might break out, she cleared her throat to say something. But she was pre-empted by laughter as they gave each other high fives to celebrate their rudeness. At such moments she felt incidental – then Anil would look her in the eye and start talking and, suddenly, nobody else counted.

It had been almost the same another time when she’d met him at the National Gallery. Merc had come along and escorted them for a while before heading off to do some research. ‘Don’t bore her with your running commentaries! Make sure you show her all the nudes!’ he’d called to them, as if heaping bawdy blessings on a newly married couple. People turned and stared, alerted first by his loud manner and then arrested by the body displayed under his ‘look at me’ clothes: a long-sleeved tight black T-shirt and narrow trousers pinned to his hips with a designer belt. Even Anil, who stood out in most crowds as the niftiest dresser, could look shabby beside his slick friend.

Lina felt uncomfortable in Merc’s presence. He was not especially friendly and even his changing contact lenses couldn’t mask the distrust in his eyes: blue, green, grey – every hue was tinged with doubt. Anil told her that Merc, who was doing an MA in art history, was the best person to visit the gallery with.

‘He knows so much about the paintings and the artists. You see things differently because of what he tells you. These, for example . . .’ Anil gestured at the walls, ‘. . . begin to make full sense only if you know your Bible stories well. Of course, when they were painted, society was highly religious and so even a peasant would recognize the scene. Nowadays fewer people know or care about the content of such works, even though they might appreciate their beauty.’

Like me, Lina thought, stopping in front of a large oil painting. ‘I would guess this is a religious painting because that’s Jesus.’ She pointed a finger at the central long-haired and bearded figure. ‘But I have no idea what it’s about.’

‘Didn’t you do Bible studies at school?’

‘Well, we had to learn about all religions at my state school, but we only got a basic insight into them.’ Outside school, Islam was the faith in which she’d been instructed, learning the Koran by rote from the age of five. By the time she was ten she could recite vast chunks of the Arabic text from memory, though she’d had little idea what they meant.

‘OK, but I’m sure you know enough to be able to work out some things about this painting. Here, let’s sit down.’ There was a bench facing the image. They perched on it side by side. He pulled at the strap of his bag so that the bulk of it rested behind him. Several folds of her long, pleated skirt bunched up against his jeans, and the tassels of her red scarf brushed the sleeve of his butter-yellow cashmere sweater.

‘Now, just look at it again.’

Lina’s eyes zigzagged over the canvas. She concentrated so hard on discovering some mystery that the obvious eluded her. When she didn’t speak Anil prompted her.

‘How many other people are there in the picture?’

She counted. ‘Twelve men – oh, so they’re his disciples?’

‘Exactly, you see? You’ve already been able to figure out a bit more by using your knowledge. Now look again, more carefully.’

‘I don’t know what to look for.’ She kept whispering, even though Anil wasn’t. She hadn’t been to many art galleries but had a sense you weren’t supposed to talk in them. A bit like how you had to be quiet in temples.

‘What do you notice about Jesus?’

‘The holes? In his hands and feet?’ She felt stupid for not having seen them immediately. ‘He’s been crucified, right?’

‘Yeah, so now you can probably guess what the scene is.’

Lina shook her head in mortification. Though Anil was being nice, she could detect his surprise at her ignorance. But she ventured another shot at interpretation because his patience reminded her of her father, who always encouraged her to keep at things. ‘There’s no failure in trying,’ he liked to say.

‘I’m still not sure. I mean, all I know is that Jesus was crucified and then he came back to life. So presumably this is after that?’

‘Well, after his resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples, but one of them, Thomas, wasn’t there and didn’t believe the others when they told him. So then Jesus reappeared and showed Thomas – that’s him, the one in front wearing red and green – his wounds and let him touch them. That’s when Jesus said: “Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed”. See?’ Anil gestured at the little plaque on which details of the painting were listed. ‘It’s called *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*.’

‘How do you know all that? Have you seen this before?’

‘Sure, I’ve seen it several times, but I recognized the story in the painting the first time.’ Anil said this as if it was the most natural thing to do.

‘How come you know the Bible so well?’

‘I went to a Christian school. We had proper Bible study classes and full on prayer services every morning. We even had a few hours a week devoted to hymn practice. So I know more about Christianity than any other religion.’ He leaned back on both hands, taking advantage of the wide wooden bench.

‘Did you like it?’ She turned to face him properly and her softly curled hair spilled over one cheek.

‘I was totally seduced! I joined the Bible Club and decided I wanted to be a Christian.’ He was studying the painting again, as if some idea had just occurred to him.

‘No way!’ Her mouth hung open for a moment.

Suddenly Anil pulled his bag around and undid the buckle of one

pocket. He took out a pen and a tiny pad of plain white paper. 'Sorry,' he smiled at Lina. 'I just need a sec.' He balanced the pad above his knee and began drawing.

Lina noted the over-new shine of his black leather trainers. The white stripes along the sides were so pristine they had the glare of neon. Her own suede boots were in need of replacement. She quickly drew her feet under the bench.

The abstract lines on Anil's pad accumulated to form a multi-faceted prism-like structure. The sapphire at the top of his platinum pen gleamed. His thumb pressed over the stone as he clicked the nib back in. 'I had to get that done before I lost it.'

'That's OK.' Lina had seen him break off doing things and start jotting before. 'So, um, what did your parents say, when you converted?'

'I only told my mum, but for some reason she mentioned it to my dad. She thought he'd be amused.' He snorted. 'He threatened to throw me out of the house unless I "renounced my faith", as he put it.'

'Oh, my God. So what did you do?'

'I was only nine years old, so the easiest option was to say I was no longer a Christian. Though I think I did remain one in my heart, for a while.'

'Are your parents really religious?' She couldn't keep her eyes fixed on his.

'No! The only Sikh things about my dad are his turban and his kara. And the only day in the Sikh calendar that we ever celebrated was Diwali, just because it was a great excuse to have a party and shoot fireworks. But, for some reason, he was outraged that I could reject the religion of my birth.' He stood up.

'That's so weird, isn't it? That they would be against you changing faith even though they don't really practise it themselves? I mean, I could understand it if they were really devout . . .' She rose slowly, still caught in the net of their conversation. Their most important one yet, she felt, coming so close, as it did, to what troubled her each time she thought of him. 'But you're not a Christian any more?'

He shook his head.

'Or a Sikh?'

‘You know what? I’m not inclined any particular way as far as religion goes.’

She’d hoped he’d turn the question around and ask her what she believed. It would have been a chance to make their differences apparent. But he seemed more eager to resume the subject of art.

The subsequent hour was the loveliest she’d spent with anyone. They went through doorways framed in carved dark wood, and elaborate hallways where the walls were hung with rich Venetian fabric. Lina noticed the colour of each room before the paintings hanging there: blue, green, gold and a red so deep it could have been a backdrop of fresh blood. They passed ornate marble pillars, and paintings so large that Lina felt a lifetime of looking might not suffice to see the whole image.

Anil showed her the masterpieces, which, he claimed, ‘You have to have seen at least once.’ He couldn’t believe she had never visited the gallery, though she’d been living in London for almost three years. And she was surprised by how much his astonishment upset her, making her feel stupid. So she listened intently to what he told her, trying to memorize the names of painters, and the styles he described. Yet immediately afterwards, she could only recall half of it. And a week later, only a couple of images still remained in her mind: Van Gogh’s mustardy yellow sunflowers and a painting of Venus and Mars by Botticelli. Mars sleeping with his mouth tenderly open and his body extended gracefully towards Venus who, serene and contemplative, was watching him. ‘What I adore about Botticelli’s women,’ Anil had said, looking at her as if she was one of them, ‘is how they are so elegant, so sensual and, still, they have an innocent, spiritual aura.’

How different he had been that afternoon from the broody person she’d met at Zahid’s flat after the concert. Then he had seemed awkward and tongue-tied amidst his bantering pals. He had spoken only when she asked him directly what he thought of the concert, and even then he’d been hesitant, as if speaking English for the first time. It transpired that they loved the same music, the same singers. He told her he had seen Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan perform live in Nairobi and, when she begged for every detail, he was able to describe the colour of the kurta that the

maestro had been wearing, and the order in which he'd sung each qawwali. When Lina tried to discuss the nuances of the lyrics with him, she learned that Anil did not speak Urdu.

'So what do you talk at home?' she wondered.

'English,' he said, scratching one of the long, thin sideburns that looked as if they had been meticulously measured and drawn along his face. 'My parents sometimes speak Punjabi, so I've got a basic grasp of that, which can help with figuring out Urdu. But mostly, when I really like a qawwali, I get my mum to translate it for me. She's fluent in Urdu, and I'm picking up bits from her.' He joked that he had acquired a foreign vocabulary of infatuation and devotion, intoxication and loneliness.

'The essentials,' Lina had said.

'I'm sorry,' she said, running up the steps at the main entrance of St Paul's Cathedral. Anil was standing, with arms crossed over his broad chest, in the narrow gap between a pair of Corinthian columns. The collars of his shirt and coat were turned up, the stiff edges almost grazing the lobes of his ears. Worry, which had started to flare across his body like a bad itch, melted into dampness across his palms. He was suddenly thankful that they wouldn't shake hands in greeting. To date, they had acknowledged each other only with smiles and hellos. When they touched it had been accidental: a brush of knees or elbows while sitting beside each other. And once, when she was leaning over to point out something, her cheek had grazed his arm: a fleeting, teasing caress.

'My God, it's huge.' Lina took in the two tiers of columns and the great bell towers that rose up from each end of the cathedral. One of them bore the time and announced in golden Roman numerals that she was over an hour late. 'I'm *so* sorry.' Her eyes and mouth shrank in embarrassment. 'Thanks for waiting . . . so long. I just . . . I don't know. It was one thing after another. And the time just . . .' She snapped her fingers.

'At least you made it. Shall we go in?'

'The others?' She glanced around. 'They're not here?'

‘No, they were busy.’ Busy wondering where he was, probably. Anil wiped his hands on his brown corduroy trousers as they entered the nave of the cathedral. He’d made vague claims about a project deadline to get out of the game of squash the friends had been scheduled to play. He hadn’t said he wanted to see Lina alone. It would have meant putting up with jokes beforehand and facing an interrogation afterwards. And, for the first time, he felt a need to protect a little part of himself from them.

Suddenly, Lina was nervous. She fingered the ends of her hair. Tousled by the wind, it had more volume, and emphasized the thinness of her face, making her chin seem longer. For all the minor irritations having Anil’s friends around entailed, they had provided a convenient buffer against the slowly unfolding truth that she was trying to deny.

When she gasped it was more at being dwarfed by her own feelings than the tremendous dome under which they had arrived. The floor of the cathedral was shaped like a cross and they were standing at the heart of it.

‘Incredible, isn’t it?’ Anil spun around and opened his arms. The cuffs of his striped shirt rode up, revealing strong wrists. There was a thick gold kara, a symbol of Sikhism, on the right one. ‘It’s the second largest cathedral dome in the world.’ Then he started pointing out different features and telling her about the architect, Sir Christopher Wren. ‘He took inspiration from everywhere. Remember those twin columns at the front? Well, they’re based on ones at the Louvre. And the dome, the porches – they’re all taken from what he saw at other churches. The genius lies in the way he combined everything so harmoniously. And he did it against so much opposition. The church hated his original design! They thought it was too modern. He had to keep watering down his vision until they approved it. But he was clever, he got sanction from the king to make variations on the agreed plan, and basically constructed the original building he wanted right under the noses of the clergy. Of course, by the time they realized it was too late!’ His face opened into laughter. The gums above his top teeth were exposed and shone pink.

The fine down on Lina’s face stood to attention as a light spray of

mirth sprang from his mouth and landed on her forehead. 'You could apply to be one of their official tour guides.'

'Thanks. It's good to know there's something I can fall back on if my other plans don't work out.'

Afraid to ask about these, Lina turned slowly to take in the murals, the ornate gilding and the galleries that lined the dome. When she looked down again, the black and white tiles on the floor seemed to slide into the vortex at her feet. She put a hand on Anil's arm to steady herself. 'You seem to admire people who do things differently.'

He closed his eyes for a moment and appeared to think before replying. In fact, he was trying to reclaim his body, all of which had become inconsequential in relation to the burning patch under her palm. 'I like it when people dare to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy.' Her hand slipped away and he could breathe again. 'I believe in fighting for what you want.'

His conviction persuaded Lina, who didn't know that he'd never had to struggle for anything.

'Come.' Anil took Lina's hand. 'I want to show you something else.' Both were quiet at this first deliberate pressing of flesh against flesh. Around them people were starting to fill up the pews. 'I think the evening service might start soon. We need to be quick, otherwise it won't work so well.'

He took her up an endless staircase. The higher they went, the more his grip on her tightened. Towards the top of the 259 steps it was the strength of his clutch that propelled her along. Her legs had become woolly leaden things, inordinately heavy, and yet trembling like thread. There was a tightness in her chest which couldn't just be attributed to the strenuous climb.

Then they were in the Whispering Gallery. Anil explained that it got its name from a quirk in construction, which made a whisper against its walls audible on the opposite side. He led her to a section where there was no one else. 'Stay here.' He left her standing in front of a wall and disappeared behind the one directly opposite.

Lina?

His voice wafted softly towards her. A moment later his head peeked

out from the edge of the wall, eyebrows lifted in enquiry. She nodded to confirm that she'd heard him. Once he was out of sight, he spoke again. At the same time, below them, a priest began a rumbling welcome to the congregation.

... FIND IN THE WORDS OF THOMAS À KEMPIS ...

I've been wanting to tell you for weeks.

I think you can guess –

LOVE IS A GREAT THING, YEA, A GREAT
AND THOROUGH GOOD.

Anil worried that whatever he said might be drowned out by the microphone-enhanced voice that was blowing through the cathedral. But he went on:

I felt something from the first time I saw you.

Like, I can't explain – it was meant to be. Even our names ...

LOVE FLIES, RUNS AND REJOICES;

IT IS FREE AND NOTHING CAN HOLD IT BACK.

The more I know you, the more I want to know.

Lina's hands were joined, palm to palm, with the index fingers pressing hard against her lips and the thumbs digging into the soft valley beneath her jaw. The simultaneous boldness and shyness of Anil's gesture moved and amused her. She wanted to skip in response to his adoration, but a history of compliance was binding her feet. Her mother's face loomed before her, a finger wagging in warning as she mouthed her favourite saying, 'Don't put a question mark where Allah has put a full stop.' There was no way around the great bulwark of Iman's expectations. But then, Lina saw her father with his gentle equivocations. Shareef's way of applying pressure was to say, 'You must do the right thing. It is always either the easiest or the hardest course of action. Usually, the latter.' Lina found herself wondering if succumbing to Anil could possibly be the rightest of all rights, because it felt at once supremely easy and excruciatingly hard.

LOVE FEELS NO BURDEN, THINKS NOTHING OF
TROUBLE,

ATTEMPTS WHAT IS ABOVE ITS STRENGTH,

I can't go away and not speak to you for a month.

I guess what I'm asking, if you agree, is . . .

No. Oh no! Lina thought.

I've fallen –

LOVE DIVINE ALL LOVES EXCELLING

JOY OF HEAVEN TO EARTH COME DOWN

He appeared again as the Charles Wesley hymn filled the cathedral. As he walked towards her, she felt a strange amalgam of elation, guilt and ominous premonition.

Anil was in front of her. They stood face to face – him looking down, her up – and read each other's eyes for all the feelings that words could not measure. Then his finger pressed against Lina's lips – as if to silence any objection.

'Does it hurt?'

For a second she thought he'd glimpsed the agony of indecision in her heart – until his finger started to trace the scar on her upper lip.

'No.' She couldn't explain that the spot was at once supremely sensitive and strangely numb, because – suddenly – his lips were on hers.

Astaghfirullah! Allah forgive me! She begged quietly.