Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Coconut Unlimited

Nikesh Shukla

CHAPTER ONE

Don't Believe The Hype

One summer when I was nine and Neel was eleven, we had a tape. It was one of those Maxwell C-90 tapes, brown with silver stickering, spools squeaky from overuse. He'd written on it in scrawly blue biro: 'Rap Trax!' I couldn't work out if the exclamation mark was his or the album's. The 'X' seemed so abbreviating, so exciting, so dangerous. It was a simple anarchic act that went against all of my private school upbringing. The streets were coming to Harrow.

Neel was my cousin. He lived in Croydon, away from the rest of our family. Every summer, his mum would send him to stay with his grandma, our ba, in Harrow to learn Gujarati. I hero worshipped him. He was a complete nerd but self-assured and confident – an expert at chess with a labyrinthian knowledge of UK comedy. We'd lie on our fronts and read our comics together, while my ba watched her Bollywood tapes, the only time she'd see us all summer outside of meals.

Ba had a tape player in her bedroom, which we used to record our voices. We'd sit up there for hours with blank tapes, press 'record' and say whatever came into our minds, occasionally choosing to script things, giving them a proper narrative. They veered from rehashes of our favourite bits from sitcoms like 'Allo

Copyright © Nikesh Shukla 2010
Published by Quartet Books

'Allo! or Only Fools and Horses to postmodern skits involving characters pooled from all our favourite TV shows.

That day, though, Neel held up 'Rap Trax!' He put it in the tape recorder and pressed 'play'. We had those first five seconds of tape silence before it spooled into the uneven crunch of a warm vinyl crackle. Our other cousin Nishu, who lived in Southall with all the real Asians, had decks and records and was about five years older than Neel. He'd recorded this album for him.

And it was then that . . . my ears bled . . . my head exploded . . . my heart started beating.

A fuzzy distorted horse-neigh twisted into a repetitive sample, a booming kick drum thudding against my diaphragm, snares snapping like slaps to my face.

DON'T-DON'T-DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE (wooooohhhhhwwwahhhhh)

. . .

'Who's this?' I asked.

'Public Enemy,' Neel said, nodding.

Back
Caught you lookin' for the same thing
It's a new thing check out this I bring
Uh Oh the roll below the level
'Cause I'm livin' low next to the bass
C'mon
Turn up the radio

What were they talking about?

'Neel . . . what are they talking about?'

'Not believing the hype.' Neel was a master at presenting vagueness as confident commentary.

'I don't get it.'

'It's just politics stuff. You know . . . '

I wanted to remain cool. Instead my heart was trying to burst out of my chest. My mind was trying to pump its righteous fist in indignation. My feet wanted to tap. I didn't want to display too much uncool emotion but noticed Neel was tapping his foot between the kick drum and the snare, so I followed. We stumbled into an awkward rhythm – first, KRS-One, then Eric B and Rakim, then Whodini, then

Copyright © Nikesh Shukla 2010

Kid'n'Play. My mind was fizzing, filled with the spirit of black power and black rage and black funk and black edu-tainment. It rendered me speechless. Neel was lost in a trance, his feet tapping and his head nodding independently of each other, and the beat. I stole looks at what he was doing and tried to focus on the words, what they were saying in the strange spoken lyrics, the 'rap'.

'We should write our own,' said Neel.

'OK, but I need to record this off you.'

'No problem. Got a tape?'

I always had blank tapes with me, just in case I needed to blam something off the radio or an impromptu radio play presented itself. I pulled it out. It was one of Dad's old Bollywood tapes that I hadn't heard him listen to in ages. I handed it over. The tabs were broken, meaning it couldn't be recorded over. Neel pulled a tissue out from next to Ba's bed and tore off two bits, rolling them into balls, filling the tape gaps. He put the tape in the second deck, rewound 'Rap Trax!' to the beginning and put the volume down so it wouldn't interrupt the new scheme he was planning. He pressed 'record'. 'Rap Trax!' was ninety minutes away from being mine.

'We should write our own,' he said again, more urgently this time.

'Definite.'

'I've been studying beatbox.'

'What's beatbox?'

'You don't know?'

'Erm, no . . . '

'You've got a lot to learn . . . ' he said, shaking his head.

'Beatbox is where you make the noises of the drum in your mouth.

Like this . . . pu-tu-pitpit-papu-tu-pitpit . . . get it?' He continued

his demonstration.

Pu-tu-pitpit-papu-tu-pitpit . . .
Pu-tu-pitpit-papu-tu-pitpit . . .
Pu-tu-pitpit-papu-tu-pitpit . . .

He stopped. 'Aren't you going to rap over the beatbox?'

Copyright © Nikesh Shukla 2010

'I don't know how.'

'So much to learn . . . '

While 'Rap Trax!' recorded, Neel found some scrap paper and we started writing our first lyrics. Bandying about subject matter and title, we got stuck on the idea of 'cool', so my first rap song became 'Pretty Cool'. It was a symbol of our confidence. We weren't awesome cool or mega cool. We were only . . . pretty cool.

Neel wrote the whole thing. I hadn't grasped rhythm and rhyming enough to feel confident, plus I bowed to his superior knowledge about rap so I just sat there as his nodding agreemachine.

My name's Amit I got to school
I got loadsa friends and I'm pretty cool
My name's Neel, I never steal
And I've got the real deal
There was a girl I used to like
She was fine she was just my type
Then I found out she told a lie
She was going out with another guy

We had to do it in one take, with Neel beatboxing during my bit, then me tap-tap-tapping on a chair near the speaker during his, and then, during the chorus, both of us tap-tap-tapping on the chair for double emphasis.

We're pretty cool, don't be a fool
Don't go to school, don't be a fool . . .

We played it back. The tap-tap-tap sounded like someone flicking the speaker with their nail and was dominating the sound, pushing Neel's vocals to the back of the mix. He screwed up his nose.

'Sounds good, man,' I offered.

'No it doesn't. It sounds whack. We need to have me beatboxing all the way through. Otherwise the bits without it sound whack, homeboy.'

'Erm . . . '

'How are we going to make it less whack?'

'Well . . . ' I thought hard. I needed to be the one with the solution so I looked pretty cool. 'Ba has another tape recorder downstairs. What if we record you beatboxing onto one tape and

then we play it on the other tape recorder and rap along and the recorder'll pick up both of us and the beatboxing . . . '

Copyright © Nikesh Shukla 2010

'That's dope! Except . . . '

'Except what . . . ?'

'We need another tape . . wait, we'll borrow one from Ba!'

I was sent downstairs to negotiate. My pidgin Gujarati was better than Neel's as I could communicate through my lack of vocabulary without getting flustered. The rule with Gujarati was, as a regional dialect, it had never been updated to include more modern words like 'toilet' or 'hip-hop' or 'fork', so you could form the sentences around English nouns with ease and Ba would understand you. As long as the verbs and gender-specific addresses were fine, she had no cause for complaint. She said words like 'television' and 'food processor' and 'cheese' to mean things like . . . television and food processor and cheese, but without compromising her humble Gujarati upbringing.

'Ba . . . ?' I said.

'Ha, beta?' [Yes, darling?]

'Mune tumaro tape recorder borrow kuru che?' [Can I borrow your tape recorder?]

Amazingly, the Gujarati word for 'please' doesn't really exist as there's never cause to use it, so I just said in a humble Gujarati accent: 'Please . . . ?'

'Sena mate, beta?' [What for, darling?]

'Ooopur, recording kuru che.' [We want to do some recording upstairs.]

'Su?' [What?]

'Hip-hop nu song.' [A hip-hop song.]

'Aa hip-hop su che?' [What's hip-hop?]

'Ba, mane tape recorder borrow kuru che!' [Ba, I want to borrow the tape recorder!]

'OK.'

I ran upstairs with the tape recorder. Neel was waiting for me at the edge of the bed, gargling some spit in the front of his mouth to keep his teeth moist so he could rock the beatbox. I placed the tape recorder on the bed and plugged it in. Neel pressed eject.

'There's a tape already in here,' he said.

'We should ask first . . . '

Copyright © Nikesh Shukla 2010

'No, we'll just use two minutes of it at the end. She'll never notice. Just blame it on me. I'm used to it.'

The end of side two had about ten minutes blank. Neel moistened his lips. I hit 'record'.

He beatboxed his heart out, wavering in and out of time, struggling to keep enough moisture in his mouth to get through it. I managed to hit 'stop' at the end of the beatbox before he erupted into coughs. It was the same pattern throughout the song but we recorded it with enough time and space so the beatbox would start with my first line and end with the last line of the second run-through of our chorus. Because we were professionals.

Neel coached me through the simple rhythm so we could record the vocals in one take. It was going to be pretty cool.

We got through the recording and listened back in anticipation.

Up until this point, my life had never been that exciting. Now, life had reached a new pinnacle. It was a real 'Dear Diary' moment. I felt so pretty cool. My first ever rap record – a rabid runthrough of why I was awesome. Like the braggadocious masters Kool Keith and Rakim, I knew I had soul.

The next evening, Ba had some of the local Gujarati community round her house for weekly prayers. They would sing tunelessly to the Gods and take stake in the customs they'd imported to England. The night usually finished with a tape recording of the Hanuman Chalisa, as recorded by supreme Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan.

As the final verse faded out there was the chewed crackle of a new recording, and Neel's voice boom-bapping into a room of middle class Gujaratis sitting in cross-legged contemplation.

Pu-tis-pa-tis
Pu-tis-pa-tis
Pu-tis-pa-tis
Pu-tis-pa-tis
Pu-tis-pa-tis
Pu-tis-pa-tis
Pu-tis-pa-tis
Pu-tis-pa-tis

Neel and I listened from the stairs, giggling to ourselves.

* * *

Copyright © Nikesh Shukla 2010