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Ours are the Streets

Written by Sunjeev Sahota

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Sunjeev Sahota

OURS ARE THE STREETS

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Ours are the Streets

At last the page is stained. Feels like a relief, truth be told. Sitting here hovering over the paper with my pen and waiting for the perfect words weren't getting me nowhere fast. And already the light's coming. A dark blue morning mist spreading thick across the window. The time's sempt to have flown by and I've spent so much of it worrying about how to kick this thing off that I'm not going to have chance to say all the things I wanted to in this my first entry. Inshallah, it'll get easier from now on. It wants to. I want to leave something behind for you all – Becka, Noor, Ammi, Qasoomah, Tauji. Abba, too. I guess knowing you're going to die makes you want to talk. But right now I can hear the voices of angels in my ears and they're calling me to prayer. Ameen.

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Another night. A better night. It's only just touching ten and I'm already managing to get a few good words down. Alhamdulillah! Not sure what good these words are going to be to you, mind. Now that I've left you. I know that it'll be hard for you all to get your heads round the fact that only a few months before you read this I were here at the window-desk in Ammi and Abba's old room and making the final preparations. That's what I think this is probably all about. Crossing the i's, dotting

the t's. The last few steps before the ground falls away. I know you'll be upset when I'm gone, and – I can't lie – that brings a sense of relief to my bones. I don't want to leave this world without having staked my claim on someone. But remember that you mustn't go overboard. You know how Allah (swt) doesn't approve of making a spectacle of your grief. Think of it like this – if you do start crying a great river of tears, how will I ever make it across? I'll be stranded, won't I?

Just remember that it's into His arms I'm heading. Me, Aaqil, Faisal, Charag. We're all with Him now. We're all of us unafraid. Remember that, B. We're an unafraid and fighting people. We are better than they can ever hope to be. So stand tall and fight it out and let your faith be your shield. Protect your brothers and sisters by singing louder than their guns. I'm speaking especially to you, Noor. I don't know how many years will have passed by the time you're old enough to read this but I want you to grow up and be a fighter like your abba. You understand? This is going to be a long and hard fight and we'll need you. You won't find it easy, I know, but don't listen to what the newspapers and TV will have said about me. None of it is true. They don't know me. They don't know that when it's just me on my own in this room, the loneliness takes hold of my gut. I look out the window and all I can see are row after row of semi-detached houses, Toyotas parked out front, and I

don't understand how these people can invest so much hope in those things.

I'm ashamed to say your abba weren't always a strong believer, Noor. I used to hang out with my mates and wear their clothes and be part of their drift towards nothing. The only good thing that came out of all that was that I met your ammi. She didn't always used to believe either, you know. Oh, yes, it's all coming out now! We were both very different back then, weren't we, B? When we met at university we were both of us very different. Do you remember?

It were a student night so it must've been a Thursday and a bunch of us from the course had gone to the Leadmill here in Sheff and I were there without beard or kufi and naked as the girls who were there to tempt me. They laughed and danced on the fuzzed-up flashing squares. I felt my chest expand. Away from home even if only for the night and all this creamy pleasure on show just for me.

There were a tap on my shoulder. It were my Rebekah.

In those days she didn't care so much for modesty. She let her dark red hair hang short and loose, skimming her jaw. Her slim shoulders were bare and packed tight with freckles. She had a short white dress on, I remember, with big green lotus flowers printed down the front of it. It pushed her small breasts up for all the men to gawp at. She had her arms folded,

as if she were waiting for an explanation. I think I beamed I were that happy. Happy and nervous, the way you get when someone so far out of your league approaches.

'Evening,' I said.

'I'm disappointed,' she sighed.

'Yeah, I know. Me too.'

'I expected better if I'm honest.'

I nodded. 'Totally. Personally, I blame Ronald.'

She made a face. 'Who's Ronald?'

'No idea. What are we talking about?'

'You know exactly what we're talking about.' She coughed then, and creased up her brow in what were meant to be an impression of me. 'Oh no, Rebekah. I'm not, like, going out tonight. I'm, like, way too busy and want to, you know, like, finish that assignment.'

She pressed a finger into my chest, and I wished to God she'd just move in and let me ride my hands up behind her. 'Imtiaz Raina, I'm accusing you of lying to me.'

'Firstly, the impression? Like a mirror. Twicely, I don't tell lies. Only fibs.'

'Hmm,' she said. 'We'll see.'

In the silence that followed, she were the first to look away. When she looked back she sempt to want to say something to me, but then she just shook her head and said she'd better get

back to the others. But it were the way you pulled back your shoulders, B, and put a bit of pace into your step that gave you away, like you were telling yourself to get a grip. I knew there'd always been an attraction between us, ever since that time you came and sat next to me in the library and asked to borrow my notes. ('Hi, I'm Rebekah,' you said, and I remember being floored by the fact you felt the need to introduce yourself.) But it weren't until that night at the Leadmill that I figured out how much you were into me. I played on that, I know. No point hiding anything now. Time to open myself out, wound on wound.

I left for the toilets, just to psych myself up a bit, and sat on the bog in one of the cubicles I popped a pill. I didn't do that often, but it always did the trick. It made everything better. It were like it dulled all the rats inside my head, even if for only a little while.

When I walked back out into the union, the music sounded sharper, the jokes came quicker, and talking to girls felt like the easiest thing in the world. Across the floor, I spotted this one girl who were on the same course as me and Becka. Blonde, top-heavy, orange-baked. You know the sort. I went over. We got chatting. She probably told me something about her life. I were too busy making sure to stand where I could see Rebekah. I wanted to know how messed up she'd get by

me talking to this girl. And it worked. Rebekah were looking across, which just egged me on more, and the more I could make this blonde girl – Donna? Debbie? – laugh, and the more I leaned in and held her shoulder, the harder I could see it were for Rebekah to concentrate on her own conversation. The more sips she took of her drink. The more effort she had to put in to stay cheerful in front of her friends. Cheap thrills on my part. I recognise that now. Then too, if I'm honest. But I know I loved being aware of your eyes on me, B. Made my whole body fill meatily out, like I were the king around here.

Towards the end of the night, I dropped the blonde and made my way back across the dance floor. I caught Rebekah looking at me. What? I mouthed, hitching up my shoulders. She just shook her head, all sad. With hand on heart, I gave a little bow. And just like that she forgave everything. She did a curtsy. I tapped my wrist – it's getting late. She mimed sleep. I waved her over. She dropped her friends and came at once.

'Do you wanna dance?' she asked, beaming.

'I don't do dance.'

'Oh, come on. Sure you do.' She reached for my hand, but I snatched it back.

'Seriously. I never dance.' Just the thought of making a twat of myself in front of all the girls caused me pain. Becka looked annoyed, like she thought she'd just made a fool out of

herself by coming over. I grabbed her hand. ‘Come on. Let’s get out of here.’

We walked out of the club and all the time as we walked side by side there were this horrible tension in the air, like a tingling up and down my arm. My stomach felt raw. I’d never had that feeling before. I thought there were something wrong with me. It weren’t normal nerves, because I’d been with a few girls by then. I used to keep on imagining them in the corner of the common room afterwards, laughing because I’d not measured up. But it felt different now with Becka, and it were only later that I worked out that those warm tight sticky pangs in my stomach as I walked beside her were simply because I wanted to impress her. Which just meant that I wanted her to like me.

We ended up behind the big green recycling bins at the back of the Novotel hotel. I’d been telling myself all the way up to be confident, in control. Be firm but make her laugh as well.

‘It’s only my dingle. Don’t know what you’re so scared of.’

She laughed at my saying dingle, like I’d hoped she would. ‘Who’s scared? I just don’t want to, that’s all.’ She moved to kiss me again. ‘Where were we?’

I turned away from the kiss and started jiggling my jeans

back up. ‘Up to you.’ I made my voice all annoyed. ‘We might as well head back, then.’

She sighed. ‘Well, if you’re gunna be such a kid about it.’

I felt a bit panicky, as if she’d taken the upper hand. ‘You don’t have to.’ She crouched down on her heels and stretched my briefs out over my cock. ‘But, you know, if you insist . . .’ She raised her eyebrows at me, warning me not to push my luck.

I remember they were my best jeans so I kept hold of them around my thighs because I didn’t want them to get mucky, and with my other hand I tidied her hair back off her face and held it there. I liked watching her stroking me off, and then my cock disappearing inch by inch into her mouth, and I loved the feel of my weight cushioned inside her like that.

Just when my balls were starting to clutch, she stopped and stepped away.

‘What the fuck? What’s the matter?’

She shook her head. ‘You can finish yourself off.’

‘Oh, brilliant.’

I came up the wall, the hem of my T-shirt gripped under my chin. Somehow, that weren’t how I’d planned on the evening ending.

‘Thanks for that,’ I said. ‘Remind me to leave you half-cocked next time an’ all.’

'Come again?'

I gave her a look. 'That's not even close to being funny.'

But you'd started giggling, and that set me off too. And we stayed there looking at each other, laughing, like we couldn't really believe we'd done this behind the back of the Novotel, as if we were a couple of stupid schoolkids again. We carried on laughing until we heard footsteps on gravel and then I took your hand and we hurried round the corner.

It were a long walk back to your bus stop. You were hugging yourself warm, I remember, nodding in thought like you were working up to say something. I stayed silent. I didn't want to risk spoiling things. It might be easy to say this looking back now, but when I laid in bed afterwards, smiling my face off, it honestly did feel like a real turning point in my life.

Eventually, you said, 'You doing anything tomorrow night?'

''S Friday. I'll be at the mosque.'

'Really? Didn't know you were that into it.'

My guard went up. 'Why? That a problem?'

I saw her smiling to herself. 'Nope. Not at all. In fact, some of my best friends are Muslims.'

I loved that you could make me laugh. 'Yeah, yeah, okay. Sorry.' We carried on walking. ''S just sometimes I get "the Friday feeling", you know?' I made air-quotes.

'Guilt, probably. Wash off the sins of the week.'

‘Summat like that. Maybe.’

Up ahead, shadowed in orange under the dark glare of a lamppost, two giants were talking on the iron bench at the bus stop. But as we got closer I saw that it were only that the two blokes were perched up on the back-rest with their feet on the seat. They were smoking. Their chunky uniforms had large loose gold buttons. They were speaking some tongue-filled language. Porters from the hotel, probably. I put my arm around your shoulder and pulled you to me. We moved inside the bus shelter, away from the two blokes. The bus didn’t look like coming any time soon.

I knew the answer, but anyway I asked, ‘Do you like me?’

You looked surprised, amused even. ‘What are we? Twelve?’ Then: ‘Why? Do you like me?’

I made sure to get your eye. ‘Yeah. I do like you. As it happens.’

It did the trick. You pressed your face into the side of my neck, sucking it, and lifted your arms around my head. Behind you, the porters ground out their cigarettes and nudged one another. And then I remember steering one hand around you, and around your waist, and thinking that it sempt made to fit my hand.

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