

Pure Mafia

A novel about child labour

Plus thesis and commentary

A portfolio of writing
submitted for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy
in
Creative Writing**

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ABSTRACT

This PhD in Creative Writing consists of three parts.

The first part is a full-length novel, approximately 80K words, entitled *Pure Mafia*. It is a drama about child labour and the Pakistani “carpet mafia”. This is intertwined with the story of an unhappily married man undergoing a midlife crisis who has an affair with a younger woman; the latter is instrumental to the main plot about child labour. The book’s second main theme is British Pakistanis. An overarching theme is abuse and exploitation, both personal and global, but ultimately of redemption and renewal. The story is set in 2010/2011, mainly in London, England, with a middle section in Lahore, Pakistan.

The second part is an academic thesis, approximately 20K words, entitled *Cheap Labour = Child Labour*, on the main theme of the novel, child labour. It attempts to show that child labour is an inevitable consequence of cheap labour generally, and that the only way to tackle child labour is to address cheap labour. The thesis has been consciously and deliberately written as an objective, third person, standalone document and for this reason *does not mention the novel*. It is partly designed to fulfil the general PhD criterion of demonstrating scholarship and research.

The third part is a subjective, first person critical commentary, approximately 15K words, on the writing of the novel and the thesis, the connection between them, and the research context; it is entitled *Pure Mafia: A critical commentary*. It explains why the main thesis is on child labour, rather than on the creative process or an English Literature thesis; however, the commentary does include in some detail an insight into the creative process, as well as a discussion of influences and tradition of writing.

The final section of the commentary summarises this entire PhD’s **original contribution to knowledge**.

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Secondly, I would like to thank **Dr Anshuman Mondal** for his supervision of the thesis, *Cheap Labour = Child Labour*. Academic writing comes hard to a creative writer such as myself, and Dr Mondal was very patient in slowly guiding my academic writing to a more precise and rigorous use of language, as well as a more appropriately dispassionate tone. He was also instrumental in guiding my initial, rather over-ambitious, ideas to a clean, well-defined thesis. His tutorials were always professional and calm, and the feedback precise. I am also grateful for his help in the final, submission stages of the PhD.

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Dedication

This PhD is dedicated to my parents and to all the child labourers of the world.

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Pure Mafia

A novel about child labour

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Part 1: Married to the *Goondas*

Friday 24th September 2010. London.

It was the usual Friday evening chorus of: ‘*Coming for a drink?*’ Over the past twenty years, in all my various jobs, this had gradually become background noise for me to the point where I almost didn’t hear it.

Today was different.

I wanted to join them but it was awkward: I wasn’t being included in the general invitation. It wasn’t that I was a pariah; simply that it was understood I was never interested. I looked through my open office door at my executive assistant, Catherine Haq, hoping to catch her eye. I felt the usual sense of mystification at the sight of her: even after four months I had still not got used to this strange English/Pakistani *gulab jaman*, this sweet rose, with her olive skin and chestnut hair; of course she could have been Kashmiri, full Pakistani, instead of the hybrid that she was. As luck would have it, she did indeed look at me just then and I raised my hand like a nervous Taliban schoolboy in a *madrasah*. Behind her, the other five members of the office staff were also readying themselves for the evening exodus; the accompanying noise filled the air, unlike the normal hush of the office environment.

She came towards me with that rushed walk of hers, a floating definition of youth and innocence; she was in her usual *shalwar-kameez*, meadow-green today, her *dupatta* draped around her neck, forming a vee at the front. She had a look of trepidation on her elfin-like face, reminding me of my daughter when she had been naughty and expecting a telling-off; Catherine was clearly hoping that I was not going to ask her to stay late, which I had had to do quite often in recent months as I struggled to master my new job. But to be fair she normally stayed late anyway without being asked and had more than justified my decision to promote her to executive assistant within weeks of my arrival. She had obviously been to the bathroom to freshen up and apply makeup, which she normally did not wear; I myself was feeling the ravages of the day and I wondered whether I should follow her example to freshen up or whether a polo would suffice. I marvelled at the ease with which she prepared to face the global metropolis that was London: the Second City, Carthage to New York’s Rome, glistening in the rain, glittering with gold and gilts, still standing despite the near-

meltdown of three years ago and the challenge of Beijing and Mumbai; still standing, but tottering, like Roma against the barbarian hordes, and this time without the excuse of ignorance in this the age of the Internet and mobile phones, of twenty-four hour satellite TV, of Facebook and Twitter. She was ready, but then she was young, a true child of the globalisation age – right down to genetic level.

‘Um, can I come?’ I said, looking up at her from behind my wooden desk, as she came in.

She looked surprised, then relieved, then puzzled, and finally delighted. As always she threw in a few Urdu words to me, for “practice” she had said, though I suspected it had initially been to show off a little, and had now become a bit of a habit; she had an anglicised accent, the t’s and the d’s hard rather than soft as they should have been. ‘*Zaroor, qui nahin?* Sure, why not. How come? Not off home to the wife and kids?’

‘Um, no, things have changed,’ I mumbled in English. I understood Urdu, spoke a broken version of it and was able to read simplified script, but unlike her I could not write it.

She raised one exquisite eyebrow, more than a match for Spock, in that typical gesture that always threatened to give me a headache.

‘I’ll explain later,’ I said.

She turned to go and I began to tidy my desk and close down my computer, rubbing my eyes and face in a mini self-massage as I waited for it to shut down, pausing to select “Yes” in response to the ping and dialog boxes of Word and Excel. The thought of Kashmir had reminded me of less pleasant images: of the recent floods in Pakistan, which were still in the news, and in particular one fresh report that was giving me nightmares – that, as if the floods were not enough, the latest danger was of reptiles. Only last night I had awoken, drowning in a sea of snakes, to the partial relief that the sea was only that of my own sweat, the nightmare made worse by the absence of my wife. I had been reminded of my childhood in Pakistan, of the monsoon season, when the roads would be knee-deep in water, and we would swim, oblivious of the dirt and disease and stink, even as the thunder and lightning crackled above us. I wondered how it was that I was still alive to tell the tale; perhaps ignorance was indeed bliss – a God-given vaccine of the poor.

The whole office area was about fifty feet by thirty, and of that my MD cubicle was about ten by eight in one corner; out in the open-plan part of it I was glad to note

that, at forty-five, I was not the oldest member of the group planning to go out for the evening. Jim was over fifty, and Amina in her late forties. Jim was divorced and Amina never-married; in the four months I had been here I had deduced the sad fact that she was still a virgin. Jim made no secret of the fact that he was interested in Amina, and many efforts had been made, apparently, to get them together but so far to no avail. Amina accepted the fact that she liked him, and that they were good friends, but remained adamant that she could only ever contemplate marrying a Muslim. I sometimes felt like screaming at her or bringing her into my office and threatening her with the sack if she did not overcome the ridiculous brainwashing of our common religion and get laid before her fiftieth birthday!

It had been a bit of an internal struggle: whether to risk the dilution of authority by venturing out with my work colleagues, or return to a cold and empty house, my wife being away visiting her family. The fact that it was not actually *my* company, only my father-in-law's, and that I had no intention of staying here forever, indeed was here under duress, had been the deciding factor; that and the cold and empty house in Ealing, *Queen of the Suburbs* (at least according to wonderful Wikipedia).

I went and stood next to Jim and Amina to make it clear I knew my place, that I was there on sufferance, cannon fodder for the young as they prepared for their night out in search of frolics and frivolity, of sex and samba; in search of *fun*, in other words, the very meaning of life itself as my daughter, at the age of eight, had once told me when I had asked her that question; and I had yet to come across a better answer in all my reading, from the ancient Greeks to the modern-day researchers with their electrodes and MIRs, from St. Augustine to the illiterate imams I was still forced to listen to by my wife and in-laws. St. Augustine of course had known the answer, giving the game away when he had said, "Oh Lord, give me chastity, but don't give it yet!"

The rest of the group, including Catherine, was younger, in their mid or late twenties, and all colours of the human rainbow; whatever other complaints I might have about my father-in-law, he was certainly not a racist.

An unusual dearth of news, thankfully even from those two current hot spots of the world, Iraq and Afghanistan, meant that there was not much to talk about really, but we stood and chatted – the usual mixture of politics and sport, work and non-work, personal and universal – as we waited for the stragglers to join us, like malingerers in the trenches, for our assault on the citadels of London – or at least the citadels of Chiswick!

*

The evening got off to a good start at the *All Bar One* on Chiswick High Road, next to the police station, near *Tesco Express*; these directions I had asked for in case I got lost, even though we all went together. I was about to order my usual diet coke when I suddenly decided to enjoy myself, have a real drink for once. Surely I deserved it after the agony of *Ramadan*, which had ended just a couple of weeks ago, followed by the torture of *Eid* at my in-laws. Not that I fasted fully anymore, of course, merely token fasts: first, last, odd weekend; how else were you supposed to get any work done?

The one glass of wine turned to several and soon I was as jolly as the rest of them, for once able to forget that I was the boss. Of course, one continued to know exactly what one was doing, but just didn't care. Thank God for alcohol! Long live the evil and decadent West!

The evening continued in the *Giraffe* restaurant down the road, where the group demanded of me that the company should pay for the night out: all other companies did occasionally, why not this one? I hesitated, torn between the intoxicating impulses of power and generosity, and the countervailing knowledge that I had to justify all expenses to my tight-fisted father-in-law, Mr Naseer-Ud-Din Shah Chaudhary, or "Uncle" as I was normally required to address him.

I compromised. I started to say, 'Okay...', paused to hold up a hand to curtail the cheers, before continuing, 'the company will pay for the food and soft drinks but *not* alcohol.' There were a few muted boos before the cheers resumed.

To my relief, Catherine had taken pity on me and was chaperoning me. At one point during the meal, she turned to me and said, 'I never knew you could be so much fun, Imran. You're so different from...' She stopped, as though suddenly aware of a possible indiscretion, before ending, 'You're so easy-going.'

'Thank you,' I said.

As we waited for dessert, Catherine turned to me again and said, 'Imran, there's something I've been wanting to speak to you about. I tried to talk to Mr Chaudhary about it, but he didn't seem interested.'

'Oh? What is it?'

'I've got a problem.'

'What's the problem?'

She hesitated. 'It's the figures. I can't make them out.'

'In what way?'

She hesitated again and shook her head. ‘Can we talk about it on Monday? I’m a bit pissed at the moment.’ She laughed.

I was puzzled but was myself too drunk by now to pursue the topic, not to mention that dessert arrived just then. ‘Of course.’

Over dessert, during a lull in the conversation, I pondered over what Catherine’s “problem” might be, but the resumption of conversation pushed the thought to one side.

After the dinner, half the group – Jim, Amina and Susan – evaporated, but leaving enough to continue, including me and Catherine. Suki, who at twenty-five was even younger than Catherine’s twenty-eight, and had clearly used up in alcohol the surplus allowance provided by my offer to pay for the food and soft drinks, raised an arm and chanted, ‘Strip club! Strip club!’, emphasising each chant with a punch in the air.

Everybody laughed and nodded in agreement. I stood puzzled for a moment and then turned to Catherine. ‘Actually, maybe I should head off as well then.’

‘Oh come on, Imran, the night is young.’

‘I’m too old for this,’ I mumbled, not very convincingly.

‘You’re never too old to have fun.’

‘But a strip club, it doesn’t sound very appropriate. I’m not saying that *you* guys shouldn’t go; I just mean...’

Catherine intertwined an arm through mine. ‘Oh don’t be such a stick-in-the-mud.’ She was about five feet six, which meant that with her sensible two-inch heels she was almost the same height as me.

Still I hesitated. There had been a time when I would have liked nothing better than a strip club but the thought now of watching young women the age of my daughter strip naked for my pleasure gave me a sick feeling, not helped by my increasing awareness over recent years of sex-trafficking. But then, on the other hand, I thought about my cold and lonely bed and the idea of returning to it just now was too much to bear.

I shrugged and half held up my arms, constrained as they were by Catherine. ‘Okay, fine, you guys are in charge here. You lead, I’ll just follow.’

‘So do you guys do this often, then?’ I asked, as we straggled along; Suki and young Kwame, who was about the same age as Suki, led the way. Suki, even with her high heels, was a good six inches shorter than Kwame.

Catherine shook her head. ‘Not very often. Tonight wasn’t planned. Sometimes these things happen and it’s best to just go with the flow.’

She still had her arm intertwined in mine, and I tried very hard to make sure our bodies did not collide, feeling rather unprofessional, but she seemed completely blasé about it. Was it just the drink? But then she didn’t *seem* to be totally out of it, unlike Suki who clearly was. I hoped that I wouldn’t bump into anybody I knew but by now I myself was too drunk to care; in any case, it was unlikely in this area.

After a few minutes of walking we realised that, in our alcohol-impaired state, nobody had actually thought things through; there was a short debate, in which I did not participate, about the respective merits of walking the two miles to Hammersmith in the cold, the inconvenience of the tube, or the expense of a taxi, but since there were four of us, we decided on the last option.

*

Half an hour later, I sat in *Secrets 1* of Hammersmith, the nearest lap dancing club to our offices in Chiswick, Catherine’s “problem” now only in the very back of my mind. I was not sure what I was doing here or when exactly the world had changed. It was not that I hadn’t been to a lap dancing club before, though I had put a stop to it when the children became aware, perhaps ten years ago; no, what was unusual was the fact that half the group I was with consisted of young women, and I was wondering if, at this very moment, my daughter was a customer in a similar place and if I had made a mistake, after all, in sending her away to university. Most of all what I found hard to believe was that Catherine and Suki were sitting on either side of me. I was feeling a mixture of lust and revulsion, of complete professional impropriety. I was also thinking that if I had wanted to do this sort of thing, why would I have got married in the first place? Not to mention that very occasionally, when serendipity led to a short-lived period of calm and happiness in my marriage, my wife had sometimes used to give me a lap dance that, though amateurish, was more satisfying than any dance that all of these young ladies put together could ever give me. At the age of thirty-nine and after two children, my wife was no longer a match for these young dancers in youth and firmness of body, but the non-restrictions, in her case, on touching, on kissing, on sniffing, on licking, on inserting with finger or tongue into any orifice without reserve or fear of disease or hygiene, or who had been there before, culminating in an actual climax rather than this endless deferral, were as a gourmet meal compared to a MacDonald’s. What

was it that Paul Newman had once said about his wife, Joanne Woodward? “Why go out for a burgher when you can have steak at home?”

I had tried to avoid having a personal dance but it soon became clear that this was not really viable. As I had been unable to decide on a dancer, Catherine had selected one for me. ‘How about that one?’ she had said, indicating with a nod, as though pointing out a prime of beef.

So now the selected young lady was dancing to Jay Sean, *Do You Remember?*, and I tried hard not to stare, even though I was entitled to. Her name was Sophie and I wanted to ask her why she did this job, did her parents know? I wanted to take her home, solve all her problems, and in return she would love me forever. Her youthful age meant that I could not bear to look when she performed the more advanced tricks of her trade – the bending, the spreading – the only problem being that this meant catching the eye of one of my equally young work colleagues, no matter which way I looked. I had asked for a topless dance only, rather than full-nude, but she had refused, even though the information card on the table clearly stated that this was an option; her refusal was because it was only half the price, although this was *not* the reason I had requested it. Catherine and Suki, unable to hear properly because of the loud music, had been puzzled by my negotiations with Sophie but on finding out had laughed and shaken their heads at what they perceived as my prudery.

I tried hard not to let the instinctive physical pleasure show on my face as Sophie mock-grinded her milky-white bottom in my lap whilst Catherine, thank God, looked discretely away for a few moments. I was feeling like Jekyll and Hyde, the animal side of me finding the fresh young naked body of a beautiful young woman irresistible, and the human side able only to think of my daughter, just a few years younger than this girl surely, and the sad question of why this girl, someone else’s daughter, was here whilst mine was enjoying “Fresher’s Week”. Make one mistake, take one wrong turn, get born to the wrong parents, and you ended up here stripping for money rather than at Freshers’ Week stripping for nothing (context was everything).

Our mistake, my wife and I, had been our arranged marriage and a life-sentence for both of us for a crime neither of us had committed, indeed had no idea what the crime was. Talk about Kafka: the repression of old Eastern Europe was as nothing compared to the repressions of our wonderful culture, which had to be “respected” of course. I wondered what mistake Sophie, or rather her parents, had made that she had to dance naked in front of middle-aged men, the age of her father. What random

fluctuations of chance had led her here, and my daughter not-here? What random fluctuations of quantum events had reduced me to this when all I had ever wanted was a wife and children, hearth and home; and no doubt my wife the equivalent?

The three minutes came to an end and Sophie kissed me on the cheek, and breathed a hot and moist ‘Thank you, darling’ in my ear, almost as erotic as the dance itself, the aroma of her perfume and scented oil in my nostrils.

‘Thank *you*,’ I said, just about managing to stop myself from adding “sweetie”, as I was wont to do with young women, “young” for me meaning anything under thirty, having got into the habit with my daughter and her friends. Instead I said, ‘That was lovely.’ I reached for my wallet to extract a twenty pound note, for a moment wondering, despite my feelings of sympathy, exactly who was being exploited here. Sophie began to dress, though whether the slipping back on of two scraps of lilac lace counted as dressing was a debatable matter. Looking around, I was surprised at the number of female customers.

Catherine decided to have a dance from the same performer, laughing her head off throughout, prompting me to ask afterwards, genuinely puzzled, what she, and women generally, got out of it. We had to shout to be heard above the din.

‘It’s just a bit of fun. Mind you, Suki says she’s bi-curious.’ Suki had gone over to the other side of the table to sit with Kwame and could not hear us.

‘Oh really?’

Catherine nodded and shrugged. ‘“Why limit yourself?” she always says.’

I was drowning in this conversation, indeed was not entirely sure what “bi-curious” meant, but I attempted to swim, to make a joke to lighten my thoughts. ‘Makes sense. I sometimes think I should join the revolution myself – anything seems to go these days, why should I miss out?!’

She laughed and nodded, before shaking her head at the handsome young Spanish waiter who came by and gave us an enquiring look; earlier, to my shock, Suki had said of him that she was going to “take him home and fuck him”, and Catherine had pursed her lips and nodded approvingly.

‘So what’s changed?’ she shouted, leaning forward.

‘Sorry?’ I shouted back.

‘You said that things had changed.’

I nodded, remembering. ‘Oh, it’s just that the kids have gone off to uni.’ I wiped imaginary sweat off my brow and flicked it away. ‘Thank God.’ I was not sure if she was convinced by my performance.

‘*Aur biwi?* And the wife?’ She pronounced “aur”, and, as “hour” rather than “or” as it should have been.

‘She’s staying with her family for a few days.’ *I did not add that she did this often, and ever-increasingly as the children grew older.*

Catherine nodded. ‘You don’t look old enough to have university-age kids?’

‘I got married very young,’ I said; *I did not add “and very desperate”.*

*

And now, finally, the evening was over; the lap dancing club itself had only been an hour or less, thankfully, the expense presumably prohibiting anything longer, and I stood in horror as everybody started to say goodbye with hugs and kisses. Was I supposed to kiss too? What was the protocol? One kiss or two? Air kisses or real? Where were you supposed to put your hands? I didn’t want to be accused of being a Pakistani perv, a groper. Were you meant to hug or keep your distance, or did that depend on how well you knew the person? I was sweating, despite the chilly night, my heart thumping faster than when I had once stood alongside two fellow passengers on the tube to face down a gang of six who were molesting a young woman. I was puzzled over how I had managed to get so much out of touch with the outside world over the years of my marriage.

When it came to my turn with Catherine, I focused my mind, held my arms locked in front of me, hands at shoulder height, so that there was no hint of impropriety, and planned to merely touch cheeks. She pushed my arms aside, invaded my personal space with all the confidence and arrogance of America invading Iraq, and planted two wet drunken smackers on my cheeks with loud “mm”s. She gave me a final squeeze at the end for good measure. True, she had done this with everybody but that was beside the point.

There were minicabs waiting outside the club and I grabbed one. In the end, I felt I had managed to get away without complete humiliation, the memory of soft cheeks and bodies, especially Catherine’s, embedded in my mind like pearls in their shells. You could blame the Continentals for a lot of things but this wonderful new cultural import of hugging was surely not one of them. I wondered how I was possibly going to look Catherine in the eye on Monday morning.

*

Back home, in my cold and lonely bed – one could only ever delay the inevitable for so long – at 2am instead of my usual 11pm, I reflected on the evening’s events. I spent a few moments trying to work out Catherine’s “problem” but was too tired to do so. Instead I turned my attention to the lap dancing, which was far easier in my befuddled state of mind. I was feeling rather sick from the prolonged exposure to naked female flesh, the equivalent of having over-eaten. I was reminded of the story of the emperor who had become so surfeited by his harem, he had started to wear iron boots and to require the women to run out of sight when they heard him approaching. I tried to focus instead on the feminist issue of the increase in female customers in such places. Thinking back, I *could* recall seeing females in lap dancing clubs before, but they were always rare and exotic presences (like South-Asian girls in normal nightclubs back in my time – oh, desperate days!) but more to the point it would never have occurred to me in a million breaths of Brahma that I would be part of a group that actually included them.

The moonlight through the window and the hint of *Organza* perfume on the pillow made me turn my thoughts to my wife. I hoped that when she returned tomorrow, after a week apart and with the children gone, we could put our differences aside and make a fresh start, pretend to be newlyweds again.

This reminded me of the reason for my wife being away at the moment: our daughter, Ayesha. I had dropped her off the previous Sunday morning at Surrey University. The fact that it was far enough away to justify living in halls, but close enough that I could get to her quickly in an emergency, had made the fact of her living away from home slightly easier to sell to my wife and in-laws. But it had *not* been enough to prevent the latest rift between us: they had insisted that she must not be allowed to stay away from home; there had been similar arguments in the past over swimming for Ayesha, single versus mixed schools and other such issues. I had stood fast, resulting in my wife’s latest trip to her family on the grounds that there was no point in her being here if the children weren’t here; I myself didn’t count of course. My wife had refused to accompany me to drop off our daughter because she felt that it would indicate that she supported my decision.

In thanks for all this I had not received a single phone call from my daughter over the past week, only terse replies to texts that *I* initiated, saying that she was fine. My *son*’s lack of communication I was by now used to but I had expected more from

my daughter; I wondered if my notion that we shared a special bond had been one-sided all along, on *my* side, or whether this was merely a symptom of her relief at finally having escaped the tense and polarised religious/secular ethos of our household.

I sighed and rolled over again, making the bed creak, my thoughts now turning to my son, Danyaal, or “Dan” as he preferred to be called, who was causing me different headaches. Could it really be true that my son was g-g-g *gay*? Not that I had anything against gays, of course, and if my son really was so, then I would support him obviously, though I did not relish the prospect of that particular fight with my wife and in-laws either; it would put the Ayesha issue in the shade. And how he would live as gay in our Stone (throwing) Age community was a problem even a Nobel laureate would balk at trying to solve.

I had a number of reasons for suspecting that my son might be gay, the main one being that he had inexplicably, for a British Pakistani family that is, chosen to study fashion design instead of medicine, dentistry, law, accountancy or computer science. Why would you possibly want to study anything else? I was being facetious of course, but *fashion design*? Two years ago, his decision reluctantly accepted, I had dispatched my son to university – Central Saint Martins, which was apparently the Oxbridge of fashion design – with subtle reminders that he was expected to find his own partner, and heavy hints that university was not a bad place to start looking; this I had drilled into both of my children since primary school when my wife wasn’t listening. But to my mystification my son, after two years, had given no hint of any girlfriends. Mind you, the truth was that I was actually more concerned about my daughter finding a partner, the reason being that boys always had the trump card of an Internet-order *desi* bride back from the home village, from the East – the warehouse of the West. Girls didn’t have that option because the boys couldn’t come over from Pakistan and get a decent job; the Pakistani *princesses* coming over didn’t have to work of course.

The final reason for suspecting that my son might be gay was that he spent hours in front of the mirror grooming himself – far more than my studious, straight A’s daughter.

There had been no drama about Dan living away from home; he had just done it, without asking permission and without fanfare, even though his King’s Cross campus was easily within commuting distance. The difference between my son and daughter was also manifest in their physical appearance and attire. Him: moon-faced, fashionably thin, expensive *Toni & Guy* haircuts – paid for by me of course; underwear-revealing

“gangsta” jeans. Her: fuller figure; pleasant-faced (oval), rather than stunning, but with lovely soft brown eyes and shiny black hair; long jumpers or t-shirts, depending on the weather, modest but still reasonably trendy.

I was by now semi-conscious; only on that twilight edge did I recall once again Catherine’s “problem”, her comment about the figures, jerking me temporarily back to wakefulness. I took the opportunity to sit up and drink from the large glass of water I had brought with me as a prophylactic against the next day’s inevitable hangover, before laying back down again. A car passed by in the street, its headlights tracing an arc across the wall. I hoped Catherine hadn’t meant that I truly had married into the mob, as I sometimes suspected. I really didn’t fancy myself as Tom Cruise in *The Firm*.

Monday 27th September 2010

On the Monday morning I was in extra early, 8am, hoping to make it clear to the staff that despite Friday night I was still the serious, hard-working boss they had known all along; of course they wouldn’t actually know about my early arrival but it made me feel better psychologically. It was still gloomy outside so I switched on all the office lights.

Despite two whole days of napping and drinking lots of water, I had still not recovered from my hangover, which I’d had to disguise to my wife as a normal headache. She had been surprised as I usually never got them. I stopped by the water-cooler in the reception area to stock up, admiring as always the large *kilim* show-rug on the floor.

In my MD cubicle I admired the smaller *kilim* show-rug as I passed it to get to my desk. I switched on my computer, waited for it to boot-up, and firstly added “Catherine’s problem” to my To-Do list, before catching up with my personal emails. They included a few from my university friends with the usual banter; I felt a twinge of pride and happiness that we had managed to keep in touch for over a quarter of a century. We were all dispersed and busy with our family lives now but still had our annual reunions. Next I went to the BBC news website; I had already heard the main headlines on *Buzz Asia Radio* earlier but I never felt complete until I had checked out the BBC. Thank God there were no major disasters this morning: no new suicide bombings in Iraq or Afghanistan; the last spate had been about a month ago. Even in Pakistan the worst of the immediate effects of the floods seemed to be over, though the long-term effects would be disastrous according to all reports.

I sighed and turned my attention to more pleasant matters – to Catherine – as I opened my work-related emails, which were mainly from our wholesale customers and from our local manager, Sharif, in Pakistan. As I handled them with one half of my mind, the other half was on Catherine and the lap dancing. I was dreading seeing her; all weekend I had rehearsed possible scenarios in my mind: should I mention the lap dancing first, laugh and joke about it? Or should I show contrition, make a pre-emptive apology and promise never to do it again? How would I look her in the eye? I considered wearing sun-glasses, pretending I had some sort of an eye-complaint.

As I dealt with the emails my usual regret went through my mind: why, oh why, had I given in to my wife's demands for a bigger house? Actually, it was not so much the size, as the fact that she was desperate to get out of Southall; it was the normal three-bedroom but everything on a bigger scale and within walking distance of Ealing Broadway Station, which still meant a price tag of almost double our old one. *But I had paid off my previous mortgage! Something most people could only ever dream about at my age. Why on earth had I saddled myself with a huge new one, for a house that we did not need?* I sighed as I thought back to the day we had signed the contract, our last chance to change our minds. I had hesitated, pen poised, but by then I too had been seduced by the new house with all its wood and glass and open staircase; the huge kitchen with its island, which my wife, Zara, had instantly fallen in love with; the en suite bedroom for me and Zara; had staked my claim to my "den", and had started to dream about building the library I'd always wanted. The house was next to a block of up-market flats and hence the price had been just that little bit less than the average for the area, thus allowing us to stretch to it.

All this reminded me of my boring and wasted weekend. Zara had returned late on Saturday morning, but my hopes of a fresh start, of pretending to be newlyweds again, had not materialised. We had spent the weekend doing our own things as usual. (Her things: cooking, gardening, mosque-work, and oil painting in which she was surprisingly good but refused to develop further. My things: reading, running, IT.) To make things worse, she had told me that, as well as the usual whole Sunday devoted to the mosque, a new Friday evening class had been initiated by the local women's group on "How to protect our children from the evils of Western society." She had said, 'I don't know how I'll show my face at this class, with Ashi staying away from home, but I suppose I'll have to try.'

'But what's the point of it now?'

‘That’s exactly the point. I can’t let them think I’ve totally given up on my children. Besides, it’ll be useful for my nephews and nieces. I love them more than my own children. And their mothers are so lax, I can’t leave it to them.’ Zara did not think much of her sisters-in-law, who came from poor backgrounds and whom she saw as usurpers of the family fortune. ‘Plus, all my friends will be there. The men are going to have a parallel class; will you come?’ She had not seriously expected a positive response from me but, for the sake of politeness, I had pretended to consider her invitation thoughtfully before shaking my head.

‘Why does it have to be a Friday?’ I had asked.

‘Because that’s when most kids want to go out. We thought it would be good to give them an alternative.’

I was surprised: for once, mosque-thinking actually made some sense, I thought.

My mind returned to the present. The regret over the house was because I had lost my job at Barclays due to the downturn and, about four months ago, I had had to swallow my pride and take this job with my in-laws’ carpet import/export company. I had thought, with much gratification, that I might just about have ridden out the economic storm, having survived all the previous rounds of job-cutting because of my expert-level IT skills, management experience and reputation for hard work, but the sword of ibn Khalid, great Muslim general whose nickname had been “Sword of God”, had finally fallen. I had lost my job in April, at the start of the new financial year, tried desperately for two months to find another, convinced that I would, but had finally accepted the reality that although there were jobs out there, none would pay me what I had become accustomed to and what I needed for my hefty new mortgage.

All that had ruined our plans for a grand, combined celebration in June/July, for our 20th anniversary and my birthday respectively – a “big” one of forty-five. It was true that my commute to the City had been cut by over a half, but even that was not enough compensation for working for my in-laws.

Around 9am people began to drift in; my attention diverted from my emails I noticed that the light outside had improved. One or two smiled and waved at me and mouthed “good mornings” from across the room, and I tried to analyse the smiles and the waves, the looks they gave me, but to my relief they did not seem too different from normal and not too accusatory. But still no Catherine, which was surprising since she was normally the second one in, after me.

I tried to divert myself by looking at the large, framed pictures on the walls, of the various designs of rug that the company could provide, including the standard patterns and motifs of gulls and medallions as well as all the geometric shapes; this learnt as part of my background reading. In addition there were bespoke patterns that Kwame, our talented pattern-designer, had designed in consultation with clients, some of which looked more like colourful, abstract art rather than rug designs. Actual, physical, small rug samples also hung from the walls all around the office, as well as the larger showpiece rugs on the floor of my cubicle and the reception area.

And then suddenly there she was, even more rushed than usual, as though in a hurry to get everywhere yesterday; she looked flustered and I could only assume she had had some kind of a holdup. I kept my head pointed fixedly at my computer screen but with my peripheral vision was aware of her coming to her desk, about ten feet away from my cubicle, her right side to me, taking off her black wool coat; she pulled back her chair, sat down and switched on her computer. Suki came over and started to chat to her and I heard some comments about tube delays.

And now Catherine was rushing towards me, and my heart was thudding faster than when I had once taken the wrong tube on the New York subway in the 1980s and ended up at a deserted station late at night. I focused on my computer screen as though the excel spreadsheet I had opened up contained the Da Vinci code to the very meaning of life itself. Okay, she was at my door now and it would be rude to ignore her. I looked up, frowning my brow and moving my lips as though performing some mental calculation, as if work was the only thing on my mind.

'Slama-laikum,' she said. She used the short version rather than the technically correct but longer *"Asa-lamo-laikum"* but I had never bothered to correct her; although she was in many ways more fluent than me, she did make some mistakes that a "native" would not have made.

'Wa-laikum asalam.'

'Sorry I'm late. Bloody tube!'

I looked at my watch. It was only nine-fifteen. I waved away her apology. We exchanged further morning pleasantries and she started to relax.

A pause as we smiled and nodded at each other; it seemed to me that the pause was lasting longer than usual – was that significant? I cracked, opened my mouth to apologise, but she beat me to it.

'Do you need me for anything?'

My mind quickly readjusted; thank God, she was only here for her usual morning “check-in”.

‘Oh, yes, there is actually.’ I waved for her to come in and sit down. She did so. ‘You were saying something on Friday night about the figures?’

She nodded, recalling, now totally relaxed and in work mode. ‘Yes, they’re a bit puzzling.’

‘In what way?’

‘They just seem too low.’

‘What do you mean?’

She looked up at the plain white ceiling with her dark green eyes, her finely carved lips pursing as she struggled for words. ‘I just can’t seem to work out how the goods can be made so cheaply.’

I sat forward in my chair, intertwining my fingers. ‘So let me just get this straight: you’re not saying the figures are dodgy, right? *I mean, I’ve been worrying about this all weekend, Catherine!* Our figures are audited by an external company.’ *Pure Rugs Ltd*, being a small company of nine people, seven here and two in the warehouse in Slough, did not require a full-time accountant.

‘No, I’m not saying the figures are dodgy, I’m just saying that I can’t understand how these goods can be made so cheaply and therefore sold so cheaply.’

I sat back and crossed my hands behind my head. ‘But that’s their, I mean our, USP isn’t it? Our slogan: “Persian Rugs at Pakistani Rates”.’

I was proud of that slogan, since I had come up with it. I liked to think I had a way with words, having always loved reading since childhood; this despite puzzled shakes of the head from my siblings and threats of physical force from my father for not spending more time on reading the Holy Book – why would you want to read other books when *it* had the answer to everything? I had also come up with the name of the company, the “pure” from “pak” in Pakistan; the word “Pakistan” itself meant “Land of the Pure”, an oxymoron, if ever there was one, as I was fond of saying. This name for a country whose very MO was corruption, and whose president’s nickname was “Mr Ten Percent”.

Susan from Accounts appeared at the open door, holding a piece of paper. On catching my eye she held up an inquiring finger, and I held up five in return to indicate five minutes. She nodded and went off; probably something needed signing.

Catherine had turned her head to see what was going on; she turned it back and said, ‘Well, I’ve tried to do the sums and I just can’t seem to make them add up. The labour costs, I mean.’

I started to understand. ‘But you do realise that labour costs in Pakistan are much lower than here? That’s the whole point isn’t it? Isn’t that what makes the world go round these days?’

‘Yes, I know that, Imran, I’m not stupid.’ Although she was a *gulaab jaman*, a sweet rose, she did have thorns, capable of being quite sharp sometimes. I was reminded of her first-class-honours and master’s distinction from LSE, and my suspicion that she was only here because she had been unable to find anything better because of the recession, and that she would be off like a lap dancer after payment as soon as the jobs market picked up if we didn’t keep her happy. She had used to work for *Carpet Right*, on their “fast-track” scheme for high-flying young graduates but had been made redundant. I also knew that she had signed a fresh rental agreement on a new flat just after getting the job and had been desperate about finding something quickly. Nevertheless, I wondered if I should be offended by her choice of words. Catherine too looked a bit apologetic and apprehensive. She smiled and said, ‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.’

I waved it away. ‘So what’s the problem then?’

‘What would you say is the average daily wage in Pakistan?’

I dredged the depths of my mind. ‘I think about a hundred rupees a day. But that was a figure I heard years ago. So maybe one-fifty, two hundred?’

She nodded. ‘The minimum wage in Pakistan is about two hundred and thirty rupees a day. But –’

I interrupted, ‘Pakistan has a minimum wage?! I didn’t know that.’

‘For certain industries, yes. But according to our figures, if I make a rough estimate of how long a rug takes to make, we’re paying something like fifty rupees a day.’

‘So are we breaking the law?’

She hesitated. ‘I’m not sure.’ She seemed almost embarrassed at not knowing the answer.

‘What’s the point you’re making then?’

She hesitated again. ‘Actually, I’m not sure myself. Something just doesn’t feel right, that’s all; something they said in my module on *Globalisation and Business*

Ethics. But I suppose I shouldn't make accusations without facts. I only mentioned it because... Well, the thing is, Imran, I took this job for very specific reasons, and I'm now wondering if those reasons were justified.'

'Oh? What reasons?'

Still she hesitated.

'Tell me what you're thinking,' I said encouragingly, sitting back in my chair, making it squeak. I myself was wondering what they had taught her about the ethics of lap dancing in their study module!

Catherine shook her head uncertainly. 'No, it's fine.' She was wearing a sky-blue *shalwar-kameez* suit today, reminding me of one of the things about Pakistan I had noticed on a visit and which had stuck in my mind: how *high* and *big* the sky was over there.

I opened my mouth to say "But I don't know what you're talking about" but then closed it again. It was clear that she didn't want to say anything more right now, and perhaps I should take time to reflect before pursuing it.

Catherine smiled and said, 'So did you have a good time on Friday night?'

I blushed, taken unawares. 'I'm so embarrassed. I really shouldn't have come.'

'Don't be silly. We're all entitled to have some fun. Where's the harm? Bollywood films are almost as bad nowadays! Have you seen *Ashiq Banaya Apne Ne*? She pronounced the "A's" short rather than long as they should have been.

I shook my head.

She sighed. 'Emraan Hashmi is such a *hottie*, don't you think?'

'Possibly. I prefer Amitabh Bachchan.'

'But he's like, a hundred years old!'

'He's not a hundred!' I said, leaning forward indignantly. 'He's only in his sixties.'

'Hey, is his name the same as yours, just with a different spelling?'

'How's that?'

'Emraan Hashmi, I mean.'

'Oh, I've no idea.'

'Anyway, you should come out with us more often. Where's the harm?'

I shrugged and relaxed back into my chair. 'Yes, well, we'll have to see about that. No harm, I suppose; it's just a bit of fun.' I was desperate to change the subject but

was curious about one thing. ‘When did all this start? Women going to lap dancing clubs, I mean?’

She smiled and shrugged. There was a few seconds of silence as we looked at each other. I felt compelled to look away first. I looked back and said, ‘Anyway, I just want to thank you again for all your hard work. Bringing me up to speed and all that; I really appreciate it.’

‘You’re welcome.’

She stood up and walked the few feet to the door; as she did so I became aware of the sounds of the office, which I had unconsciously filtered out during our conversation. She exited, almost bumping into Amina who was passing by. Susan came back a few seconds later and I signed the order form. She was a calm, mature woman of fifty-five with three grown up children, and lived in Richmond with her husband who had an antique business. We chatted for a while before she went off.

With Susan’s departure I cast my mind back to my first few days at the company, combing my memory for clues as to the nature of Catherine’s concerns, but was unable to think of anything. But one thing was for sure: Catherine had been critical in helping me to get up to speed in my first months on the job and I felt that she was entitled to have her concerns listened to. I wondered if I might get her to open up more if I were to take her out of the office environment; in fact, this was often our tactic when struggling with a particularly thorny business problem.

Friday 1st October 2010

It was the Friday of that week. Catherine and I were having lunch at *The Old Pack Horse* on the corner, the favourite daytime haunt of the people from the office. The place was fairly quiet at the moment as we had come early, indeed had come early for that very reason. We were sitting at right angles to each other, instead of face to face across the small round table, so that we could talk more comfortably; she was on the banquette, I was on a wooden chair.

‘So, I note you’ve got a First and a Distinction?’

She smiled and nodded, clearly delighted.

‘Which one’s harder, would you say?’

‘Distinction, of course,’ she mumbled, through a mouthful of prawn salad.

‘Why?’

‘Because you have to show originality.’ She wiped away a speck with a dainty thumb; her nails were unpolished but well manicured, I noticed.

‘Oh really? I thought that was only for a PhD?’ I took a mouthful of my fish and chips.

She shook her head. ‘No. Distinction as well; obviously, at master’s level you don’t have to go into as much detail, but it does have to be original.’ She held a hand in front of her mouth as she spoke.

‘What was your original idea then?’

‘I argued that cheap labour in poor countries is a modern version of slavery, and that we should have an international minimum wage. Either that or if we’re going to have free flow of trade and capital, as the neo-liberals favour, we should also have free flow of labour.’

Her second sentence was pure *jat* Punjabi to me but I considered the first sentence as I chewed. When I had finished chewing I said, ‘I don’t mean to put you down, but as far as the international minimum wage is concerned I find it hard to believe that nobody has thought of that before?’

She struggled to explain: ‘Of course, you’re right, nothing is really totally original. But there *is* a difference between just having a random thought and maybe putting it up on the Internet; between that and having a reasoned argument, fitting it into the framework of existing knowledge, giving all your references and some ideas about how it would actually work.’

I nodded. ‘I see. And how *would* it work?’

A frustrated look came over her small, intense face. ‘Well, as I say, at master’s level you don’t have to go into too much detail; you only get six months for the dissertation, remember. I wanted to continue with a PhD but I couldn’t afford it and I couldn’t get funding.’

‘Even with a First and a Distinction?’

She laughed ruefully. ‘I wasn’t the only one to get those. Quite a few people get them at LSE. I was *near* the top of the class but not quite at the top, and only the people at the top get funding, and even then it’s rare in the arts and social sciences.’

There was a pause before I said, ‘Is it hard getting a First, Distinction, all that? Do you have to be, like, super-intelligent?’

She thought for a moment. ‘I don’t think I’m super-intelligent. You just have to work hard and... go for it, I guess. If you want something, you have to go for it, right?’

I nodded noncommittally. I had a brainwave: how I could keep her happy, relatively cheaply; I was still worried that she would leave at the first sign of a better opportunity – good staff were hard to find. ‘How about if the company was to sponsor you? We could pay your fees and maybe even give you half a day off per week.’

She looked delighted, her whole face lighting up; she had small, regular teeth.

‘That would be great!’

I felt guilty that if she was paid what she deserved she wouldn’t have to have this as a favour but instead would have been able to pay for it herself; and that she was not to know that from the company’s point of view it meant that it was not an ongoing commitment and that any future pay rises, in terms of percentages, did not have to include it.

I said, ‘It’s a shame about the timing. You’ll have to wait until next year before you can start.’

She looked puzzled. ‘Why?’

‘The academic year has already started, hasn’t it?’

‘But for PhD you can start at any time.’

‘Oh. In my day you had to start in September.’

There was a pause as we dug into our lunch. I had wanted to do a PhD myself, but it had always seemed to me to be rather like going on a hunt for some mythical creature, sometimes sighted by others but never by oneself. (My daughter, Ayesha, perhaps...? Dan was presumably out of the question: could one do a PhD in fashion design?)

I said, ‘So what made you want to work for *Pure Rugs*?’

She considered her response. I wondered if she was trying to work out a polite answer as opposed to “Because I couldn’t get any other job.”

Instead, to my surprise, she said, ‘It was perfect for me. I couldn’t believe my luck.’

‘In what way?’

‘Well, as you know, I’m interested in international business, international relations and so on. It’s a small company so I was hoping I could really make a big input. That didn’t work out initially but now that... I mean now that you... I mean I want to thank you, Imran, for this opportunity.’

I nodded. ‘You’re welcome. You deserved it. You saved my life really: I knew nothing about this business, still don’t really.’

She continued, 'Plus the fact that it was Pakistani was even more unbelievable.'

'In what way?'

'I mean there aren't that many companies like this around; there are more Indian ones.'

I was puzzled. 'You didn't want to work for an Indian company?'

'It's not that I didn't want to work for an Indian one; I just preferred a Pakistani one.'

It was the first time I had ever heard of anybody preferring Pakistani in anything. 'Why?'

She hesitated, a rather strange expression on her face that I found hard to interpret; rather puzzlingly, there was almost a hint of sadness and wistfulness about it.

She said, 'You know I'm from a mixed background, don't you?'

I twisted a hand. 'I can see that but obviously I don't know the details. You've certainly got the exotic looks that mixed heritage people often have.'

'Thank you. Anyway, my mother's English and my father was Pakistani.'

'Was?' I said, now feeling genuinely sorry for her.

She said quickly, 'I mean is, I mean I don't know. They split up when I was very young and I've never seen him since. I'm not even sure what he looks like: she threw away all his photos.'

She did indeed have a mad mother. A few weeks into my new job I had been startled to hear a commotion. I had rushed out to find a middle-aged woman standing near the office entrance, in the right hand corner from my point of view, screaming and shouting. *'Why don't you ever phone me?! Why haven't you given me your new address?! I've got news about your dad! This time I really mean it. I swear on the life of the Holy Father!'* Looking around I had been astonished to note that nobody was reacting, sitting at their desks and continuing to work as though nothing was happening. Only Catherine was sitting with her head in her hands, close to tears. Amina had come over and quietly explained. *'It's Catherine's mother. She does this sometimes.'* I had tried to calm her down, asked her to sit down on the sofa in the reception area and have a cup of tea. She had backed away like a Bollywood heroine, almost tripping over the low round table, arm stretched out as though I was trying to rape her, screaming, *'Stay away from me! All you Pakis are the same!'* I had been shocked: I could not remember the last time I had heard that word. I had seen her out and, my ears still ringing from the insult, had told her quietly that if she ever did this again I would call the police. She had

not returned since. Later, Catherine had apologised; I had swept her apology aside and asked if there was anything I could do to help. I had started to make suggestions, perhaps she could just see her mother occasionally, talk to her on the phone, maybe some therapy...

Catherine had listened with *that* look on her face: the look that said, *I know you mean well but honestly please stay out of it, you don't know what you're talking about, it's none of your business, I've tried everything, you have no idea what it's like.* After getting a few things off my chest, I had heeded the look's advice, only thinking to myself, *Actually I do know what it's like.*

My mother had died when I was twelve. I had missed her growing up but now, at the mature age of forty-five and having experienced other people's mad mothers, I often wondered if I hadn't actually been better off *without* a mother. In fact, some of my siblings had tried to convince me over the years that our mother had been an angelic woman – as opposed to our father whom they considered a bastard, but maybe the fact that *she* was dead helped – but it was my dirty secret that I did not agree with their estimation. She had been a rather cold and distant woman, always pushing me away whenever I tried to get cuddles.

I wanted to hug Catherine or reach out a hand but felt it would be inappropriate. 'I'm really sorry. Do you know what happened? Why?'

She shook her head. 'Not really. All I vaguely remember is I came home from my first full day in primary school and my mother told me he had gone home to Pakistan for a holiday; he never came back. Until then I'd been brought up as a Pakistani but then my mother tried to change me to English. I didn't want to, but she forced me, threw away all my Pakistani clothes, told me to use her surname. But she couldn't stop me from taking GCSE Urdu at school; you can do that in Bradford. And when I was about fourteen or fifteen I felt able to stand up for myself and slowly started to revert to my Pakistani clothes.'

There was silence for a while before I said, 'Do you know anything at all? Have you tried to trace him? Your mother said she had news of him.'

'She's always saying that: it's her favourite trick to try and see me. All I know is that he was from Raulpindi and then he immigrated to Bradford. That's where they met. Later on, I moved to London for uni and to get away from Mother. About a month ago, she even swore on the Pope's life that she had big news but she was lying again.'

I had noticed her pronunciation: she had said “Raulpindi” instead of “Rawalpindi”. But then I wasn’t absolutely certain *mine* was the correct way.

She was saying, ‘Have you heard of Raulpindi?’

‘Yes, of course. I was born there.’

Her jaw dropped and she twisted her whole body towards me. ‘*Really?! I thought you were from Lahore!*’

‘Well I am really. My father is from there and I spent the first six years of my life there but my mother was from Rawalpindi and she would return there to her family to give birth to us. That’s how they did things on those days.’

She was barely listening. ‘OH – MY – GOD! I can’t believe it.’ And suddenly she was looking at me with an expression that was not at all professional, soft and girl-like, and vulnerable.

I said, ‘Do you know that Rawalpindi used to be the capital of Pakistan? I wish it still was. Islamabad is so boring; basically like London in terms of the buildings but with nothing to do, no colour, no culture.’

She became animated, putting down her knife and fork so that she could gesticulate. ‘I know! Raulpindi is so much more interesting. I think my father must have been a soldier. You know it’s the HQ of the army? I went there after my studies, spent a year there doing some NGO work, hoping to find him but no luck.’

Catherine’s mother had looked like a dinner lady so I was more than willing to believe that Catherine’s father had been a soldier – a handsome one indeed – and that that was where she had got her looks from. Perhaps she had been searching in the wrong place: maybe she should go and look for him at the Wagah Border, the demarcation line between Pakistan and India near Lahore, where daily peacock displays were performed at sunset by the very tallest and handsomest of Pakistani and Indian soldiers.

‘How did you go about it?’

‘I just wandered around, hoping I’d bump into him.’

I said nothing, looking around at the other customers. Being Friday lunchtime it was now busy with the usual office crowds. I noticed Amina and Jim sitting at another table. It was noisy with the sounds of chatter and the clinking of cutlery, and we would often have to repeat ourselves; the smell of food and alcohol filled the air. My mind was temporarily lost in the heart-rending image of a young woman wandering around looking for her father like Gretel in the forest; at the same time I was wondering how it was that people could be so clever in some ways and so foolish in others. The rather

alarming thing was that she did not seem to be aware of the stupidity of what she had just said, making me question my own rather grand ambitions for her; fortunately, at least her sad and wistful look had disappeared.

She was speaking. ‘One day I’d like to run my own company: an ethical import/export business.’

I looked back. ‘You mean like Anita Roddick?’

Catherine beamed. ‘*Exactly* like Anita Roddick. She’s my hero. I wrote a paper on her for one of my MA assignments. I got an A for it.’

‘What sort of business?’

‘I don’t know yet. But as well as paying the workers decent wages, a school would be an integral part of the factory where the workers’ children would be taught for free.’

‘But would you still be able to make a profit?’

The first look of doubt appeared. ‘I’m thinking I wouldn’t try to compete on price? I’d literally compete on the business ethic: it would be the central part of my marketing and advertising campaign. It’s quite an original idea; I think it could work. I think a lot of people are actually willing to pay a bit more for ethical products nowadays. Don’t you think?’

I nodded. ‘I do actually. I know *I* would. That’s a great idea. Good luck with that. Let me know if I can help you in any way.’

‘Thank you.’

Our lunches were finished. A waiter came by and made a gestured inquiry as to whether he should take the plates away, to which I nodded assent.

I turned to Catherine and said, ‘The reason I actually asked you out for lunch was that I thought we could speak more freely. I’m still puzzled about your comments regarding the figures.’

‘Oh that.’

I nodded. ‘I want you to speak openly. Tell me what you’re thinking.’

‘I suppose it’s kind of related to what we’ve been talking about. I can’t make out the labour costs. There’s a number of possibilities: one, we’re paying very low wages, even for Pakistan, I mean – unethically low; two, the hours are very long, which is essentially the same thing; three, we’re using child labour, which is very common in the carpet industry, as you know.’

I hadn’t known, but was impressed with her analysis. ‘You sound like Morse.’

‘Who?’

‘Inspector Morse?’

‘Oh right.’

‘Did you ever watch it?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘What did you think of it?’

She shrugged. ‘A sad, middle-aged man with a paunch and a teenage angst he should have lost years ago. And a loser with women. I preferred Lewis.’ She took a sip of her diet coke.

With two short sentences, a master’s level analysis, she had destroyed one of my main fictional heroes. I suddenly wondered if I liked her at all!

‘Anyway, going back to the main point: what are you saying?’ I asked.

She shrugged. ‘Well, you know I told you that I took this job for a number of reasons. One of them was to find out how the company works. I specifically asked Mr Chaudhary at the interview about its ethical policies, for example whether it paid decent wages, used child labour and so on, and he assured me that the company was ethical. But I just can’t make out the figures.’

‘I see. But you don’t think we’re breaking any kind of laws?’ I was now glad that I had made my offer of the PhD before all this; otherwise she might have thought it was hush money.

‘It’s hard to say. I don’t think we’re breaking any *British* laws. Even with child labour, I don’t think there are any laws as such, amazingly enough. Only public opinion. The bigger companies have to be a bit careful nowadays, but because we don’t deal directly with the public, it’s not really a problem. All we have to do is sign a piece of paper, knowing that nobody is ever going to check.’

‘And have we signed that piece of paper?’

She nodded. ‘Yes. But one of the reasons I’ve been wanting to mention this is that the renewal date is coming up: end of the year.’

‘And if the companies did find out, could we be in trouble?’

‘No real trouble. I mean, we’re not talking prison or anything. I suppose our wholesale customers would be obliged to stop buying from us if they found out anything, so that would be serious of course, but the chances of that happening are almost zero.’

‘How come?’

‘They never check. They’re not bothered. In a way, small suppliers like us are good for them: we’re like a buffer. They can get us to sign this disclaimer and then wash their hands of any responsibility.’

I reflected for a while before saying, ‘By the way what was the name of your master’s program?’

‘*Empires, Colonialism and Globalisation.*’

‘Oh yes of course, I remember now.’ I meant that I remembered from her CV, and I also now recalled that her first degree had been *International Relations*. ‘Sounds interesting.’

She nodded. ‘It was.’

‘What does your mother do, by the way?’

‘She’s a lawyer.’

I raised my eyebrows, wondering how a lawyer could behave the way her mother behaved, but said nothing; instead I looked at my watch. It was time to head back. Looking around I noticed that Amina and Jim, who had arrived after us, were also making moves to leave. I said, ‘Can you do me a favour? Just write all this up, including your assumptions and figures and so on. I’ll see if I can talk to Mr Chaudhary about your concerns; he’s not well, so that might be difficult, but I always find that I can’t think about something properly unless I have it in writing.’

‘Sure. I’m the same.’

I was glad to be bracketed in with her. I was proud of my Upper Second which had driven me to the brink of suicidal despair; I had tried hard for a First but had always known that it would be rather like catching a will-o’-the-wisp or one of those fireflies that I had been delighted to see on my first visit to Pakistan all those years ago but which had stuck in my mind to this day.

I smiled at her. ‘We’d better get back. And by all means, start looking into your PhD thing.’

She smiled back. ‘Great.’

We stood up and walked over to merge with Amina and Jim to stroll back to the office together in the cool cloudy early October weather. I noticed that, whereas in the past Catherine would always keep a clear gap between us when we walked together (except the other night) she was now walking very close to me so that our bodies often bumped. I moved away, but gradually and discretely, not wanting her to feel rejected.

*

It was evening of the same day, 7pm. I was staying late at work, knowing that my wife would not be back until well after nine. She was to start her new mosque class, which ran from seven till nine. I planned to leave around 8.30pm. Everybody was long gone, except Catherine. I often wondered why she didn't dash off early on Fridays like the others; I knew she was hard-working and ambitious but surely working late on a Friday night was beyond the call of duty. But she now came to the door to say goodbye and exchange a few pleasantries, as was her habit.

'So how are you getting on without the kids, then?'

'Fine. Starting to get used to it.'

'Wife still away?'

'No, but she's started a new class at the mosque. She won't be home till after nine.'

'Oh well, see you on Monday then...?'

'Yup, see you then.'

I got the impression that she was lingering and that if I were to ask her out for a drink, she might even say yes. But I did not want any hint of impropriety on my part, anything that could be construed as abusing my age and position, especially now that she had been revealed to be rather vulnerable. She went.

An hour and a half later I cleared my desk and left the office. I stopped on the way home to buy some flowers for my wife, a rather pleasing mixed bouquet. I was again hoping that with the children gone and the bloodletting of our week apart over, we could re-ignite our relationship; I was also hoping that the flowers would serve as a partial apology for not accompanying her to the mosque. I arrived at my front door and opened it.

'Hello, I'm home,' I shouted from the porch, as I put down my briefcase and hung up my coat and jacket, temporarily laying down the flowers on the floor.

I entered into the open-plan area; she came out of the kitchen-end, around the island, and walked towards me with that slow, slightly rolling gait of hers, her face lighting up on seeing the flowers. She was wearing slippers so her heels did not click on the wooden floor as they normally did. It took her almost a minute to cross the thirty feet or so. She had already changed into her white silk pyjamas; she normally wore long dresses or similarly modest Western clothes at home, and Pakistani dress at her family or the mosque. She would turn forty this year, which she was dreading, but looked good for her age, slim and attractive, with shoulder-length black hair, large black eyes, a

medium-dark complexion and a full mouth; she was five feet four inches tall. Her relatively dark skin had been a source of anxiety for her parents but I had never been worried about such nonsense, indeed preferred darker. In any case, not being exactly George Clooney myself, except for the salt and pepper hair, I was in no position to be too fussy, though I liked to think I was no Quasimodo either; a bit like my height really, five feet nine, neither here nor there, but slim and trim as a result of ruthless diet and exercise over the years. The exercise had been Judo to black belt level in my youth, but now consisted mostly of running. I was clean-shaven, having an aversion to facial hair of any kind and, like my wife, of medium complexion.

‘How was your day?’ she asked, accepting the flowers with a slightly grudging and suspicious smile, and taking a deep whiff; the suspicion was because I did not buy her flowers as often as I perhaps should have done.

‘Fine. How was the new mosque class?’

‘Oh it was great. They gave us so many ideas.’

‘Like?’

‘Oh, you know, about talking to your children, keeping an eye on them.’

She said this as though it was the latest research, fresh from a think-lab; generally speaking, she was as sharp as anyone, often besting me in debates, but when it came to the mosque her rational judgement seemed to disappear, rather like men’s when it came to sex. She had the precise, clipped way of speaking of Pakistani girls educated in English-medium private schools in Pakistan. I merely nodded politely in agreement, already thinking with a familiar sinking feeling that the flowers were not going to do the trick of bringing us closer together.

‘What’s for dinner?’

‘I haven’t had time to cook properly, so it’s only rice and *dal*.’

I nodded. ‘That’s fine with me. Actually, I had a big lunch today, so I’m not really that hungry. I’ll just go and freshen up.’ There was a downstairs toilet in our new house but I also wanted to change into more comfortable clothes.

As I started up the designer-staircase she returned to the kitchen area, taking another whiff of the flowers as she did so.

During dinner, at our glass dining table which was now too big for us even though it was only an eight-seater, after talking briefly about the kids and mundane things, I said, ‘I had lunch with Catherine today.’

‘Who?’

‘Catherine, you know, my executive assistant. She used to be accounts manager, still is, but I gave her additional responsibilities. She’s really clever.’

‘Oh, right, okay.’ Zara did not take much interest in her father’s business, knowing that she would see none of it; the most she hoped to inherit was her mother’s jewellery, and even that she would have to fight her sisters-in-law for, who would argue that since they had “kept” her mother, they deserved it.

‘Something strange happened.’

‘What?’

‘She said that there’s a document we have to sign every year to certify that we don’t use child labour.’

‘Okay.’

‘I asked her why she was making an issue of it and she said that she wasn’t convinced that we weren’t.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She said that she can’t make out the figures. That the labour costs are too low. That either we must be paying the workers very low wages or we must be using child labour.’

Zara spread her hands, knife and spoon pointing in opposite directions, the spoon clanging against the white, geisha-decorated vase containing the flowers, which she had placed right next to us so that she could admire them as she ate. ‘But if they’re happy, what’s the problem?’

‘How do you know they’re happy?’

‘If they’re not happy they can leave, can’t they?’

‘It’s not quite as easy as that, though, is it?’

I reached for another helping of *dal*, taking a deep whiff as I did so, thinking that if *dal* had been rare and expensive like caviar, men would have fought and killed for it, as they did for land, women and gold, according to the ancient Punjabi proverb. When we had first got married Zara had been unable to boil an *unda*, but over the years she had become a fine chef; even her “simple” *dal* was delicious – rich and aromatic.

She made no reply to my question and I decided to desist. Anything could trigger an argument and we had both learnt not to push things.

‘What are you doing this weekend? Going out with your mosque friends again?’

I asked.

She smiled. ‘I don’t need to go out on Saturday nights anymore; not for a few months anyway.’

I was puzzled for a second but then recalled the reason and nodded: yes, of course, *Beauty and the Chin*, in *Strictly Come Dancing* were on. She watched this program with the avid concentration that should really have been reserved for Friday afternoon sermons and during which all activity in the house ground to a halt. I sometimes teased her that she really shouldn’t be watching half-naked women dancing intimately with men but she refused to rise to the bait. I had also suggested that she actually *go* to a class and *learn* ballroom dancing, rather than just watching it, and she had looked at me as though I was mad. (‘What, dance with strange men and have them put their hands all over my body?’ I had shrugged: ‘Perhaps we can go together?’ I was mostly joking, since I had the rhythm of an imam, but if that’s what it took to reignite our relationship...) She had shaken her head, clearly indicating that she found it unfathomable as to why any man would want his wife to be touched by other men. Put in those words, I did not want that either, of course, but surely it was all about context?

She now disappeared, leaving me to clear the table; I was a Muslim dinosaur in the housework department but somehow this had become my responsibility. I turned on the kitchen radio to keep me company. The ten o’clock news was just starting and I learnt that there were hopes that the trapped miners in Chile would be freed soon. When I went up ten minutes later, brushed my teeth and came into the bedroom, she was already in bed with the light off.

*

*I lay in bed, aching for my wife who was gently snoring beside me. The six inch gap between us might as well have been the Pakistani/Indian border. Sex had become increasingly rare over the years but had dried up completely a few months ago when I had taken my daughter’s side in allowing her to stay in halls. I had hoped that when my daughter was actually gone, *fait accompli*, my wife would soften but so far there had been no sign of it.*

The irony was that I knew she loved sex. Indeed, I had always thought it the saddest irony of my life that I had a wife who enjoyed sex but with whom I could not converse and who insisted on using sex as a weapon. The fact that she liked sex should not have come as a surprise to me: according to Islam, when God created sexual desire he gave nine-tenths to the woman. More scientifically, despite my youthful misconception that women only consented to sex reluctantly and as a duty, it made

sense that, since they had to endure the pain of childbirth and the ultimate responsibility for children, the payback had to be that much higher.

She actually **enjoyed** giving blow-jobs (and the reciprocal even more, bucking and heaving like Alexander's horse, Bucephalus) rather than seeing them as a wifely burden. She would suck and bite and flicker her tongue with the same relish that I displayed when eating my favourite chocolates, ferrer roches. In the early days she would often allow me to come in her mouth, holding it until my spasms subsided, before rushing to the sink to spit it out; she drew the line at swallowing. She had even, once, in the first hot flush of marriage, allowed me to experiment with the love that dared not speak its name, the love that was the subject of intense debate amongst Islamic scholars. (There were two schools of thought on the love that dare not speak its name, both backed by impeccable sources. Hadith 1: "A man may do anything he likes with his wife, provided she consents." Hadith 2: "Any man who knows his wife through her anus will go straight to hell.")

I was with the first school of thought! (Zara's comment had been: 'I just want to find out what the fuss is all about!') To my disappointment she had not enjoyed it; in fact, to this day, I was not sure if even partial entry had been achieved. ('It's so painful, how do people do this?') I had learnt later over the years that our mistake had been to not use enough lubrication but she was no longer interested in repeating the experiment. I was not too bothered either: just the naturally lubricated type of sex soon became enough of a rarity for me to be eternally grateful whenever I got it.

For many years the sex alone had more than compensated for our lack of personality-fit. But if the truth be told, it was not so much the sex I ached for now: it was the kissing and the cuddling, the love and the affection; these had disappeared even sooner than the sex.

I had tried everything over the years to make her love me – expensive restaurants, holidays (Paris, Rome, New York), gold sets from Southall – but nothing had worked. What she wanted was something I simply could not give: she wanted me to love her family – not just her – to visit them more, to go to the mosque more, to pray more, to fast more, to drink less, to believe in God. She wanted me to be a totally different person.

She wanted someone else.

*

We had had an arranged marriage. I was desperate and so was her family, but for different reasons. As Ahmadis, members of the tiny sect – cult, really – called Ahmadiyya (the one and only *pure* Islam) they had had to flee Pakistan to escape persecution. Ahmadis believe that the whole world will become Ahmadi in three hundred years’ time, half of which has already elapsed. The only worries they have about this, when it happens, are: Where will they go to do the things that Muslims do? And where will they go to escape persecution from their fellow Muslims?

Being new to the country, her parents had been terrified that their children would fall into “bad habits”. Their plan was that as soon as Zara turned eighteen they would marry her off; she was fifteen when they had arrived. I had wanted to marry a British Pakistani girl but none was available in our minuscule community, despite claims to the contrary – that it numbered millions – though their leader, called the Hazur, had once given the game away in a Friday sermon. He was giving some example and had clearly strayed off script. ‘If there are four thousand Ahmadi households in Britain...’ He paused as though realising his mistake and tried to backtrack: ‘Perhaps there are more...’

So it was not surprising that there was almost a hundred percent divorce rate within the community, as opposed to the “terrible” Western one of fifty percent. No wonder Zara and I were the only ones left standing from the six couples that had got married in the mosque that year.

So there *were* some British Ahmadi girls available: exactly *five* in fact, only one of whom I found appealing, who turned *me* down. (I assumed she had a secret boyfriend; why else would she turn me down?) Zara was more than presentable, I was desperate, I saw her once, I said yes – more to the point, so did she – everybody danced, even though dancing was not strictly allowed.

A month later we were married, and nine months after that Dan had arrived on the scene. *Why did we not use any contraception?* Because I assumed her parents would have taken care of it, but they hadn’t. She only told me this later, and she didn’t ask me to use a condom. We had learnt our lesson and gone to the family planning clinic after that. She blamed me for missing out on a university education. In vain I protested that I would have been happy for her to go to university. *Her response: ‘What, just tie the baby in a sling on my back?’*

She also blamed me for not telling her that I was not religious. It had not occurred to me that I was being deceitful: I had assumed that she would pray for joy at finding a “modern” husband who actually *wanted* her to wear tight jeans and mini-skirts

and go clubbing. True, when quizzed I had lied to her parents about not drinking and how many times I prayed, but I had assumed that *everybody* lied. I had *not* lied about not having had any previous girlfriends, but I didn't explain that this was due to lack of chatting-up skills rather than piety, and certainly not for want of trying. The fact that, like most Muslims, *she* hardly ever prayed either didn't count, of course. *Her defence: 'At least I believe in the basics. At least I fast. At least I believe in God.'*

What *she* didn't reveal was her propensity for violence, inherited from her mother who had had a tribal upbringing and who often resorted to the threat of knives to get what she wanted, and her, Zara's, use of sex as a weapon, also learnt from her mother in coded language, I had gathered. But, to be fair, she too had tried everything over the years to please me: had become an excellent cook, kept a spotless house, raised well-behaved children and helped them with their homework. But she could not give me what *I* really wanted: an easy-going lifestyle, not too much interference from in-laws, less religion. Less of this ridiculous, inverted religion that banned all the good things in life (unless you were a prophet or a rich Arab) – music, dancing, alcohol, sex – and sanctioned the worst: child brides, multiple brides, stoning, beating one's wife. It was as though *Shaitan* had weaved his evil, distorting magic, after all, when the Holy Book was being revealed: this was my very own interpretation of the Satanic Verses Incident.

They had been rich in Pakistan. Her father was in the rice business but I was not sure of the details. There were some rumours of corruption and backhanders, possibly even bordering on criminal, but then since I'd heard of similar stories on my own side of the family I could hardly hold that against my in-laws – that was the way Pakistan worked. The children had been educated in an English-medium school and surrounded by servants; she did not have an embarrassing accent. But what attracted me most, strangely enough, was that unlike the British girls she was rather forward and sat and talked to me during my first visit like a civilised human being rather than cowering in the corner behind her mother's *dupatta* like them.

Her family had lost everything and were living in a council house on social security, though that I only found out about later. They had laid on a feast and had told stories whose purpose seemed to be to make it clear how lucky I was to get their daughter, even though I did not dispute this in the least.

I had to give credit to her father, who was a wheeler and dealer to beat Del Boy himself. Uncle had tried everything but had struggled. In a new country, a culture he didn't understand, a language he spoke less well than his children, he had struggled.

And then, a few years after our marriage, Uncle had got his lucky break. A man in the community had let it be known that he had a business for sale. It was a carpet import/export company, including a large factory in Pakistan. The man's children were all professional now and were not interested in running the company; he himself was tired. He was willing to sell the company for a mere £50,000 plus a pension of £12,000 per year, index-linked, which would be more than enough for him to eat and drink, visit Pakistan once a year, and buy presents for his grandchildren without having to ask his own children for the money. What more does any Muslim man need?

Uncle begged, borrowed and prayed for the money from all his relatives. I had contributed five thousand pounds, almost my entire savings, which had been returned promptly within the three years Uncle had promised me. My other main contribution was to say that carpets were quite bulky, sales were probably on the decrease as people turned increasingly to wooden flooring, and perhaps they should focus on luxury rugs. Uncle had nodded approvingly in agreement and had followed my advice. My final significant contribution had been the name change to *Pure Rugs Ltd.* The terms of the sale had included six months of handholding from the owner, and Uncle had seemed to pick things up reasonably well.

By this time the family had their British passports. They had gone back to Pakistan to visit, Uncle having changed his name for security reasons. He had visited the factory, though no one else had gone as it was in Sheikhpura, which was an industrial town fifty kilometres from Lahore with nothing to see or do.

Strangely enough, I had been to Sheikhpura once very briefly, to visit a cousin who was living there for a while for his job. All I remembered of it was the huge graveyard that my cousin lived next to. When I had told my wife about it she had sniffed. *'Only poor people live next to graveyards in Pakistan.'* She never missed an opportunity to dig at my lowly origins. She had almost exploded with horror when I had revealed that I was originally from Mughalpura, a small district of Old Lahore, and had forbidden me to divulge this information to any of her relatives. She had told me to say that I was from fashionable Gulberg and had coached me on the geography and some of the main landmarks, including the McDonald's with its pagoda entrance, the Gaddafi Stadium and the FC College, so that I could lie with Pakistani conviction. I refused to fib of course, resulting in sulking and a rationing of sex for a while.

According to Uncle, Sheikhpura had a rather more romantic history than its current status implied, though Zara and the rest of her family, like mine, were not

interested in history, or general knowledge of any kind for that matter – there were no books in my in-laws' house except for the Quran or other religious texts. Uncle *did* seem to have a lot of knowledge but I had no idea where he had got it from. The gist of the history of Sheikhpura was that it was built by the Emperor Jahangir himself, whose nickname was Shekhu. It was apparently the site of one of Alexander the Great's famous battles although, to me, this seemed rather more like legend than fact. It is also one of the main sites of Pakistani cricket, Sheikhpura Stadium, as well as Sheikhpura Fort, which I had not seen during my visit.

In fact, I had only seen the inside of my cousin's house during my three-hour sojourn in the town. The only reason I had even bothered making the out-of-the-way journey was because I had fond memories of our childhood together; that cousin was now in Canada, and I had not seen him for twenty years.

No one had enquired much about the factory. As long as the rugs rolled in, that was enough.

Monday 4th October 2010

The following Monday was a typically windy October day, reminding me of the great storm of 1987, during which the chimney in the house I had been renting a room in had collapsed. When I arrived at work, to my amazement I found an email in my work account from Catherine containing the report I had asked for. It took me by surprise, even though I had requested it, the reason being that I had not expected it so early, and certainly not for her to spend the weekend on it. I could not fault the report; the speed of delivery was definitely not reflected in the quality – right there were all the figures I had asked for, all the assumptions and references, and clearly showing that we must be paying 50-70 rupees a day to the workers.

As I was pondering the report, Catherine materialised in the doorway; I had been so engrossed in my thoughts and her report, I had not heard her come in.

'Meri report milgeh thi?' she asked. 'Did you get my report?'

'I'm just looking at it. Don't tell me you spent your weekend on that rather than enjoying yourself?'

She nodded.

I was impressed. 'But I still don't know what it is you want me to do exactly. It's not my company, you know. I'm just the MD.'

‘I understand that. It’s just that I feel bad about working for a company that might be...’ she paused, searching for the right words ‘...might be involved in...’

She was clearly waiting for me to complete the sentence. ‘Might be involved in unethical behaviour?’

She nodded, relieved that she had not had to say the words.

I stared at her long and hard. I noticed once more how extraordinary her eyes were: a dark, brownish green, rather like seaweed. I was suddenly intrigued to know more about her. I wondered what it would be like to have a long, interesting *conversation* with someone about politics and literature and current affairs; my wife took a basic interest in such matters and was as sharp as anyone, often besting me in debates, but since these subjects always ultimately ended up treading on the toes of the all-singing, all-dancing religion that was Islam, this usually resulted in heated argument. Over the years we had learnt that it was best to just avoid such conversations. For similar reasons I hardly ever saw my own family, my father and five siblings: with religion precluding any normal conversation, and my lack of religiosity and mosque-attendance a constant cause for accusatory silence and tension, there really wasn’t much point. I was able to make up for all this occasionally with my university friends at our annual reunions but that really wasn’t enough, and my wife’s restrictions on my drinking curtailed my general social life considerably.

I was trying to work out Catherine’s motives; was it that, being so badly treated herself by her parents, she felt the desire for justice more than others? If that was the case it just showed that there was never a simple explanation for anything, because quite often the opposite was also true: victims often wanted to perpetuate the abuse.

‘And if it was?’ I waved to her to come in and sit down. She did so.

She shrugged. ‘I’d just be disappointed, that’s all. As I told you, that was one of the specific reasons I took this job. Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful. I mean, jobs are hard to come by these days, but...’

I spread my hands. ‘I’ll talk to Mr Chaudhary. I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to do it this weekend.’ I pulled an apologetic face, knowing that I had already made this offer, but to be fair I had only just received the report.

‘Thank you. Besides, I suppose you’ll need to see him to sign the disclaimers, or are you going to sign them this year?’

I hadn’t thought about it. ‘But if I sign them, the only way I can be sure is to actually go to Pakistan and see for myself?’ I suddenly realised that this implied that I

did not entirely trust Uncle, and hoped that she would not get the implication, which was a rather forlorn hope given her deductive abilities; but her face gave no indication either way. I put the thought aside for the time being.

I swivelled my chair, almost banging my knee as I did so, to look out of the window at the cloudy sky. I turned back to her and said, 'I really don't want to go to Pakistan.'

She looked puzzled. 'Why?'

Why indeed? Because I had cut myself off emotionally from the country and did not want to risk attaching myself again, that was why. Besides, if I did go, would I visit my relatives? Would they welcome me? Would they even recognise me? Or would I literally just make a flying visit, get the job done, and come back without telling anyone? But why? Why was I thinking like a thief? Why *had* I cut myself off from my relatives, including real uncles, aunts and cousins? It was partly embarrassment at the difference in living standards, partly the difference in culture and religion, but I could not quite pin it down.

I said, 'You know, sometimes I feel so alone.' I had said the words without thinking and suddenly realised that they sounded rather self-pitying and sentimental. I laughed and held up a hand. 'Sorry, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I just meant...' I struggled for words.

She nodded understandingly. 'I know what you mean. It's called "anomie".'

'What?'

'Anomie. It means a "breakdown of norms" or, in this case, "a sense of alienation and anxiety as in the case of uprooted people".' She said it as though she had memorised the definition; perhaps she had, for one of her essays.

I knew what the word meant. Ever since I could remember, I had looked up words in the dictionary whenever I came across ones I didn't know.

I said, 'But I thought that was for people like the African slaves?'

She nodded. 'That's true. But it applies to us as well. It's just more subtle in our case.'

'Us?'

'Us Pakistanis.'

I was astounded; I sat up in my chair. 'You see yourself as Pakistani?'

She looked down at herself, at what she was wearing. 'Of course.'

‘But how come? I mean your mother’s English, you were born here, you’ve only spent one year there.’

‘I feel it in my blood.’

I was lost for words. I decided to put this aside for the time being. ‘So how does that work, then?’ I asked, referring to her previous comments.

She leant back, making the chair squeak. ‘Well, as you say, it’s more apt to black people and the American Indians, who are often associated with crime and violence, but actually they are the most peaceful people on earth. They welcomed the “white man” with gifts and hospitality, and in return were massacred and enslaved and ripped apart.’

‘I see. But how does it apply to us? I thought I only felt this way because of my education and reading. I mean, even though I have brothers and sisters I find it very hard to talk to them.’

She nodded. ‘I’m sure that’s part of it. But it’s also to do with the long-term effects of migration. Lack of an extended family, lack of a history. All of these things.’

I thought about my grandparents, whom I had never known other than vague memories of distant faces and figures, as though seen in a dream or dimly through a fog.

I was enjoying this chat with Catherine. I looked at her with affection and respect. ‘How do you know all this?’

‘My degree?’ she reminded me, with that Spockian raise of her eyebrow, prompting the usual Pavlovian hint of a headache in me. ‘My master’s?’

‘Oh yes, of course. Well I could talk to you about this all day but I suppose we’d better get back to work.’

She nodded and went off with her usual rush.

I sighed and pulled out my mobile: I would have to go and see Uncle. I rang my wife to make the arrangements. It was early and she would just about be getting up but I wanted to get it out of the way before I forgot again; Zara, being a Pakistani princess, didn’t work of course. I made it clear that it was business-related but even so I could hear the sleepiness in her voice turn to delight, a rare opportunity for her to win some brownie points from her family who often complained that I did not visit enough which was disrespectful from their point of view.

As I spoke on the phone, I heard sounds of chat and laughter from outside my cubicle: people had come in during our conversation. It was the usual Monday morning “catch-up” of what people had been up to over the weekend. Catherine had left the door

open and as I spoke on the phone I could see sharp-featured Suki regaling the office with some of her shenanigans of the weekend, her diamond nose-stud occasionally glinting as it caught the light. Sounds of laughter, and words and phrases in her solid-glass voice floated in. *'Absolute twat... just wouldn't leave me alone... freshie or what?... take your polyester trousers back to the Punjab, Gabbar Singh...'* Suki, Junior Sales, was of Sikh background, one of the new breed of young, go-getting South-Asian women; she had a pugnacious attitude that was enough to put the fear of Kali into any patriarchal South-Asian men, whom she avoided like victims of the swine flu despite its damp-squib pandemic being officially declared over last month. Her preference in terms of men was for black, with white being an acceptable alternative if they were man enough to handle her. I wondered why she chose to wear a nose-stud – such an Indian thing – given her contempt of Indians.

A few minutes later I put down the phone. Suki was still going strong. She too came from a crazy background, having been forced into an arranged marriage, and had narrowly escaped being burned alive in the Punjab of India; her hair had been set alight by her husband but she had managed to put the fire out using some kind of a trough that had luckily been nearby, having only to shave off her hair temporarily afterwards, the ultimate indignity for a Sikh woman. Fortunately, the sight of her flaming tresses had brought her in-laws to their senses, and they had allowed her to run away, some remnant of humanity fighting to the surface through the primal slime that was human beings. Perhaps the saffron colour of the fire had reminded them of their religion, orange being the colour of Sikhism.

It was strangely gratifying to know that Muslims were not the only barbarians currently inhabiting the divided land of the “Five Rivers”, the meaning of the word “Punjab”; the division was the legacy of those *civilised* barbarians, the English, with their impeccable navigational and cartographic skills, derived from the likes of John Harrison and *Sir* Cyril Radcliffe.

Sunday 10th October 2010

It was the following Sunday at my in-laws' house in Putney. Aunty, my mother-in-law, was an excellent cook and had made enough food for a second wedding, had Zara and I wanted to renew our vows four months into the twenty-first year of our marriage. There was lamb and chicken curry, *biryani*, *raitha*, fresh *rotis*, and a vegetable dish. There was

zarda, sweet rice, for dessert. The smell of the food filled the large kitchen-cum-dining room. We had arrived an hour late to keep up with tradition.

During the journey Zara had regaled me with all the latest updates from her family and from the mosque. It was the usual gossip about people, what they were up to, what their children were up to, who – gasp – had married a *non*-Ahmadi. To be fair, however, it had to be said that although Ahmadis were fairly backward, they were not really into honour-killings. *Their* solution, if their son or daughter married a non-Ahmadi, was much more ingenious: they simply insisted that the partner had converted, whether it was true or not, and since “converting” merely meant signing a piece of paper, many people were prepared to be pragmatic and just do it for the sake of avoiding argument.

Using my impeccable navigational and cartographic skills, now that I was fully assimilated into the English Borg (“Resistance is futile!” – this realisation from further talks with Catherine about globalisation) I had managed to find the way to my in-laws; this despite the fact that it had been over six months since I had last visited, though I had forgotten that the Sunday afternoon traffic, particularly over Kew Bridge, was another minor reason why I hated coming here. It was another cloudy, chilly day.

I managed to sit through the meal, despite the menacing presence of the silent, heavy-set twins that were my brothers-in-law, and their brood of plump mini heavies in the making. I was reminded once again as to why the twins were not running the company, after Uncle had retired following a minor heart-attack. The reason was that they were useless twats, good only for watching TV or playing cricket; they were, however, in charge of the company warehouse in Slough. But Zara and her mother more than made up for the silence of the rest of the family, gossiping in loud voices, punctuated by manic peals of laughter. I often felt that Zara behaved with artificial and forced gaiety with her family, just to show me that her reserve at home was because of me, and not because it was her natural personality. The twins’ imported wives also sat silent, speaking only when spoken to. I had never once in twenty years witnessed an extended conversation between the twins and their wives, their communications being limited to greetings and short commands, rather like to pet dogs; one of them did indeed resemble a Chihuahua, the other more like a Rottweiler. Perhaps this was my in-laws’ way of adhering to the Islamic rule on dogs, this being that they can be kept as guards but not as pets. And to this day, I had never worked out how people had sex in extended families, especially in this country with the closed houses. It had to be in the genes: Zara

had always been quiet even though we had our own house, the only indication of her peaking being a brief panting, an arching of her back, and a tensioning of her whole body, followed by a gradual relaxation.

As soon as it was polite to do so I indicated to Uncle that I needed to talk business. We retired to the front lounge, with tea instead of port and cigars, whilst Zara and Aunty went upstairs, giggling like teenage cousins who hadn't seen each other for years rather than a few days; the dogs trotted behind obediently, shepherded by the twins. They would all get into bed together and watch a Bollywood film.

'I've been speaking to Catherine. She's a little bit unhappy. She says that the figures don't add up. That we are either paying very low wages or using child labour. She said that she specifically asked this question, and that she tried to speak to you about it but no luck.'

'It's none of her business.'

I turned my face away at the abruptness of the answer, Uncle's reedy voice making it sound even more offensive. I looked at the walls on which hung large, framed photos of the Promised Messiah and all his successors, looking almost identical with their caftan-like tunics, their turbans and their flowing beards. Even the look of madness in the eyes, accentuated by the nimbus behind their heads, was the same; only the shades of the beards varied in their black/white proportions. But I could not deny that the house itself was beautiful and impressive, very bright from the huge skylights, and tastefully decorated with antique furniture, rugs, wicker chairs and the like.

I looked back. 'I think we have a duty to consider the concerns of our employees. Oh and by the way, to keep her happy, I've offered for the company to sponsor her for a PhD and to give her half a day off per week. She's doing a terrific job, I think she deserves it.'

In all fairness to Uncle, he was not a micro-manager. He shrugged as if to say, you are the MD now, and made no further reply.

'I think she has a point. She did a full report and it seems to make sense. The figures don't add up.'

'In what way?'

'If I think about roughly how long it takes to make a rug we must either be paying very low wages or indeed be using child labour.'

'What calculation did you use?'

I explained.

Uncle said, 'That's where you've gone wrong.' He explained his own method.

I pondered it and then pulled out my mobile phone to use the calculator function. After a few moments I said, 'But you're assuming that a human being can work at a constant rate like a machine, a fast rate at that, and without a break?'

Uncle shrugged. 'To be honest, I don't get involved with all that. I leave it to Sharif. We pay by the rug and we employ families. The rest is up to them. And the rate we pay is the going-rate in that area, even a bit better, and our working conditions are *much* better. You should see some of those factories and some of those employers.' Sharif was our local manager in Pakistan.

There was a pause. From upstairs came the sounds of laughter, presumably enjoyment of whatever film they were watching.

'What about your annual visit to Pakistan?' I asked.

'The doctor has advised against it.'

'So what do you propose?'

Uncle shrugged. 'We can leave it for this year. Jami can go next year.' Jami, short for Jamil, was a grandson and was in the final year of a business degree at City University.

It seemed to me that Uncle was reluctant and I wondered why. In addition, over the past few days, by that mysterious process that often happened, my thinking had changed: apart from Catherine's concerns, I was slowly becoming excited about the possibility of visiting Pakistan. It would be interesting to see what changes had occurred over the past ten years. Plus, it would be a free holiday, clearly the company would pay. And most of all, it would look good on my CV to show that I'd revised a whole supply chain. And there was also some nostalgia, I had to admit.

I looked afresh at Uncle, noticing his prominent eyebrows, which were bushy and now more white than black. He was getting old and in all honesty I could not blame him for his apathy, which it seemed to me also came from a certain tiredness. For a Muslim he had done enough work for a hundred. I sometimes felt sorry for him, sensing a kindred spirit of sorts: capable, struggling against the culture he had been born into, inadvertently married to a typically mismatched wife, like I was myself. His first venture in this country had been in the restaurant business and it had even been a success. But then the Hazur had issued a fatwa that Ahmadis could not run restaurants, as it involved alcohol. I would have told him to stuff his fatwa up his jacksy (using the unclean left hand of course), but not Uncle. In Southall he might even have been able to

run such a restaurant profitably, but in Putney this was impossible. The dilemma was that he was unable to move from Putney because his wife would not allow it, wanting to be near the central mosque.

No wonder Muslims were at the bottom of the pile. It wasn't just the laziness; it was the fact that they were constantly fighting against fourteen-hundred-year-old rules and regulations.

'It still seems to me that we are paying too little,' I insisted.

Uncle looked puzzled, parroting his daughter. 'If they are not happy they can leave.' He took a sip of his tea.

'But it's not as easy as that though, is it?' I took a sip in my turn, appreciating the lychee flavour that Aunty preferred, setting the cup back with an inadvertent clang on the small glass side table.

Uncle made no reply.

'And I'm genuinely concerned about this child labour thing, as is Catherine.'

Uncle smiled. 'You are Western. You won't understand. Children *work* in Pakistan. We are doing them a favour. They would be on the streets otherwise, selling their bodies. It's not a nice thing to talk about, but this happens in Pakistan unfortunately.'

'So you've lied to your customers then?'

'What do you mean?'

'You've signed disclaimers to say that we don't use child labour.'

Uncle was dismissive. 'I told you we have families working for us. That is the way things are over there. I asked our clients what they mean by child labour and nobody can give me an answer. They talk about being under fifteen, then they start talking about age bands, what you can and can't do, what sort of work you can and can't do. Then they say it is okay if they are working with their families after school, or if they are learning a trade, which in our case they are. It is all too much. I just sign, everybody's happy. Nobody has ever asked to check; one of them even said to me when I was asking all these questions, "Look, it's just a formality, just sign here." I think he was in a hurry to get back home, it was late. How are you meant to check ages anyway? No one has a birth certificate. Anyway, I leave all of this to Sharif; I don't get involved.'

There was a pause as I digested this unusually long speech from Uncle. I finished my tea, re-crossed my legs and, after thinking for a while, said, 'Do we have any records of who is working in the factory?'

Uncle shook his head. 'I am not interested in that. All I want to know is how much it costs.'

I said, with some force, 'I think if I'm going to continue in this job for any length of time and do a proper job, I will have to go and see for myself. Obviously, the company would have to pay for it, right?'

'Very well,' said Uncle slowly, running a hand over his beard. 'Flights and receipted expenses.' Cheeky, stingy bastard, I thought, I'm your son-in-law and you're talking to me about receipts. I looked directly at Uncle who at least had the decency not to meet my eye.

'Do you have any more information about the floods?' I asked, changing the topic but still partially related. Uncle was more in touch with the country, although even in his case I could detect the slow drift away I myself had undergone.

'The situation is much better now. Lahore is okay.'

'All right, let me think about the details and I'll get back to you.'

I stood up, went out into the hall and shouted up to say that I was ready to leave. I was under no illusion that Aunty would allow Zara to leave so soon; this was merely the first call. After taking a comfort break in the downstairs toilet, I went into the rear-lounge to watch some TV whilst I waited, politely declining Aunty's tempting request (not), shouted down, to join them in their family orgy. I knew that my refusal would result in them shaking their heads at each other at what they perceived as my lack of social skills and my refusal to participate in their family life, but there was just too much negative history to justify my negative answer. Who was right and who was wrong, I really did not know, but I was reminded of one incident in particular.

The twins had turned up at my house in the early days to try and intimidate me; Zara and I had had an argument about how much time she spent with her family and in the mosque. My confrontation with the twins had reached its denouement with Twin 1 saying, '*Agar tum ne dubara hamari behn koh humse kaatne ki koshish ki, hum tumhe teekh karde gehh.* If you ever try to cut off our sister from us again, we will sort you out.' The delivery had been in the slow, rhythmical and emphatic style of a Bollywood villain.

I had laughed and spread my hands, taken a step forward. 'Why wait? I'll take you both on, right now.'

They did not yet know that, although usually mild-mannered, when it became necessary to continue diplomacy by other means, I was not averse to a scrap. Indeed,

when I had started Judo I had realised that it *was* mostly mild-mannered people who did martial arts: not being naturally violent, they needed to learn it. Funnily enough, whereas pre-Judo I would occasionally be picked on or mugged, post-Judo I had never once had occasion to use it or the threat of it – except with my brothers-in-law.

They had hesitated, clearly not expecting this. ‘Just make sure you don’t try to control our sister again.’

Having made my point, I had stepped back and said, ‘Don’t worry, I won’t; she can come *back* to you, if you like.’

That comment had not gone down well, and indeed we had never really recovered from it. I was reminded of the falsity of the old nursery rhyme: “Sticks and stones will break your bones, but words will never hurt you.” The complete opposite was the truth, of course: bruises faded within days, words lasted a lifetime.

Friday 15th October 2010

It was the Friday following my meeting with Uncle. I had made up my mind that I would visit Pakistan, the only question being whether to go before or after Christmas or indeed, during. I had floated the idea of the whole family going but the children were not interested. Dan was too busy with his final-year work and Ayesha wanted to do things with her new university friends, as well as catch up with her old school ones. I was glad that Dan finally seemed to be taking studies seriously, albeit it was only fashion design. Even Zara who had used to get so excited about visiting Pakistan, said that if I was going to spend most of my time on work, what would she do? Besides, it would give her the opportunity of spending almost two weeks with her mother. All this ruled out Christmas itself but I was still undecided about exact dates.

I was at my desk, early as usual, waiting for Catherine to come in. It was gloomy outside and, being a morning person, at least since turning forty, I was looking forward to the clock change in a couple of weeks’ time. I had actually made up my mind by Wednesday evening but had waited until Friday to tell Catherine, to allow my mind to mull things over thoroughly before committing myself. Also on Wednesday there had been some good news from the other side of the world for a change: rather than reports of bombings or war, of melting polar icecaps or famine in Africa, the happy news was that the trapped miners in Chile had been rescued; indeed, my final decision had followed on from that and was sort of connected but I was not quite sure exactly how. As soon as I saw Catherine, second one in as usual, I beckoned to her. She made

gestures to indicate that she would be with me as soon as she had taken off her coat and settled in. She came in a few minutes later. I asked her to close the door. She did so, pulled up the chair, its wheels squeaking, and sat down.

‘I’ve decided to go to Pakistan,’ I said.

She smiled enviously. ‘Oh, I wish I could go with you.’ She took a sip of her Starbuck’s coffee; we had a small kitchen in the left hand corner, with tea and coffee, but she usually brought her own in the morning. A small wisp of steam rose from the escape-hole in the middle of the lid.

I wondered if this was a hint, angling for a free company trip. She was looking morning-fresh, though with a touch of that sadness and stress that made me wonder whether her mad mother had managed to find out where Catherine lived, made another trip to London, and was cruelly teasing her about news of her father again. Catherine’s freshly-applied perfume seemed overpowering in the small cubicle. I smiled at her comment as though to acknowledge that it was just a throwaway remark.

I said, ‘I wish I could take you with me but I need you to look after the place while I’m gone.’

‘Yes of course.’

I was puzzled by the look she gave me: the hint of a smile, a slight tilting of the head, the inkling of coquettishness, the holding of my eyes for more than the appropriate millisecond of time. Had she misread my choice of words which had been meant innocently enough? I had begun to worry recently, ever since our night out and our lunch together when I had divulged my birthplace, that our relationship had become a little too informal. It had now been over two and a half months since I had last had any sort of physical intimacy with my wife and I wondered whether, because of the resulting frustration, I was giving off unconscious signals? DIY helped, but only briefly and in some ways actually made things worse, rather like a drug fix; not that I knew anything about drugs, having only ever tried *ganja* once at university. I had read somewhere that physical proximity was halfway to love, and because of our respective roles Catherine and I naturally had to spend a lot of time together. I had also learned over the years that young women liked older men, the so-called “father figure” syndrome, and that the reason why one did not see more couples like that was not because the women did not want it but because actually men were not as stupid as they seemed.

I had always struggled with women when I was young but two things had started to happen since turning forty, one of which led me to believe that the tide might be

turning – not that it was of much use to me now. One, young South-Asian people had started to call me “Uncle”; the first few times I had looked around to see who they were talking to but had now decided to accept it with good grace, like my lightly greying hair. Two, young women generally had started to become very relaxed and friendly in my company, sometimes even flirting, confirming my “father figure” theory.

But only now, with Catherine, had there been the time and opportunity to test my theory if I felt so inclined, if indeed that *was* what was happening here. But I would never *dream* of doing anything with Catherine. Even if she had some sort of a silly crush on me, I would not dream of taking advantage. She was my *employee*. I was in a position of *power* and *responsibility*. Besides, I did not want to be one of those sad, middle-aged men with girls half their age on their arm, unclear to others whether this was a couple, or a father and daughter. The only problem was, I had recently started to admit to myself something I would never confess to anybody else: that she *did* arouse certain physiological reactions in me when she was nearby, her mere presence instigating mild waves of global warmth in my body. And when we sometimes had to sit together to look at figures or documents on my computer, did she really have to come so close, our shoulders rubbing, her hair sometimes almost in my eye, its fragrance in my nostrils? But surely I could only be held accountable for my actions, not physiological reactions beyond my control?

I said, ‘Have you talked to anybody else about your concerns?’

She shook her head.

‘Let’s keep it like that. In fact, I was thinking maybe we should keep these discussions outside of the office.’ I had in mind “plausible deniability”; I still had no idea if we were actually doing anything illegal. ‘Are you free for lunch?’

‘Oh, sorry, I’ve agreed to go with Suki for lunch; well, shopping actually, she needs a new pair of shoes. But I’m free this evening if you want to go for a drink. Or do you have to get back to your wife?’

Was she serious? Or was this my father-figure theory in action? Or was I reading into it things that were not there? I was virtually *twice* her age. She *knew* I was married. I felt a sudden excitement. I wouldn’t actually *do* anything, but why not have a bit of fun? Besides, it was Zara’s mosque night; I would be going home to a cold and empty house. And as for Suki’s shoes, as far as I knew I had never seen her in the same pair twice, so why she needed a new pair was not entirely clear; or perhaps that was exactly why.

I said, ‘She’s started a new mosque class. She won’t be back till late. Are you sure? You haven’t got a fancy young man waiting for you?’

Catherine had given a small nod of recollection when I mentioned the mosque class, as if to say “Oh yes, I remember you told me already.” Now she sighed and said, ‘Oh, if only, Imran, if only.’ She took another sip of her coffee, her dark-green eyes looking like gun barrels over the cup.

I was genuinely surprised. ‘But surely you must have them lining up for you?’

‘If only it was that easy.’

‘Do you want me to ask around in my community? I could have you married off in no time.’ I was half-joking, half serious.

‘Yes, please.’

We both laughed. Behind her, I noticed that people had started to drift in. ‘What are your specifications?’

‘Right now, anything will do.’

I laughed again. ‘Okay, I’ll see you later then. Around six?’

She nodded and left.

I genuinely enjoyed talking to her. We had occasionally discussed her studies further, sometimes at the water-cooler, sometimes during lunchtime, perched on each other’s desks; she would talk about globalisation, migration, “soft power” ... this last was apparently the next stage of imperialism, following on from colonialism.

‘But don’t you think that’s all a bit out of date now?’ I had said during one conversation, referring to a remark from Catherine about colonialism and Pakistan, and all the current problems of the world – terrorism, migration... ‘I mean, I know the Western countries did terrible things but don’t you think it’s time to move on, time for the Eastern countries to start sorting things out for themselves? India and China are doing it, why can’t Pakistan?’

Catherine had shaken her head. ‘It’s not as easy as that. Slavery and colonialism gave the Western countries such a huge advantage, which they then locked in using the banking and financial system, there’s no way most of these poor countries will ever be able to develop unaided. But the real point is that it’s in our own interest to sort these problems out now before it’s too late. We’ve used the East like a toilet all these years, if we don’t start cleaning it up now, soon we’ll all be swimming in the shit.’

It had been an unpleasant image, made even more unpleasant by the contrast with the vision in front of my eyes; only half of the conversation itself had made any

sense to me. As for the image, the fact that she had used it at all clearly showed the strength of her feeling. When she spoke about these things, as opposed to trivial matters, she often spoke as though reciting from her essays. I wondered if this was one of the reasons for her lack of success with men: what *I* found attractive was perhaps not the same as hot-blooded young men with just one thought on their minds.

At five-thirty, people started to drift away, and by five-forty-five the office was empty except for me and Catherine and the communal cleaner who had come in at four-thirty and was now almost finished; the vacuum cleaner was loud in the near-empty office.

It was almost six by the time I had finished all the tasks I had set myself for the day; the cleaner had also departed, therefore no longer requiring our presence. I closed down my computer, tidied my desk and started to saunter the ten feet to hers. I could see that she was still busy, gazing at her computer screen; she looked around as I came out of my cubicle, smiled briefly and turned back to her computer. As I came within speaking distance, she said, ‘Almost ready. Let me just quickly check my personal emails.’ The early-morning freshness had disappeared.

Her eyes moved down as though scanning the subjects, and her look changed. Some beau after her, perhaps. I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed, still a little worried as to the appropriateness of this “drink”.

She was reading, a smile was coming over her face, a look of delight appeared. ‘I’ve been accepted for my PhD! Oh, Imran, I’m so excited!’ She clenched her fists in a victory gesture and jumped to her feet.

She turned to me, saying ‘Oh thank you, thank you!’ as she did so, threw her arms around me and hugged me tight. I stood stock still and waited for the storm to pass, the way my children had used to do when they were in their tweens – old enough not to really want the hug, but not quite old enough to say no outright.

‘Oh I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that!’

I tried to act cool. I shook my head. ‘It’s fine, don’t worry about it. We can turn this into a mini celebration.’

‘Absolutely! Let me just get my coat.’

*

‘So tell me about yourself, Catherine,’ I said, as we made our way to *All Bar One*. ‘We’ve been working together for months now but I still don’t know much about your personal life. What do you do at weekends? What are your hobbies?’

‘I like Red Bull X-Fighters,’ replied Catherine.

‘What on earth is that?!’ I said, astounded, dodging a fellow pedestrian coming the other way.

She explained.

‘I see. And what do you do to keep fit?’

‘Boxing.’

‘Jesus Christ! Does that mean I have to be careful of getting on the wrong side of you?’

‘Absolutely.’

I wondered if I was dysfunctionally attracted to violent women, and whether my black belt in Judo would be a match for her boxing skills if it ever came to a fight.

‘Do you read much fiction, or mainly just your globalisation stuff?’ I asked.

‘I like fiction as well. What about you?’

‘I love fiction,’ I said, excited by her answer.

‘Who are your favourite writers?’ she asked.

‘Rushdie, Dostoevsky...’

‘I can’t stand Rushdie. I mean, I can appreciate his mastery of language, but what’s with all the people falling out of the sky, and appearing and disappearing into thin air?’

I was tempted to cancel our drink immediately! ‘It’s called magical realism.’

‘Yes, I know that, Imran; I was being sarcastic.’

‘I know you were. What about you, who do you like?’

‘I like Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Kamila Shamsie...’

‘Who’s Kamila Shamsie?’

‘She’s a Pakistani writer.’

‘Ah.’

We walked in silence for a while, her heels clicking on the pavement. ‘Do you like poetry as well?’ I asked, dodging more pedestrians.

‘Some. I like Lemn Sissay.’

‘I’ve never heard of him,’ I said, pleasantly surprised that I did not know the name. ‘What sort of poetry does he write?’

‘It’s hard to describe. I’ll bring some in. I also like performance poetry, you know? Like Benjamin Zephaniah. What about you?’

This last name I had heard of. ‘I like Keats,’ I said, feeling like a dinosaur, which silenced me for a while. I noticed that we were almost there; we were passing the police station and a short distance away I could see the bright, wide expanse of glass, with some people sitting at the tables outside, despite the chill.

‘What sort of music do you like?’ I asked, to fill in the remaining few moments before we reached our destination.

‘I like Amy Winehouse.’

‘Ah, that’s interesting. I’ve heard of her but I can’t seem to work out why she’s so popular.’

‘She’s got the most amazing voice: the deepest female singing voice you can have, and I like the way she mixes genres – R&B, soul, jazz. And because...,’ she hesitated, ‘her parents separated when she was very young too.’

*

We had arrived at *All Bar One*. We stood at the low bar and I surveyed the vast array of bottles on the rear display before turning to her and asking her what she wanted to drink.

‘I’ll get the first round,’ she said. ‘I wanna have a couple of tequilas first to get warmed up!’

Already I could see the transition from work to play mode, and she hadn’t even had a drink yet! She started to make small dance moves to the music, looking around to size up the clientele, which was fairly small in number at this early hour; the music was currently Eminem/Rihanna, *Love The Way You Lie*. I felt a wave of global warming, proof surely against the sceptics, and wondered if I should just make a dash for it now, before the icecaps melted and it was too late.

‘That’s all right; I’ll get them. What else would you like?’

‘A Corona, please.’

I was sorely inclined to join her in another night of fun. I was almost tempted to text my wife that if she wanted to go to her mother’s after her mosque class she was welcome. But I had never done that before and my guilty conscience convinced me that she would be instantly suspicious, even though, to give her credit, this was *not* a trait she possessed.

I turned to the tall young male bartender and ordered a small glass of house white for myself, glad that I did not have to wait an hour to get served.

‘Not joining me?’ she asked, smiling, referring to the tequilas.

I shook my head regretfully. ‘I shouldn’t really drink at all.’

When the drinks arrived, she slammed back the tequilas, one after the other. Once more I was tempted to just go for it; after all, the kids were not home, I was a grown man, what was the worst Zara could do? I recalled a holiday in Greece where I had seen young people lick the salt off each other’s backsides before knocking back the tequila. (I myself had been young back then, in the country of Byron...) I wondered if Zara would let me lick salt off her backside when I got home; she had used to love it when I played with her bum.

‘Are you all right, Imran?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You were shaking your head.’

I pulled myself together. ‘Listen, let’s talk about business first, before we get wasted.’

She laughed. ‘Before *I* get wasted, you mean. Sorry, I almost forgot.’

‘Are you hungry? We’ll put it on the company, as we’re talking business.’

‘Great.’

We studied the menu board, jostling with new arrivals, and both decided on burgers, me with chips and her with salad. I ordered, took the little numbered stand, and we went and found a relatively quiet spot, where we were able to talk without having to shout too loudly. As it was still early we were able to obtain one end of a table and banquette, but no chairs as these were all taken, which meant that we had to sit side by side with a gap between us so that we could turn and face each other. We settled down, having taken off our coats and put them to one side. I loosened my tie.

‘Two things, really. One, when do you think would be best for me to go to Pakistan? Two, is there anything in particular you want me to look for?’

‘Actually, there is one related thing before that: people are asking about wanting a Christmas party.’

‘But it’s only October.’

‘Things get booked up really quickly. Depends what you want to do, where you want to have it, if you want to invite some customers and so on. I’m going to be honest with you: they said not to tell you, but I understand that Mr Chaudhary didn’t used to have one, but I do think it’s a good idea for morale.’ She took a swig of her Corona, the pale yellow reminding me of another evocative country, Spain, and making me wonder

why so many other fun things also started with “S”: sun, sea, sand, samba, sangria, sex...! *Control yourself!*

‘Oh, I agree. I’m happy to have one. Can I leave that to you?’ I took a sip of my wine, which was cool and tangy both in taste and smell.

She nodded. ‘In that case, why don’t we have that on the first Friday of December and then you can go after that.’

‘Isn’t that the busy period? It’s pretty busy already.’

She shook her head. ‘Not really. I mean, it is in terms of retail, but with our lead times and so on, the office actually becomes fairly quiet. We’ll be able to handle it and you’ll only be a phone call away. *After* Christmas is busier, with queries from people who have bought during the Christmas period and so on.’

She had leaned back a bit and lowered her voice slightly so that I had not quite heard everything she had said. ‘I’m sorry?’

She leaned forward and repeated herself, louder this time, and I caught a lemony whiff of Corona.

I nodded. ‘I see what you mean. That’s great. You’re a wonder; I was tying myself into knots trying to think of when to go. What do you normally do for Christmas, by the way?’

I said it without thinking and could have kicked myself at the look that came over her face.

She shrugged. ‘Oh you know, the usual. Nothing much.’

I considered inviting her to the family home, but thought I’d better check with Zara first.

‘Well, let’s talk about your concerns.’

Her whole manner changed again, became professional. ‘To be honest, it’s not just the child labour I’m concerned about. Why should it have to be children for us to care about people working twelve hours a day for less than a pound? Even if we are not using children, we are definitely paying well below par.’

‘How come you’re so concerned about it?’

She frowned and thought for a while, taking the opportunity to look around at the slowly filling bar, as though buying time, and I could almost read her mind thinking, *What, you mean apart from the basic immorality of it?* but unsure how to put it politely. I had the opportunity to study her profile; when she was thinking her mouth pursed in a rather sweet way. In the end she looked back at me and said,

‘You have to have some rules, right? I mean, how do you live otherwise? Plus, I’ve been re-reading some of my old essays and textbooks, whilst I was waiting for the reply to my PhD application. We tend to forget, but it really makes your blood boil, when you read about all the exploitation. What these people did in Africa and in America with the native Indians. What they’re still doing now.’ In contradistinction to what she was saying she was smiling slightly and I could only assume she was remembering her PhD acceptance email.’

It was loud in the bar, but by straining my ears and concentrating I had managed to get the gist of what she had said. I was reminded of her odd assertion about her identity.

‘So you see yourself as Pakistani?’ I said, looking into her green eyes, which were certainly the colour of Pakistan.

She nodded, holding my gaze; I was often disconcerted to find that she would look me straight in the eye and *I* would be the one to have to look away, even though surely the power relationship between us should have dictated the opposite? Or did I look away to avoid any hint of impropriety?

‘What about you?’ she said.

It was a question I had often asked myself, in a vague sort of way, though I had stopped worrying too much about it over the years. I had been born in Pakistan but had come over at the age of six. I had vague memories of my home country and had visited several times but in the last ten years had not been and would probably have forgotten all about it if it wasn’t in the news all the time, usually for the wrong reasons: suicide bombs and honour killings.

‘Do you want the short answer or the long answer?’

She shrugged.

‘The short answer is I don’t really know. The long answer is that obviously when I was younger I felt Pakistani but wanted to be English, to fit in, you know? But then as I got older I suppose I did start to feel English, but if I’m honest, I’m still confused. Forty-five and still confused, eh!’

‘Ahh, don’t worry.’ She reached out and gave my hand a squeeze, pressing it down on the cool leather sofa. I expected her to let go after a few seconds but she kept a loose hold; I felt compelled to withdraw it myself, using it to pick up my wine glass as cover, even though it was my left hand. I was saved by the arrival of the food, bringing

with its pleasant grilled aroma. We busied ourselves for a while getting stuck in, salt and pepper, sauces...

‘I didn’t realise you were forty-five,’ she said, as she waited to swap salt and pepper with me. ‘I thought you were only about forty.’

I finished my first mouthful of the passable burger and, taking care not to spit food all over her, said, ‘Thank you. You’ll get your pay rise on Monday morning.’ We both laughed. ‘But going back to our original point: if the British government doesn’t care, why should you?’

She pushed a stray bit of salad into her mouth with a finger, finished chewing and swallowing and said, ‘Because we’re at a turning point. Because of the Internet, because of social media, we’ve got a real chance now of changing the world, for true democracy, rather than this token four-yearly facade. Are you on Facebook? Avaaz?’

She had an averagely high-pitched pleasing feminine voice, with just a hint of Yorkshire brogue, but when she spoke about these matters it became very concentrated. She had reverted to her serious persona and I suddenly felt rather frightened of her intensity and almost got up to go home to my wife to talk about spoons (which her mother often liked to do, for some strange reason), hopefully followed by spooning for sleep; the only problem with this was that we no longer spooned. I managed to control the urge and shook my head in answer to her question, feeling like a Muslim stuck in a time warp of fourteen hundred years. ‘What’s Avaaz?’

‘It’s an Internet campaigning website.’

I had another sudden thought; she seemed to spark sudden thoughts in my brain like a meteor shower. ‘Hold on a minute: “Avaaz” is an Urdu word. It means “voice”.’

‘Yes, I know.’

Of course she knew. We ate for a while, and I looked around. The bar was now starting to heave even though it was only about seven o’clock.

There had been a second question I’d wanted to ask... oh yes. ‘You say, “these people”. But this company is owned by a Pakistani.’

‘I know. That’s how clever the system is: it perpetuates itself. As Foucault says, power is always at work, even when you don’t realise it.’

My head was beginning to ache, and not only from the shouting over the loud music. I had heard the name Foucault, it rang a vague mystical bell in my mind, similar to the likes of Kant and Hegel, but I had no idea about his work. I wondered whether she was simply more intelligent than me or only that this was her area of expertise. I

thanked my lucky stars for my reading, such as it was: I had sometimes used to wonder whether my father was right after all – that reading was a waste of time; had fate ordained all along that it would be for the purpose of just about managing to hold my own with Catherine?

‘So are you saying it’s some kind of a conspiracy?’

She shook her head. ‘No, not really. I mean, not in the sense of some sort of a cabal. If that were true, Obama would never have got elected. It’s more subtle than that. I suppose it’s a bit like life itself really, blind but at the same time somehow purposeful.’

My headache was intensifying. It was time to get back to basics, back to the *Yasrul-Quran*, the children’s version of the Holy Book.

‘So what in particular do you want me to look for in Pakistan?’

She had finished her dinner. She wiped her mouth with her napkin, put it on the plate and pushed it away. She finished off her Corona and leaned forward, her breath now smelling of food and alcohol, but not unpleasantly so; she had earlier eaten a strong mint on the way over and given me one also. ‘Obviously, the first thing is: are there children working? That might not be as easy to determine as it sounds: they might hide the children. To be fair to Mr Chaudhary, even he might not know about it. A tell-tale sign is empty workstations or people who don’t seem to know what they’re doing – they might have been drafted in to cover those stations. Also, the ages might be hard to work out: these children often look younger than they are because of malnourishment and hard work. The other way would be to try and work out how long it takes for a rug to be made. You probably want to do that anyway, if you’re looking to streamline the business, but it would help you to work out the pay rates. And obviously the conditions, that’s another way of saving money – if the working conditions are very poor.’

I drained the last of my wine. ‘Another one?’ I asked.

‘My round,’ she said. ‘Same again?’

I nodded and said “house white” in response to her follow up query; I needed it. The place was now a loud buzz of music and chatter. At the bar several young men, black and white, made exploratory remarks to her; it was busy now and she had to wait. She was polite but dismissive. Next it was the turn of a young, trendy Sikh guy, built like a Punjabi warrior and with a turban; unlike in my own day, there *were* actually some trendy South-Asian guys nowadays, I had noticed. She looked him up and down and then responded, laughing. I suddenly felt very old. She knocked back two more

tequilas at the bar before returning with her Corona and my wine. The place had become lively and some people were dancing. She put down the drinks and stood in front of me, stepping back a few feet and slightly to one side because of the table; she started to sway, and crooked a finger at me as she did so. I shook my head regretfully: I did not want to make a fool of myself. Her admirer had followed her, was behind her, had placed his drink on a ledge, and now put his hands lightly on her waist. She turned her head, nodded in recognition and assent, and smiled; he was immaculately dressed, with an earring and clipped beard that was as trendy as his clothes. She turned around, wrapped her *shalwar'd* leg around him, and tossed her hips. I could only watch in admiration and envy at the two of them, the ease of communication, the youthful confidence, and wondered if I should just leave now. But only a few seconds later she detached herself from him and came and sat down, laughing, painfully close, our thighs touching, the boss/employee gap forgotten in the haze of alcohol. She had originally been sitting on the other side, with me at the end of the banquette, but she did not seem bothered by exactitudes and I now found myself squeezed up against another young woman, reminding me of my lap dancing experience; I mouthed an apology but the young woman waved it away with a smile and a shake of the head.

Fortunately, after just a few minutes, Catherine said, 'Back in a minute.' She went off, I presumed to the bathroom, stumbling slightly; I moved away from the woman next to me.

Whilst Catherine was gone a couple entered. The woman was in her early twenties, the man in his late forties or early fifties, the age gap even more than between me and Catherine. The pair looked ridiculous and I saw myself reflected in that grey-haired, puffed-up executive figure. Of course *we* were here on "business" but then business had been concluded long ago.

When Catherine returned I stood up and looked at my watch, having to tilt it to the light to see properly. I said, 'I think I need to be getting off now.' It seemed to me that her face fell slightly, though she tried to control herself; *or was that just wishful thinking on my part?*

She too looked at her watch, peering at it rather drunkenly. 'But it's early!' Her speech was now loud and abandoned.

'Might be early for you. I have to be all tucked in by eleven!'

She gave a half-hearted laugh. 'Oh, okay then. I'll see you on Monday.'

‘You don’t want to walk to the station together?’ Although we lived in opposite directions we shared the same station, Chiswick Park. She lived in Hammersmith, conveniently close to *Secrets 1*, apparently!

She looked over at the young man who had retreated to his circle of friends and was now standing still, pint in hand, looking at her occasionally with the fixed stare of a lion eying a gazelle, his expert knowledge clearly telling him that we were not really “together”.

‘I think I’ll stay for a bit. The night is young.’

‘Sure, I’ll see you on Monday then.’

‘See you on Monday.’ She leaned forward for a goodbye kiss.

It might have been an accident, it might have been because the alcohol had blunted our senses, blunted *my* reaction time and *her* aim. Whatever the reason, instead of lips meeting cheeks, lips met lips; hers, I noticed, were firmer than Zara’s.

She pulled away and laughed, bunching her shoulders. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do that!’

I laughed too. ‘It’s all right, it was my fault.’ My heart was thumping faster than when I had done my one and only parachute jump, and suddenly I didn’t want to leave. But it was too late to change my mind now; I picked up my coat and briefcase.

When I looked back just before exiting, half hoping that Catherine would be looking after me longingly, I saw that the lion had moved in for the kill, and the gazelle’s attention was already diverted.

*

I was a great fan of popular science books and TV documentaries, especially BBC’s *Horizon* program. Not only had I learnt the fascinating fact that time travelled at the speed of light, whatever that meant, I had also learnt that the theory of parallel universes was one that was taken seriously by many professional physicists.

I was now sitting in one of those parallel universes, on the District Line home to my own *Queen of the Suburbs*, my wife Zara. Unfortunately, the overcrowding and general condition of the train in this universe was the same as the one I normally resided in. Actually, joking aside, I was a great fan of the London Underground. Having visited Pakistan several times, and often waited whole days for trains that ultimately never arrived, Londoners had no idea of the magic that was the tube system.

I was playing the kiss over in my mind, wondering if it really had been an accident, and feeling rather like that character in Chekov’s short story *The Kiss*. I was

thinking that surely, despite the four tequilas and two coronas, it could *not* have been an accident. But even if it was an accident, had it been my imagination or had the kiss lasted a microsecond longer than a friendly goodbye kiss, especially one that had landed on the wrong target?

One other thing was puzzling me, as I recalled snippets of conversation. At one point I had asked her about religion and she had said something rather odd. ‘I take it you’re not a Muslim?’ I had asked. ‘I could be,’ she had replied. After puzzling over the comment, and failing to work it out, I had let the whole topic drop. I was still not quite sure what she had meant. Her manner when drunk, when out of the office, was completely different to when she was working, becoming almost childlike in some respects. I had learnt that she wanted to settle down, have kids. ‘But you’re so young,’ I had said. ‘I’m almost twenty-nine!’ she had replied. ‘I need to find someone, get to know them... it all takes time.’ I had learnt that her birthday was just a month away, November 20th; I had made a mental note and then a physical one on my mobile as I’d left the bar.

Despite her attractiveness, I knew why she was struggling, and it was this realisation that made me laugh at Pakistani parents trying to control their children, having learnt over the years that it was almost impossible for people to find decent partners anyway. Perhaps I should invite her over for Christmas, make it clear that I did not see her in that way; it might even be a way of pre-empting any possible temptation on my part. If I were to introduce her to the family, then it would be impossible to have any sort of an “office affair” with her. I knew such affairs happened, so often in fact it was a cliché, but for God’s sake, in the words of my favourite tennis player, you *cannot* be serious! Perhaps I really should get her married off into the community; but no, that was a fate I would not wish on my worst enemy!

But leaving Catherine aside, the kiss had reminded me that I could not remember the last time my wife and I had kissed, really *kissed*. Even our occasional lovemaking was now perfunctory, some kissing on cheeks perhaps, maybe the odd brushing of lips, but not lingering and *certainly* no tongues. I wondered if tonight, even if sex was out of the question, a small ration of cuddling and kissing might be available. After these past few months I was feeling physical pain from the lack of bodily contact. Zara had lovely soft lips and in the early days I would often leave them bruised with my passion so that she was unable to visit her family for a while. It was a tactic I had then used often, if

only to keep her at home! But that was before she had cottoned on to the trick and put an end to it.

At Acton Town two youths entered. One looked Somali with a rather mad look in his eye, the other a thin, callow white boy; both were tall and smartly dressed. The moment I saw them I knew they would be trouble. They sat in front of me. I avoided their gaze. The Somali, Youth 1 in my mind, brushed up his foot against mine; my foot was well within my personal space, I felt, so I did not shift it. I looked at him briefly but looked away again. He nudged my foot again. ‘Cha, Maan.’ I looked at him again and this time held his gaze. ‘Whatcha lookin at?’ he said. I made no reply. ‘*Look down, man! Look down!*’ he said, leaning forward. I did not look down. But despite my black belt in Judo, despite occasionally having had similar experiences in the past, my heart was thumping louder than the rattle of the train; I was sure everybody could surely hear it, if not actually see it beating under my chest. Black belts were all very well, but one never knew what such youths might be carrying: knives, syringes; thank God that at least here, unlike in New York, there was little fear of guns. My plan was to be preemptive: if he stood up and came towards me I was going to strike first and do the viva later. The other passengers were studiously minding their own business and continuing to behave as though nothing was happening. The youth looked a little uncertain. His friend, Youth 2, said, ‘Leave it, man. He’s not worth it.’ Youth 1 said, ‘Tch!’ leant back, and turned sideways towards his friend. Now I looked away, feeling sick, and waited for my heart to stop thumping.

They too alighted at Ealing Broadway but to my relief did not seem interested in pursuing the confrontation. I allowed them to go ahead of me and at the exit they turned left towards the High Street, presumably heading for a night out, whilst I turned right. I looked over my shoulder a couple of times to check that they were not planning to sneak up on me but saw no sign of it.

I had texted Zara to say that I was on my way and that I had eaten. The excitement of the confrontation had accentuated my already deep need for wifely comfort; I was also hoping my story would arouse some sympathy. When I got home she was already in bed. I brushed my teeth in the en suite bathroom, gargled with Listerine mouthwash for good measure, came into the bedroom, quickly changed, switched off the light and got in beside her.

‘You’ve been drinking.’

My dreams of soft lips and female admiration for my derring-do shattered. ‘Look, the kids are not home, I had one glass of wine; I’m not drunk.’ It was a small white wine lie; no matter how much I brushed my teeth, how much I gargled, she could always smell it, even when I had tested the theory about vodka not having a smell.

I settled down; ten-thirty on a Friday night and we were getting ready for sleep! I moved towards my wife, still half hoping. She turned away. ‘Don’t even think about it.’ She sat up in the dark. ‘In fact, can you please go to the other room; I can’t sleep in this stink.’

I went; I really was not in the mood for an argument. In the other room, as I waited for the cold bed to warm up, I consoled myself with memories of the accidental kiss, but wondered how on earth I was going to look Catherine in the eye on Monday morning. If the Monday after the lap dancing had been nerve-wracking, this would be on another level altogether.

Friday 3rd December 2010

It was six weeks later, the day of the office Christmas party. Catherine and Suki had decided to keep it simple: a Christmas dinner at a local restaurant, followed by clubbing in *Ruby’s* in Leicester Square. *Ruby’s* was quite expensive, apparently, but the plan was to stock up on drink (internally) before heading there. It was 6pm and we were all standing in the office reception area waiting for Catherine and Suki, who were in the bathroom getting changed; they had told us they had a surprise for us.

They came into the office wearing identical “Mother Claus” outfits of red tank tops and mini-skirts. Suki often wore short skirts but this was the first time I had seen Catherine in anything other than a *shalwar-kameez* and she looked almost naked. Jim and I averted our eyes and raised our hands to cover ourselves as though from strong sunlight; Kwame, I noticed, barely gave them a second glance. Susan and I were worried that they might catch cold outside, despite their coats. I myself had dressed down for the day, jeans and a going-out shirt, instead of my normal suit, and had made sure that there were no client meetings for that day.

The Dynamic Duo insisted that everybody at least wear the red and white bobble hats they had got for us. After resisting for a while, I agreed. For the past six weeks I had managed to behave myself, avoiding temptation by not allowing myself to get into any compromising situations. Even for Catherine’s birthday night out I had only joined

them briefly, during which I had had one soft drink. In full view of everybody I had given her a card and a box of dark chocolates which she apparently liked, and had even made a small speech thanking her for all her hard work. *My weekend of mental self-torture after the accidental kiss had been for nothing: on the Monday after, it seemed as though she had genuinely forgotten the whole thing; whether that was acting or not, I really could not tell.* So now I wondered if I was entitled, indeed had a duty perhaps, to get into the Christmas spirit and let myself go. After all, with everybody there, what could possibly go wrong?

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We were in *Ruby's*, post Christmas dinner, and I had indeed let myself go. For the past couple of hours I had been foolishly matching them drink for drink, the tequilas, the drambuie, other colourful concoctions I had never even heard of, until now my head was in one parallel universe and my body in another. It would take me a month to recover, but what the hell.

At one point I found myself alone with Catherine: Suki was dancing with some young man; Kwame too had got lucky, as always apparently, and was doing more than dancing with a gorgeous blonde; Susan had disappeared straight after dinner, not interested in clubbing; and Jim and Amina had also left. In their case I was beginning to wonder (hope) that Amina was not as innocent as she seemed: secretiveness seemed to become second nature to Muslims even when it was unnecessary. What happened next left no room for doubt about accidental kisses. Catherine and I somehow ended up in a remote and dark corner, away from the others, sitting watching the dancers. Suddenly, in response to something I had just spoken, she put an arm around me and said, 'Oh, Imran, come here! *Ou mere paas.*' Before I knew it we were wrapped around each other, my right hand on her mini-skirted hip. We were both sweating, *her* sweat feminine and arousing. And then, inevitably, our mouths found each other's, first exploratory pecks and then glued together. We played the tongue version of the game that Pakistan was the undisputed world champion of – hockey, four titles in six world cup appearances – the music and chatter just a resounding blur of sound all around us. The people nearby became like ghosts, there but not there. And, because of the five-month-long dry spell with my wife, it was as though my parched middle-aged body was gorging from her generous young mouth to replenish itself.

Against my will, my hand felt a compulsion to place itself on her olive thigh. I started to stroke softly and she made no objection, but when I tried to go further up the

highway to *houri*-heaven, her hand shot out and held mine tight. I pulled back my hand to indicate that I had got the message and she relaxed hers. I was not disappointed: the gift she was giving me was more than enough and I did not attempt it again, did not dare to risk breaking the spell of my very own Scheherazade night. I was having a kissing-affair with a twenty-nine-year old! I could die a happy man! What other achievement could possibly hope to compete with this? I was reminded that Newton had apparently remained a virgin throughout his long life – eighty-four excruciating years. Newton could take his theory of gravity and stuff it up his black-hole where even light couldn't escape; I would take this one night with Catherine any day.

But after five or ten minutes a change came over me. Having refilled the dry reservoir to a certain extent, my reservations about taking advantage of her had resurfaced, along with the rising reservoir. I said, speaking into her ear because of the loud, thumping, lyric-less music, 'I'm going to leave you guys to it, Catherine.'

She pulled back to look at me and then came forward again to also half-shout in my ear, her breath like a blast of moist hot air. 'But I thought... I mean, it's early.'

'It's almost two.' I had received special dispensation from my wife to stay out this late as long as I did not drink.

'That's early.'

'I really should get going, Catherine.'

There was a pause and then she withdrew her grip on my hand and said, 'If it's this, I'm sorry, maybe I'm being silly; I was just thinking it's not very private here.'

I heard her loud words muffled through a drunken haze, the verbal equivalent of outlines through a fog. But the possible implications of her words were not lost on me, despite my drunken state. I shouted back through the haze. 'No, Catherine, you're not being silly, and you're not the one who should be apologising. *I'm* sorry. I'm behaving totally inappropriately. Have a good time. I'll speak to you soon.'

Before she could respond, and before I could give in to weakness, I pecked her on the cheek and then got up and left, having to fight my way through the packed nightclub. Pausing only to pick up my coat from the cloakroom, I exited the club. But I did not go home straight away, a familiar restlessness gnawing at my heart. It was cold and windy, but after the heat and sweat of the club, it was refreshing. Throughout my life I had always thought that the next stage of it would sort out that restlessness. When I had been young and single I had assumed that marriage and kids would sort it out. Marriage had not sorted it out. I had been told by my family that all marriages were like

this and had accepted the fact. The kids had come along and their childhoods had been wonderful, distracting us both. But then as they grew older and more independent, and my role was reduced mainly to chauffeur and bank manager, and now pretty much to bank manager only, the restlessness had returned with renewed force. I had floated the possibility of a third child, a late lamb, to my wife but she was not interested.

I made my way through Chinatown, across Shaftesbury Street, and into Soho; there were not many people about now and I had to really focus my mind when crossing the main road. I passed the doorways with their red lights and promises of voluptuous models just a few steps away. I was suddenly full of an existential desolation and craved the touch of naked female flesh – of my wife’s naked female flesh – but I knew that there was no chance of this when I got home, given my advanced state of intoxication and her zero-tolerance policy.

I also knew that what I was contemplating instead would only fill that existential void for a few minutes at most, like a drug fix. But even so my brain stopped thinking, my body took over and I found myself climbing the wooden stairs, knocking on the door. She was not exactly voluptuous, but she was young and pretty though with a rather hard face, and smelled of perfumed oil. She had a radio tuned to *KISS FM*, which was shown on the digital display. She was not surprised at my request to wank me with one hand and spank my balls with the other, as I gasped in pain, before coming in a handful of tissues that she held for me. She charged me fifty pounds – not bad for ten minutes’ work. I did not remove my own clothing, merely lowered my jeans. I tried to prevent the sickening and hypocritical thoughts of why she did this job, did her *parents* know, but trying to control one’s thoughts was rather like trying to control the sexual urge itself, which I had often tried to do but without success. I had used to hope (dread?) that as I passed the age of forty and forty-five, the urge would diminish but there seemed to be no sign of that yet; whether that was something to be proud of or not, I wasn’t sure.

I came out barely ten minutes later, feeling sick at heart, my hand over my face as though thinking, hoping and praying that no one I knew, especially my son, would be passing by. I wondered whether religion did serve a purpose, after all. But then, back when I *had* been religious, had believed all I had been taught, before I had seen the light as they said, I had *still* used to do these things; only I had felt even worse afterwards, as I sensed the heat of the hell-fire from the parallel universe containing that world. According to Islam, there were indeed parallel universes, one of them being inhabited

by *jinn*, creations of fire as opposed to the clay that humans were made of, so perhaps heaven and hell were merely in parallel universes rather than in the sky.

I walked up Dean Street and reached Oxford Street, thinking that at least I was in good (?) company: according to rumour our previous holy Hazur had used to frequent these very streets as a student; to be fair the rumours were from anti-Ahmadis and without evidence, though the fact that the Hazur had failed to graduate was perhaps some indirect evidence. Besides, Ahmadis were no slouches when it came to gossip and rumour, and if you lived by gossip then you had better be prepared to die by gossip. I meandered around for a while, dodging fellow drunks, the sound of the traffic a roar in my ears, not wanting to go home, but eventually, cold and tired, I hailed a cab.

‘Ealing,’ I said, and just about stopped myself from adding, “*Queen of the Suburbs*”.

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Back home, in my cold and lonely bed, I tried to divert myself with thoughts of my trip to Pakistan and what I might find there. I was surprised to note that the attempt was successful, filling me with a mixture of sadness and excitement of a totally different sort: nostalgic and mind-expanding.

Part 2a: Sweat Shops

Monday 6th December 2010

It was three days after the Christmas party, evening, and I was in my hotel in Pakistan. I had arrived in the morning at Lahore International Airport, now renamed Allama Iqbal International Airport after Sir Muhammad Iqbal, the national poet and one of the founding fathers of the country. I had been impressed, because my memories from before were less complimentary: it now actually resembled what it claimed to be – an international airport – with marble columns and floors; and the noise and bustle were no more than one might expect from any airport. I had been met by a driver and limousine; again I was impressed, the white limousine was better than my own five-year-old Mercedes car back in London.

It had been an overnight flight and I was tired. My plan was to stay in a hotel in Lahore for the first day and night before going to Sheikhpura, which was about twenty-five miles away. Uncle had suggested the Best Western Hotel, and when I saw it I could see why. Although it was not one of the best, not exactly Pearl Intercontinental, it was more than acceptable and easily of Western standards, as the name implied, and with a hotel rate of about twenty pounds a night – Uncle clearly being thrifty as always. I had slept most of the day in the small but clean room, had gone out for dinner in the famous Food Street about four miles away, which I vaguely remembered from my previous visit, and where I had eaten fresh chicken *tikka* and *nan*, simple but delicious. The waiter had been a child, about ten years old. The meaning of “fresh” was on a different level: you could point to the live chicken you wanted served. Delicious aromas as well as music, including Adnan Sami and Abrar-Ul-Haq, had come from all sides as I strolled down the pedestrianised street, trying to choose a restaurant. Extended families of three or even four generations strolled with me, some of the ancients in wheelchairs. To my surprise it was cold, even though the day had been warm, and I was glad of my winter jacket that Uncle had advised me to take along. To my further surprise, darkness had fallen quickly, around 6pm, but both of these events were slowly reacclimatising me to the country after my long break. I had sent a couple of text messages to Zara to update her: “Have arrived safely”, “Strolling down Food Street!” She had texted back “Ok” to the first one but had not replied to the second: a continuation of our fight about

my Friday night drinking; for the same reason I had had to take a cab to the airport. Even though I had slept in the other room and got up early to have a shower she had deduced what I had been up to. I had tried to divert myself from these depressing memories by reflecting on the miracles of modern technology, but also thought that such technology really had reduced the old wonders of travel: the mystique, the sense of adventure and bracing sense of isolation. On Food Street there had been no indication of poverty except for the child waiters and the occasional beggar with hand upturned more in hope than expectation.

My plan was to go to Sheikhpura first thing in the morning. I found myself back at the hotel before 9pm, reminding me of the other main reason why I had stopped coming here: there was nothing *to do*, no bars, no clubs, no nothing. I knew from my reading that all these things were available if you had the contacts, but I really wasn't interested: I could do them back home in England. I was amused to note that now I was in Pakistan I thought of England as "back home" whereas when I was in England it was the other way round. I tried to watch some TV but there was nothing of consequence on the State channels except for news, Quran exegesis programs and some moth-ridden documentaries about the foundation of the country and the wars against India, featuring the whiskey-drinking, cigar-smoking, very first president Jinnah. The hotel did not have satellite channels.

No matter; I was exhausted and, having brushed my teeth and changed, switched off the light and noisy fan heater in preparation for sleep. I felt the usual sense of unreality when sleeping in a foreign bed, especially on my own. I was glad of the thick purple duvet that had been provided, which reminded me of some memory but which I could not pin down no matter how hard I tried. Perhaps if I stopped chasing, it would come of its own accord...

I fell into a deep sleep, only vaguely becoming conscious once or twice during the night as I turned sides, wondering where I was, before falling asleep again. I had told the driver to pick me up at 8am, expecting him to turn up sometime around nine.

Tuesday 7th December 2010

Confounding my expectations of Pakistani timing, I was roused from my sleep by the almost simultaneous sounds of my phone alarm which I had set for eight, and a loud knocking, as though the man had stood outside and waited for the clock to strike. I jumped out of bed, went to the door and opened it, apologised, considered explaining

my reasoning, decided against it given my broken Urdu, and asked the driver to come back in half an hour. He was about thirty, dark, slim, about the same height as me and had prominent cheekbones; he gave the usual South-Asian rolling shake of the head in agreement, and went off with no hint of surprise or annoyance. I reminded myself not to be too apologetic or explanatory to the workers here or they would think I was a weakling; I hated the thought, but self-preservation took first priority.

I decided to forgo breakfast and instead asked the driver to pick up some lady finger bananas, which I loved, from a roadside stall on the way. The vendor was a young boy of perhaps fifteen or so. The fresh air of morning, despite the traffic fumes, was prevalent.

Sheikhupura was towards the northwest of Lahore, just off the M-2 motorway; for this reason I had decided to stay in Allama Iqbal Town, which was in the west side of Lahore and close to the motorway. Accordingly, we were able to miss most of the city traffic and were soon on the dual carriageway, on which there were not many vehicles, prompting me to question the cost-effectiveness of it. The driver wound up the electric windows and turned on the AC; he had wanted to do this earlier but I had told him not to. We passed mostly fields but also some built-up areas, mostly commercial, as well as slums and hut encampments. The sun was now up and the day was warming. Our head office was actually in Sangla Hill. Uncle had told me that all the major players had their offices there, even those running their businesses from Faisalabad and Karachi; in fact Sangla Hill was closer to Faisalabad than Lahore. After Partition, carpet weavers from India, where carpet weaving dated from the time of the Mughals, had migrated there; this was one of the background facts I had learnt about the industry as part of my acclimatisation.

Sangla Hill was further on from Sheikhupura, about another forty miles, and was a token office, used for meeting major clients, especially Western ones; but Uncle had told me that there was no point in actually going there.

Sharif, our local manager in Sheikhupura, was waiting and was obsequious, which I hated, but thought it would be more diplomatic to put up with it than to make a fuss. His high-pitched, almost feminine voice was in stark contrast to his size: he was short and fat, his girth almost as much as his height, his face dark and plain with a moustache; he had a large mole on his right cheek. He was perhaps about fifty.

The factory was not as bad as I had feared; I had been doing some research on the Internet and had read all the horror stories. It was reasonably clean and well-lit;

there were no children, but there *were* many empty workstations, reminding me of Catherine's comment. It was roughly a hundred feet by fifty, with a high ceiling; there were about a hundred workers. I had expected the deafening sounds of automated looms but realised that this was a hangover from a visit to a cotton-making factory I had once made long ago; here the only sounds were muted ones from the hand-woven carpet-making process and the occasional bits of chatter. There was a slightly musky smell.

At least that was my first impression, standing at the doorway, my back to the relatively weak winter sun, gazing into the factory. Given my initial expectations of heat I might have been mystified by the fact that the workers were wearing overcoats, but because of my own experiences last night I was not. They were also all wearing masks. But as I toured around, nodding and smiling at the workers, within five minutes I noticed the first problem. Before landing in Pakistan I had been expecting sweltering heat; outside, it was indeed warm despite it being winter, but inside it was freezing cold. There was no heating; obviously, I did not expect central heating, but it did make me suspect that in the summer it would indeed be boiling, given that there was no air-conditioning either. There were fans on the ceiling, but these were currently still. The high windows had no glass, only metal grills. The space was divided into two with a long, curtain-like partition: one section for men and one for women. I stayed mainly in the men's section, merely popping my head into the other, prompting a quick flurry of head-covering with *dupattas*.

There were no young children; there *were* youths but Sharif insisted that they were all fifteen or over. I had my doubts about some of them but he said that they merely looked young for their age. There were indeed some empty workstations, as Catherine had predicted. A "workstation" consisted of something that looked like a large easel, with the threads stretched along it vertically, the completed part of the rug forming at the bottom, and a small bench in front of it for the workers to sit on. In front of them they had their tools, the names of which I had learnt from my research: the awl, the comb, the hook, the knife... I asked about the empty workstations, and Sharif replied that those people were off sick.

But once my initial impressions were over, I was horrified. The conditions were appalling, compared to England. What surprised me most was the speed and concentration of the workers, but then given that they were paid for completed rugs this was surely to be expected; I was reminded of Uncle's formula. The process itself was a bit like knitting: pull the thread down, across with one hand, swift movement of the

hook downwards with the other, a periodic cutting with the knife. *All this at lightning pace.*

I was mystified as to how people could work like this all day, day in, day out – not so much for the nature of the work, but for the remuneration: *a pound a day*. But Sharif too was mystified, saying, referring to the youths, ‘But sir, they only work nine hours a day, guaranteed, and a whole hour for lunch *supplied by the company*. And there is no punishment room, sir. I will take you to some of the other factories. They are forced to work fourteen, sixteen hours a day. And the junior workers are *safe* here, sir, that is my *personal* guarantee.’ He had the typical sing-song Pakistani way of speaking, emphasising random words. He lowered his voice and looked around. ‘In other places, sir, boys are beaten, girls are abused, sir, *unspeakable* things happen. Big Sahib is *very* particular about these things. Only six days a week, every Friday they get off, and once a month, after *Juma’ah*, we all go for a picnic, sir, paid for by the company. We are all one big happy family, sir.’ The adults apparently chose their own working times, on average about twelve hours a day.

‘Okay, okay. But it’s freezing?’

Sharif spread his hands and smiled as though the idea of heating was some exotic luxury not even to be thought of. ‘There is *nothing* we can do about that, sir. But as you can see they have *warm* clothes, we provide those, even the gloves sir, look.’ He rushed over to one worker, a dark, skinny man with hollow eyes, and showed off his gloves with the ends of the fingers cut off.

‘What about in the summer? It must be boiling in here.’

Sharif smiled in delight, revealing small, regular and only slightly *paan*-discoloured teeth. ‘*All* the fans are working, sir.’ He rushed to the bank of switches, probably getting more exercise in these few minutes than he ever got in a year if his portly frame was anything to go by, and switched them all on. Sure enough all the fans were indeed working, with only the odd exception. Sharif nodded to those and said, roll-shaking his head, ‘Not to worry, sir, when the time is coming I will get those fixed; I *personally* guarantee it.’ He switched them all off again.

‘But there’s no air-conditioning, right?’

Sharif laughed; a big-bellied, wheezing laugh, the laugh of a fat man, as though I had just cracked a huge joke. ‘Please to be serious, sir. But we *are* having a generator, which we are using in the summer for the fans if there is being a power cut. Big Sahib is being *very* generous; he is paying for that separately.’

Sharif's earlier speech had raised so many questions in my mind I had not known where to begin and had needed time to digest it. 'You mentioned a punishment room?'

'I will *take* you to some of the other factories, sir,' repeated Sharif.

Half an hour later he did so, but stopping off at a clothes store first for me to buy and change into some ready-made *shalwar-kameez*; he said that the other managers would be uncomfortable of my Western attire otherwise. At the other factories he nodded to the managers in the man-to-man manner of "business-rivals-but-colleagues". Here there were children working openly, some of them young and tiny, including a little girl wearing a summer-yellow *shalwar-kameez* who could not have been more than six years old and who looked completely lost. To be fair to Uncle, in our own factory none of the youths were so young that they were not aware of their circumstances, although whether that was an advantage or not was a debatable matter. A few of the children were chained to their looms by their ankles, none of the workers wore masks and they were all squatting instead of having benches to sit on. He showed me the "punishment rooms": tiny, bare, concrete cells with nothing but a small bench in the centre and a rope in the form of a swing suspended from the ceiling. I could not bring myself to work out exactly how the two things were actually used; one thing I could be certain of was that the swing was not for the normal purpose a child would make of it.

Sharif told me that he could even take me to some private homes where the conditions were worse than in the factories. Sick at heart I shook my head and told Sharif that I had seen enough and that I was ready to return to my hotel. Sharif volunteered to keep me at his house, insisting that his wife was waiting for us and that she had lunch prepared. I politely declined; I had a vague idea that this sort of thing – of employees inviting employers to their houses – was customary in Pakistan but I really did not feel up to it. My initial plan had indeed been to stay in Sheikhpura; I did not mind roughing it and had not been bothered by the fact that there might not be any decent hotels there. But I felt that if I stayed in Sheikhpura, Sharif would not risk bringing back the children, whom I was now certain, having seen the other factories and this latest horror, we must be employing if only to be competitive. I apologised, said that I had relatives to visit, that I had seen enough and would be giving a good report to "Big Sahib" about Sharif; he beamed in delight and gratitude. 'Thank you, sir, thank you,' he said, bowing his head with each "thank you" and holding up his joined hands.

Back in Lahore, depressed from what I had seen, I did not go out that evening but instead ate in my room. The hotel did not have a restaurant but informed me that they could get anything I wanted; I knew from previous experience that what they did was to just send some boy out to get it from a local place. I ordered *aloo paratha* and *chana*, suddenly feeling an inexplicable craving for these things. I was still jet-lagged and what with the long day was again exhausted; I retired early once more, after a quick text update to my wife, to which she did not reply.

Wednesday 8th December 2010

Sharif came running out of his small cabin-office on seeing my car pull up the next morning and tried to stop me from going into the factory. I ignored him and brushed past.

He grovelled, attempted to explain. ‘They are families, sir. They beg us for jobs. We are doing them a favour. I will take you to the brick kilns, sir.’

‘How much do we pay them?’ I asked, referring to the children.

‘Sir, we pay per rug.’

I remembered that fact from Uncle but had wanted to compare stories. ‘But what formula do you use?’

The word “formula” took a while to explain. After a laborious conversation, it seemed to me that, bearing in mind that families were employed, the children’s rate was about half that of the adults’, and that even the adult rate was less than the minimum wage.

After some hesitation, Sharif agreed about the children. ‘But, sir, they are learning a trade. Other factories pay a third or a quarter or even a tenth.’

‘And the adult workers, they are not being paid minimum wage,’ I stated.

‘I’m sorry, sir?’

I tried to explain the concept of a minimum wage in my broken Urdu. ‘*Ek kum tankha hoti hai?*’

Sharif shrugged and made no reply.

My first instinct was to stop the children working straight away, but I had learnt in life to control my first instinct. Instead, I tried the work for myself. I had originally planned to do this just for an hour or so, to get a feel for the process, but after my discovery of the children I felt compelled to do it for the whole day; to feel what they

felt, like when I had fasted as a child once and had insisted on continuing, even though my mother had told me that I could do a “*chiri roza*”, a “bird fast”, half day.

I sat at an empty workstation, next to a child who did not know his exact age but who had been told that he had been born in the year the “big buildings in Amreeka had been destroyed”; from this I deduced that he must be nine. The child was moon-faced, with long brown hair coming over his eyes, and large jug ears; his moon-face reminded me of my son, though without the fat cheeks my son had had at that age. The child had been given a coat far too large for him and was dwarfed by it. I tried to take his workstation but he refused. I attempted to explain, in my broken Urdu, that he would still be paid, wondering if that was his fear, but he smiled shyly and refused to give up his place, shaking his head. I accepted defeat and took the station next to him, which happened to be empty. I asked Sharif to show me how the work was done. As we worked, I tried to talk to the child; occasionally he would reach over and correct my mistakes. In the time it took me to do one knot I estimated that he had done at least ten, but this was partly because I cut myself several times and was forced to slow down to a laborious pace. His name was Javed, and I noticed that his fingers were scarred.

I asked Sharif about the child. Sharif squatted next to me and in low tones told me the child’s story. He was a Christian boy from Muridke, a small rural village about twenty miles from here. Shortly after his birth, his father had abandoned the family. His mother had got work as a housecleaner but found it difficult to make enough money to feed all her six children from her small income; she had sold him into bonded labour in a carpet factory at the age of about four. When he was old enough, about eight, he had escaped and managed to get to the local police station. The police inspector, who knew the factory owner, beat Javed with a bicycle chain before returning him to the factory; the owner entombed him for three days – where he had been stung by scorpions and almost died of thirst – before setting him back to work. He had escaped again and ran away to Sheikhpura where he had presented himself at the factory for work but insisting that he be given fair wages, saying that he had heard good things about the factory. Nobody was sure how or where he lived. But apparently he was very proud of the fact that he was earning his own money and looking after himself. The idea of adoption occurred to me – perhaps I could solve my late lamb question that way – but how many Pakistani children could I adopt? And I knew that adoption was not the romantic, easy option many people thought it was. I steeled my heart and tried to close my mind to the subject.

Lunch was *roti* and *dal*, with water to drink, which the workers ate gathered around in families, out in the winter sun, on sheets spread on the stony ground. I asked for more details about lunch and was assured that there were different vegetables every day. ‘But no meat?’ Sharif hesitated, and I could see that he was wondering whether to lie or tell the truth, whether to laugh just like when I had asked about the air-conditioning, or be serious. ‘Don’t lie to me,’ I said, wagging a finger, as the man paused. In the end, with a neutral expression on his face, Sharif opted for a simple, ‘No, sir.’ I had to tell him to fetch some bottled water for me to drink, knowing that the local water would give me the runs. ‘Coke, sir? Miranda?’ asked Sharif. I remembered that Miranda was like Fanta. I looked around; nobody was drinking anything fancy. I shook my head. ‘Water.’

I took the opportunity to talk to some of the workers; they were not exactly happy families, as Sharif claimed, with resigned, unsmiling faces, but no one made complaints, even though I specifically asked.

Later, I asked Sharif if there was a hotel nearby but he would not hear of it; I decided to give in gracefully and accept his offer to stay at his house.

I was glad that I had done so when, in the middle of the night, my back went into spasms. After rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Sharif rushed off to phone the local doctor who arrived half an hour later and, after examining me, simply prescribed painkillers and rest. Unable to move a millimetre without excruciating pain, and feeling sorry for myself, I wondered whether I had been destined merely to return to my homeland to die: a sign and punishment from Allah for my disbelief. I refused to phone Zara for comfort, which at least gave me some satisfactory sense of martyrdom.

Fortunately, I started to feel better the next day and within three days I was back on my feet – though that was still a quarter of my trip wasted – which helped me with my decision about whether to visit my relatives or not, the answer being no. Besides, I needed all the time I had to get a feel for the factory and how the whole system worked; to see if I could work out a way of making it more efficient and thus reduce our reliance on child labour.

Sharif tended me the whole time. After being introduced to the wife, a small, dumpy woman, I did not see her again; I assumed she had been packed off somewhere, as she clearly could not stay in the same house as a strange man, especially as the house had only three rooms. His daughters also disappeared but the sons remained. I made a point of remembering to pay Sharif for the doctor when I recovered.

And then he did indeed take me to the brick kilns. We got in the car and drove for about half an hour, the final stages being along dirt tracks. Even from afar I could see what he wanted to show me. But he insisted on going up, close and personal.

We got out of the car to look. It was a large open field with entire generations of families working away, including babies, toddlers and old people. The babies were playing in the mud (presumably part of their training program), toddlers barely able to walk were carrying one brick at a time, and children from the age of about six were fully working. The smell of dust was in the air. The place was eerily silent; the one good thing about Pakistan was that usually, despite the poverty and the misery, the people were cheerful and there would often be music playing somewhere in the background. Not here.

‘These are all bonded families, sir,’ said Sharif. Even he looked sad and miserable. ‘They work from 2am until night for a hundred rupees.’

‘Why so early?’

‘They can make more bricks then; it is too hot during the day.’

He did not insist that I stay for more than a few minutes; we turned away and went back to the car in silence.

*

Later that day, at the end of the shift, I asked Javed where he lived. He looked at me blankly for a while and then raised his arm and pointed vaguely.

‘Please take me. I want to see where you live.’

Outside the factory I made to go to the car but the boy held back. I realised that he did not want to get in the car. I nodded and said I would follow him and beckoned to Sharif to bring the car. The boy led me down the main road for about half an hour before turning off into a field. It was a small shanty encampment of perhaps a hundred dwellings; I had smelled it first before I saw it. It was quiet with no music playing. He led me down narrow alleyways until he turned into one of the huts. Inside, it was dark and gloomy. There was no electricity and no lights except for a small oil lamp hung up on a string. It took me a while to get used to the gloom. Only then did I see that there was a young girl in the room, lying silent in the corner.

‘Where are the adults?’ I asked in my broken Urdu. ‘*Bare kan hehn?*’

‘Just us, sir.’

‘So who looks after you?’

‘We look after ourselves, sir.’

‘Who cooks for you?’

He pointed at the girl who seemed a bit older, perhaps twelve or so. She was dark, with a triangular face, very prominent cheekbones and a small chin. Her eyes were large.

‘Where do you sleep?’

He pointed down at the floor. Around the edges of the room were mats; there was a small “corridor” from the door to the middle of the room which was not covered.

‘How many of you all together?’

‘Three.’

‘So where’s the other one?’

‘He works in the brick kiln, sir.’ Javed paused. ‘Can you give him a job, sir? He hates it there.’

I ignored his question, steeled my heart. ‘But that’s far away. How does he get there?’

‘There is a van, sir.’

‘What happens when you fall ill?’

He shrugged again.

‘Where does she work?’ I nodded over to the girl.

‘She is not working at the moment, sir.’

I waited for him to ask me for a job for her as well but he did not. ‘So how does she support herself?’

‘I support her, sir.’

I was amazed. ‘How come?’

‘She supported me when I came here, sir.’

I stood helpless in the centre of the room. What to do? In England, I would have pulled out my phone, called social services and that would be the end of it; I could disclaim all responsibility. Who to call? Uncle? Zara? Catherine?

They were looking at me, waiting. ‘I can’t just leave you here,’ I mumbled to myself. But why not? I saw beggars in the street all the time, without a second thought, or at least not a third one. True, I did feel sorry for those beggars and had I been God and could have waved a magic wand I would have done so, which begged the question of why *HE* didn’t, but that was a question for pub philosophy.

But Javed was an *employee* – I could not just leave him here. I stood in indecision in the middle of the room and might have gone on standing there indefinitely, had not Sharif entered.

‘Sir, shall we go?’

‘How can we just go? We can’t just leave him here: he is our employee.’

‘Sir, he is not our responsibility.’

‘I’m going to stay here.’

‘But sir, this is madness.’

‘I’m going to stay here. I want to see how they live.’

He sighed and turned to go. I said, ‘Wait.’

He turned back. ‘Who does this land belong to?’ I asked.

‘Some rich landowner, sir.’

‘How much rent do these children pay?’

‘Nothing, sir. He lets them live here for free.’

I was astonished. ‘You mean, there are good rich people in Pakistan, too?’

He rolled-shook his head. ‘Of course, sir. There are many good people in Pakistan.’

The other boy, who was about the same age as Javed, arrived home just then, as Sharif left. As the girl, whose name was Farina, cooked on a small gas cylinder cooker, to my surprise they started to sing the Pakistani national anthem:

Pak sarzamin shad bad
Kishware haseen shad bad
Tunishane azmealishan arze Pakistan
...

I was only able to understand a few words: *pak* = pure, *haseen* = beautiful, *awam* = country, *khuda* = God.

I felt guilty about eating their food but knew it would be rude to refuse outright. I took half a *roti* and one small ladleful of *dal*, pretending not to be hungry, rubbing my stomach and shaking my head.

After dinner, the two boys turned to the girl and said, ‘Tell us a story.’

She sat them down, stood in front of them and started her story, with full action and mime, with emphasis and rhythm. The lamp lit the room and children with

shadows. With the children quiet in listening, I could hear the sounds of movement and talk from the other dwellings, including the wailing of a baby.

'Ek dafa, ek chooah or ek choohi theyh; woh ban bai the. Once upon a time there was a little boy mouse and a little girl mouse. They were brother and sister. They were very poor. One day a rat came to their nest and said to their parents, "I will take your children and give them a job. They will become rich and all your worries will be over."

'The two little mice were overjoyed that they would be able to help their parents. But it turned out that he was a very bad rat. He took them away and he made them work and he bit their tails and pulled their whiskers when they didn't work, even though it was because they were so tired. And he did terrible things to the little girl mouse but I won't tell you about those because you are children.'

She briefly caught my eye, seemed to blush even in the gloomy light of the room, and lowered her gaze. But in addition to that I also noticed a look of fear and suspicion.

'Years went past and they thought they would never see their parents again. But then one day, in the middle of the night, there was a banging on the door of their nest. And then the door broke down and guess who came crashing through?'

The two children smiled: they had clearly heard the story before.

'Yes, that's right. It was their father. And he beat up the bad rat, bit his tail until he cried like a baby, and Father said to his children, "Don't worry I've got a job now, I can look after you." And he wrapped them up in his arms to take them outside.

'And the rat screamed, "Please give me back those children! I need to make them work or the BIG RAT will kill me!"

' "Who's the BIG RAT?" asked Father, not believing a word of this.

' "Nobody has ever seen him. He lives far away, across the ocean, in lands where the roads and buildings are made of glass and where, when it is too hot or too cold, they have heaters and coolers *even in the open air.*" '

The children scoffed. A likely story!

' "And where *none* of the children work and they all go to school." '

The children stopped scoffing and watched the girl with wistful looks, wide eyes and open mouths. There was a long silence before she continued.

'The rat said, "And the BIG RAT is getting bigger and bigger and soon he will be so BIG he will have eaten ALL the food in the WHOLE WORLD." '

The children started to scoff again: how was that possible?

‘And Father stopped beating the rat; he could see that the rat must be mad to make up all these stories, and if he was mad what was the point of beating him? Father just warned him never to come near them again. And then Father took his children outside and guess who was there?’

The children smiled again.

‘That’s right, it was their mother. And she hugged them so hard they could not breathe.

‘And when they got home there was so much food they ate and they ate until they thought they would burst. And then they slept in warm beds with their mother and father on either side of them. And they were never sad again.’

Silence descended and the children prepared for bed, casting puzzled glances at me.

I said, ‘Where’s the toilet?’

Javed shook his head in puzzlement. I rephrased. ‘*Pashaab? Wee?*’

He smiled shyly. ‘Small wee or Big wee?’ I knew this was the Pakistani code-equivalent of “Number One” and “Number Two”.

‘Small wee,’ I said.

‘If it’s just small wee you can just step outside, sir. If you want big wee you have to go further.’ He was obviously catering for the possibility that I was shy and actually wanted “big wee”.

‘Where?’ I asked.

He waved a hand vaguely, from which I deduced that he just meant I should go further into the field.

I went outside. Even though I genuinely only needed “small wee” I could not bring myself to do this within such close proximity to the dwellings; I went further. The only illumination was from the distant lights and some small oil lamps that some shacks had hung outside. The noise of cicadas was loud in the silent night; the smell here was horrific, making me gag. I covered my mouth and nose with my hand.

I felt a sense of unreality as I relieved myself, this mundane act in contrast with the grim reality around me; but the act also reminded me of my animal nature and that these people had not evolved much past that point, at least in living conditions, although the little girl’s story-telling skills had been almost as good as a female performer I had once seen who had one of those new-fangled “practice-based” PhDs in the subject. I

looked up at the stars; the one advantage here was that the sky was bright with them, unlike in London where one would be lucky to see even a few. I wondered if these people ever looked up at their splendid night sky. The contrast of the beautiful stars with the unbearable smell was even starker than my earlier observation.

I detected a motion from the corner of my eye and suddenly realised that there was a man about twenty feet away from me, squatting and clearly doing “big wee”. The movement I had detected was him reaching for his *lota*, toilet jug, to wash himself. I wondered what the system of segregation was here where it was really needed. After cleaning his backside, the man washed his hands with soap he must have brought with him. He went, taking his *lota* and soap with him.

When I returned, the children were in bed. I washed my hands using a bucket of water that was in the corner. Apparently there was a standby pipe which came on twice a day when people took the opportunity to fill their buckets. I went and sat in my corner, hunched up. It was freezing.

‘Come, sir, there is plenty of room here,’ said the small boy, lifting up the blankets; his name was Arif.

I smiled and shook my head; it would have been completely inappropriate.

Instead I took Javed’s coat and wrapped it around me. But even so, my teeth were soon chattering and I was shivering. Sharif was right, I thought: *this is madness*. I had just recovered from my back problem; if I carried on like this I would get pneumonia as a bonus. Another thought occurred to me: the longer I stayed here the more false hope I would give these children. A final, awful reflection, simultaneously with a recollection of the little girl’s look of suspicion, sealed it: *What if Sharif thought I was some kind of a perv?* That I had some ulterior motive, some designs on these poor children? My eyes closed involuntarily to shut out the thought.

I was forced to admit defeat. I was about to pull out my phone to call Sharif when I heard the sounds of a baby; the earlier wailing of the baby had died down but this sound was distinctly closer: *it was inside this hut*.

I looked over at the corner where the girl was making soothing sounds and motions, at the same time casting nervous glances over her shoulder in my direction. I did not know what to do. Should I go over? But what would that achieve? Instead, I rushed out of the hut and ran back towards the open area. I tried to control myself for as long as possible before I threw up.

I cleaned myself up as best as I could and waited for my breathing to calm down and my heart to stop thumping. I pulled out my phone and told Sharif to come and get me, as though I were a lost child, my voice shaking, fighting to hold back tears.

Thursday 16th December 2010

In the end, partly because of my experience with the children, in particular the memory of the little girl and her baby lodged in my mind like a cancer, I was unable to resist the pull of my childhood home. Today, the day before my flight back to London, I went back to the house where I had grown up. I watched from a distance, trying to build up the courage to knock on the double wooden doors, which were blue but with the paint peeling. I wondered what I could possibly say to them, would they even recognise me? Might they even shout and scream, ask me what the hell I was doing here after ten years of silence.

I was depressed to note that indeed nothing had changed in the area. Yes of course there had been *some* changes, more built-up now, more roads, more shops – many of them gold stores, surprisingly enough – but essentially unchanged: the same complete lack of rhyme or reason, of every man for himself. After my experiences in Sheikhpura, it was just one more straw on the camel's back; in Pakistan, this was not just a cliché, but literally observable sometimes, though usually on poor little donkeys. I felt a deep melancholy, a complete sense of the futility of existence. As I watched, the doors opened and an old woman emerged. It took me a while to recognise my aunt, my father's sister; she was grey-haired and slow moving. With her were three girls in their late teens or early twenties, helping and supporting her. I was puzzled; who could they possibly be? It took me a while to work out that they must be her granddaughters, and therefore my cousin-nieces, possibly daughters of the cousin who had died a few years ago at the age of fifty, just five years older than I was now.

My cousin had been a handsome man, always immaculately turned out, not a hair of his moustache out of place. I had vague memories of playing together as children. I had not even sent a message of sympathy; it seemed a bit rich to have no communication but then make contact on death.

I was not a sunglasses man but now put mine on, perhaps more to hide my guilt than my face. I turned away, wandered the streets where I had grown up, my heart aching. Vague memories of childhood, of my grandparents who had lost their only son,

to see him perhaps two or three times before they too had died, floated through my mind.

I felt an overwhelming desire to talk to someone, to excise the cancer from my brain, but to whom? I could hardly phone Zara: she was indirectly the cause of my current predicament; besides, she was barely acknowledging my text updates let alone phone calls. Catherine? My heart beat faster as I recalled our Christmas kiss. (I also felt a twinge of shame and weakness as I recalled the events after that.) I could easily phone her and claim that it was work-related; indeed had already done so a few times to touch base. When I had phoned the first time it had been with some trepidation, but again I had been flabbergasted to note from her tone that she seemed to have completely forgotten about the incident. I had heard people say that they had been so drunk they could not recall events, but I had always found this hard to believe, thinking that it was perhaps just an excuse for embarrassing behaviour. Either way, I was now happy to go along with the pretence. The only problem was, I really had no work-related queries or updates, would it be appropriate? But I could not help myself – I pulled out my mobile; I had bought a cheap international SIM card, so cost was not an issue. I pressed the number. She answered almost immediately, surprising me.

‘Hi, Imran.’

I assumed that she had put my name into her phone as she had said the greeting before I had even spoken, as indeed she had done after the first time I had called with the new number. ‘Hi, Catherine, how’s it going down there?’

‘Fine. Everything’s fine. I mean, there’s the usual stuff but nothing I can’t handle.’

She did indeed seem to have everything remarkably under control and had never contacted me once with any sort of a panic.

‘Where are you?’ I asked.

‘I’m at my desk.’

‘Can you go into my office and close the door?’

‘Sure.’ There was a slight note of puzzlement in her voice. It was not the first time I had asked her to go into my office, to look at some file or other, but perhaps she had detected something in my tone of voice; not to mention that I had never asked her to close the door before.

There was a few seconds of quiet, followed by the sound of a door closing, and then: ‘Okay?’

‘I didn’t tell you the whole truth the other day.’

‘Oh?’

‘About the children.’ I hesitated. ‘But I need to say that this is in confidence. If you divulge this information, I’ll deny all knowledge.’

‘Don’t be silly. It’s fine. Who would I tell?’

‘Actually, you’re right. I’ve found out that the government *itself* runs carpet factories with children working there! But they’re very proud of the fact that at least their working conditions are better!’ I almost laughed. I then told her the full story but not my experience in the hut; it seemed too weighty to relate over the phone.

There was a long silence. I said, ‘You won’t report the company, will you?’ I realised as I said the words that I had already forgotten my own comments of earlier: it just *seemed* so obvious that this should be horrific and unacceptable.

‘No, of course not. Who would I report it to? Nobody cares. All companies do this. I’m just disappointed, that’s all. It means I’ve wasted all this time. I joined this company specifically to learn how to do business ethically.’

‘I’m wandering around where I grew up. Nothing’s changed. Not in the forty years I’ve been away. Not in the ten years since I was here last. Have you ever seen those films where aliens keep human beings for food? All this has made me think that Pakistanis are a bit like that.’

‘I know what you mean,’ she said, her voice a bit crackly until I moved a few more steps, dodging some pot holes. ‘I felt the same way when I was in Peshawar. Only we’re a labour reserve, not a food reserve.’

I was nodding vigorously even though she wouldn’t see it. ‘Exactly. You know, in England, blacks and South-Asians are always talking about how grateful they are to Britain, how it’s given them such a good life. But why? Why should we be grateful? We’ve been uprooted, exploited, ripped from our homeland... As you said yourself, not quite like the poor slaves, more subtle, but worse in a way: *we’re so brainwashed, we’re grateful for it!*’

‘I know,’ she said, and I could imagine her nodding vigorously just like me. ‘That’s what – ouch!’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing. Sorry, I just banged my knee.’

We both laughed, despite the gravity of our conversation; I assumed that she had been swinging in the chair. The cancer flickered minutely before lodging itself again. She continued, ‘Anyway, that’s what I was trying to explain to you that day.’

‘Yes, I understand now. And they’re still doing it. When will it end?’

‘When we put a stop to it.’

‘Who? How?’

There was silence for a moment, as she too came to the end of her intellectual and practical capabilities. She said, ‘That’s what my PhD is going to be all about it. That’s what I want to look into. What’s all the noise?’

I laughed; the cancer flickered again but obstinately returned to its place. ‘Oh, it’s some kids playing *guli-danda*.’

‘What’s that?’

I was glad that I knew something about Pakistan that she didn’t. ‘It’s like a children’s version of cricket. Brings back memories. The only problem is, whereas before I would have found it idyllic, now I’m wondering where their fathers are: probably in America or England or Dubai, if they’re “lucky”, sending back money.’ I emphasised the word “lucky” to indicate the speech marks I saw in my mind. ‘Money’s all very well but what about their fathers’ presence?’

‘Yes, I know.’ Her voice was suddenly subdued and I kicked myself for my lack of tact. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, Catherine, I didn’t mean to...’

‘No, it’s fine.’

It was probably time to end the conversation before I got myself into more trouble, but there was one final thing I had to get off my chest. I said, ‘You know, I used to think that Pakistanis were lazy. *They’re not lazy! They work from morning till night and almost literally from the cradle to the grave!*’

Silence.

I sighed deeply. ‘Sorry to rant, Catherine. I’ll let you go now. See you in the new year, and we’ll discuss what we can do about this.’

‘No problem, Imran, see you later.’

An hour earlier, when I had come from the hotel to my childhood home, I had taken a rickshaw instead of a taxi, wanting the nostalgia, but now realised that it was not nostalgia, it was... what was that phrase one of my white female colleagues had used after watching *Slumdog Millionaire*?... oh yes, “poverty pornography”. Once, I had seen a program on TV about the slums in India. A young British Indian woman had looked at

them and said “that’s beautiful”. At the time I had thought that I knew what she meant. But now I knew that she was wrong: it was *not* beautiful, it was ugly, the ugliest thing in the world.

And I had as much blood on my hands as the white devil himself. Had become a true British-South-Asian “coconut”, with the evil white bit on the *inside*, well hidden away, like the evil human heart, the only consolation being that at least I didn’t have to hide my whiteness with a smile and good English manners.

For my return journey to the hotel, I took a taxi: I had had enough of poverty pornography. As I neared my hotel I thought, no, things *had* changed: the Pakistani town planners had taken the classic route of building new towns outside of the old cities, which were too crowded to rebuild. The new towns were indeed leafy, with large mansions, each with high walls and its own private security guard. That was what had changed; one would be hard put to tell that one was still in Pakistan.

I went into the tiled lobby of my hotel where the very civilised clerk dealt with me efficiently and courteously. One expected to fly eight thousand miles, from England to Pakistan, and find a different world; you did *not* expect to travel *twenty-five* miles, from Sheikhpura, or indeed five miles, from my home village of Mughalpur, and find the same contrast.

‘Good afternoon, sir,’ said the clerk in English. ‘Everything is fine?’

No, everything is not fine. Not fine at all. ‘Everything is fine, thank you,’ I said. People in England might wonder where good English manners had gone. They need not worry: they were alive and well, here in Pakistan.

*

And the next day, as I boarded my plane, I reflected that ten days in this sweatshop of a country had been more than enough for me. I tried hard not to think of Javed and Arif listening to Farina’s stories in their little hut, all of whom would have to spend their whole lives here making miraculously cheap goods.

Miraculous because they were made by magic of course, not by real people, and *certainly* not by children.

And not *real* people, because they were *Eastern*.

They were *cheap*.

They were over *there*.

Out of sight and out of mind.

But *I'm* all right, Jack, I've got that other piece of red magic: my European Union passport.

I'm Western now.

I'm *Englaand* now.

The only present I was taking back was the cancer in my brain – the memory of Farina and her baby – which refused to budge, no matter how hard I rolled-shook my head in the Pakistani style I had begun to imitate, even though I had only been here ten days.

Part 2b: Sweat Dreams

Saturday 18th December 2010; morning; London

I could not breathe, the noise was deafening, the heat stifling. What was wrong with these people! Hadn't they heard of health and safety? I'd report them to the authorities! Where was the manager?

I turned to one of the workers in the serried rows and shook my head in disbelief. It was a child! Barely eight years old, surely! By God, I was going to roast these people!

'Where's the manager?' I asked the child. The boy looked back at me blankly with his large, black eyes.

A man came up to me, carrying a clipboard; he was middle-aged, cleanly dressed, five foot nothing. Ah, this must be the manager.

I turned to him. 'What the fuck's going on here? Haven't you heard of health and safety? And what are all the children doing here? Why aren't they in school?'

The manager shrugged, handed me a roll of notes. I stared in disbelief. 'Pehn-chaud! Sister-fucker! You think you can bribe me with a few hundred rupees! You think I'm a fucking Paki! I'm gonna have you hanged by your big, fat Paki balls!'

The man started to grovel, joining his hands in supplication, his moustache quivering; he was rotund, and even his belly seemed to quiver under his white shalwar-kameez. 'I'm sorry, sir, I just do as I'm told. I'm just the manager. Big Sahib will sack me, sir. Please, sir, I have ten children. They will starve.'

He grabbed me by the wrist. His hand was hot and clammy. I started to sweat. 'Okay, okay. Where's the Big Sahib? I'll Big Sahib him.'

The children started to shout. They left their workstations and clamoured around me. 'Please, sir, don't make Big Sahib angry, sir.' The clamour built to a crescendo. I was pouring with sweat. The children's hands reached out to me from all sides, elongated, out of focus...

*

I awoke with a jerk, my sleeping suit soaking wet, even though it was a cold night. Even more than usual I missed the fact that my wife and I no longer spooned in sleep; I ached for her arm around me.

Christmas was only a week away but I was in no mood for festivities. The house was quiet in sleep, save only for my wife's deep breathing. Normally, the week of Christmas and my annual summer holidays were my favourite times. I would put aside work, give myself a break from my self-imposed anti-Muslim crusade of hard work – *or should that now be pro-Muslim, given my recent discoveries?* – enjoy myself and enjoy the kids; immerse myself in the general reading that there was never quite enough time for during the rest of the year, given all the technical books I had to keep up to date with.

I lay in bed, wide awake, staring up into the semi-darkness at the patch of light on the ceiling. I wondered why I had been so affected by my discoveries; after all, it wasn't as though I hadn't been *aware* that children worked in Pakistan. But theory was one thing, facts another. The reality of the factory – why be coy, *sweatshop* – and the brick-kilns even more so, had affected me more than I had expected. I had seen photos of child labour, read articles in newspapers, and seen things on TV and the Internet, even witnessed it for myself albeit briefly and long ago in that cotton factory. Why had it affected me so much more now? Was it simply that I was older and wiser? More sensitive despite being more cynical, after forty-five years of life? Was it because I myself was living off its earnings, albeit unwillingly, had even contributed to the company's start-up fund, not to mention its name change that I had been so proud of?

The pain from the blisters and cuts on my finger-tips had faded but the new skin retained its whiteness. But my back was still aching, especially when I stood up, because of an old injury that I had sustained when I had once got romantic with my wife back in the day and picked her up like in the movies. I turned on my side, away from my wife, hugged myself and tried to get back to sleep.

*

'Why did you leave me, Dad, why? You forgot all about me.'

'No, son, I didn't forget about you.'

'But you were gone six years. You said you was only going for a few days.'

'That's right, son, I only went for a few days and now I'm back.'

'But why did you have to go, Dad, why did you have to leave me?'

'I did it for you, son, I did for you. So you could have a better life.'

'But why can't we have a better life here, Dad? Why couldn't you take me with you?'

'It doesn't work like that, son.'

'Why, Dad, why?'

'It's hard to explain ... where are you going, son?'

'I have to go with that man over there. He owns me now.'

'Come back here, son. You don't have to go with him. Nobody can own you. I can look after you now.'

'Bye, Dad.'

I tried to run after my son but for some strange reason found that I could not move. I looked down and saw that I was glued to the floor. What was wrong with these people?! Hadn't they heard of health and safety? And what the hell was that noise? People would go deaf, and I bet they hadn't been supplied with ear-plugs. I suddenly realised that actually there was no noise: it was just the blood pounding in my ears.

'Come back, son, you don't have to go with him. I can look after you now.'

'Bye, Dad.'

*

I awoke again, gave up trying to sleep and lay in bed, staring up into the darkness. Normally, if I awoke in the night, I was anxious to get back to sleep, conscious of having to go into work the next day. I had never faked a "sickie" in my life, in fact often going in when I shouldn't have until I had been told one day to go back home as I would pass on my cold to others. But now my nightmares, combined with the fact that it was the Christmas holidays, meant that I did not worry too much about getting back to sleep. The only good thing about my current nightmares was that they had replaced those of the floods, but it was not much of a swap. I had still not quite worked out why, even before my recent visit, Pakistan had started to weigh increasingly on my mind. Was it age? Was I getting to the stage where one started to look back on one's life to take stock?

The nightmare made me think about my son. There had been some good news from Dan, though in the light of my discoveries in Pakistan, even *that* news had turned sour in my mind. The good news was that Dan and his friend had presented a proposal for a joint project to their supervisor. It was a fashion design / business proposal. Their supervisor had been impressed. Apparently, the design was for one of the holy grails of the industry: a South-Asian design for the mass Western market. Their supervisor had contacts in industry and had even offered to show it to some chain stores.

The plan was that Dan would do the design, and his friend, whose family was from Karachi, would look after the business side. Dan would do the designs on

computer, send them to Karachi where samples would be made and sent over to London for showing to customers; Dan had already asked me for a new large-screen Apple Mac, saying that PCs were not the best for this kind of work. If the designs were approved, bulk orders would be made. My concern was the knowledge that not only were my in-laws involved in the exploitation of our “own people”, perpetuating “The System”, my son was now going to be doing the same thing.

Saturday 18th December 2010; afternoon

I had lost my son. I was trying desperately to find him in the serried rows of children working away. I walked down the aisles, broke into a run. ‘Dani!’ I shouted ‘Dani!’

‘Here, Dad, here I am!’

‘Thank God!’

I looked closely, craning my neck forward. ‘You’re not Dani! You’re not my son!’

‘Yes, I am Sahib! I am Dani! I am your son! Take me with you to Englaand, to Valaat. I’m your son.’

‘Dani!’ I shouted and awoke, trembling, drenched in sweat.

*

It was later that afternoon and I had fallen asleep on the sofa; Zara and Ayesha were in the kitchen, whence came baking smells and sounds. Dan had been supposed to arrive the previous evening but had said he would come today instead and that he would be bringing a friend. Since he often brought friends home I was puzzled as to why he had made a point of mentioning it. I decided to go for a run whilst I waited and to clear my thoughts, in particular to try and dislodge the cancerous image in my brain of Farina and her baby; I had not told the family of my experiences in detail, merely giving them a brief general update.

I returned half an hour later, partially successful in my efforts to clear my brain, to find Zara waiting for me in the doorway with a dark expression on her face, saying that it was all my fault, but declining to specify the exact problem except that there was a “surprise” waiting for me in the lounge.

When I went in I saw Ayesha and an oriental girl who was staggeringly beautiful, with the classic face that could only be described as the definitive “Oriental Flower”: a rosebud mouth, high cheekbones, almond eyes. She and Ayesha were sitting

on the sofa comparing things on their smartphones. I assumed it was one of Ayesha's friends although she seemed a bit older.

Ayesha looked up and said, 'Hi, Dad.' She too had a strange expression on her oval face.

'Hi, Ashi. Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?'

Ayesha cleared her throat. 'Actually, this is, ah, Dan's friend, Mimi.'

Mimi had stood up as the introductions were being made; she was short and slim. She held up her hands in supplication and bowed. 'Good afternoon, Mr Sheikh. I am thoo happy thoo see you.' She was dressed in sixties clothing, making me wonder if she could only afford second-hand clothes.

I bowed slightly in return and half held out my hand at the same time, unsure of what to do. I had steeled myself for the children to bring back white partners, perhaps even black ones, one of the few good things about Islam being the oneness of humankind, but *this* I had not expected.

'Good afternoon,' I said. 'I'm so happy to meet you too.' I knew I was looking at her as though she was some kind of a specimen under a microscope, my neck slightly craned forward and eyes narrowed, but I simply could not stop myself until I felt a discreet nudge from Ayesha who had sidled over to stand next to me; temporarily, even the horrors I had witnessed back in my wretched homeland had been blessedly pushed to the back of my mind.

I pulled myself together. 'Welcome to our home, Mimi. Um, where's Dan?'

'I think he bent to the bathroom.'

I nodded. 'So, are you on the same course...?' I waved a hand. 'Please sit down.'

She did so. 'Not quite. I am a pashion photographer.'

'I see,' I said slowly. I turned to Zara, who was looking grimly on, arms folded, but was at least being polite in front of Mimi. 'I think I need to go and lie down. I'm really tired.' I turned back to Mimi. 'It was really nice meeting you. I hope you won't think I'm being rude if I retire for a while?'

'No, of course not. I understand you've just come back from Pakistan. Must have been really pascinating. I'd love to hear about it. I've been to India but not Pakistan.'

I suddenly felt very old: at her age the furthest I'd been to was Brighton. Mentally, I took off my *topi* to Dan; he had really delivered. How to deal with Zara was

a challenge for later; *this* was good news as far as I was concerned, compared to his other news.

At the top of our designer-staircase, out of view of Mimi, I bumped into Ayesha, who had come upstairs looking for Dan whilst Mimi and I had been talking. I spread my hands and pulled an enquiring expression. She matched me like a mirror plus a huge grin on top.

‘Where is he?’ I whispered.

‘He’s in his room. He won’t tell me anything,’ she whispered back.

I walked across the landing and knocked on Dan’s door, waited for the assent and went in. Dan was grooming himself in front of the mirror. I had gathered over the years that he was what they called “metrosexual”. We exchanged greetings, and I looked around at the posters of famous fashion designers, mostly men, named Alexander McQueen, Versace, Yves Saint Laurent, as I waited for Dan to finish his grooming and turn around to face me. I now understood that the posters had not been further evidence of Dan’s gayness. I had heard of the latter two but the first was still a mystery; his death about a year ago had seemed to cause Dan genuine upset, even prompting him to trim his existing designer-stubble to matching beard and moustache for a while.

‘So, um, your *friend*?’

‘Mimi.’

‘Yes. What sort of a friend is she?’

‘My girlfriend.’

In a Muslim household the word was like a small nuclear explosion. I waited for the mushroom cloud to disperse. I wondered how Dan could say it so casually. I was relieved that my concerns about Dan’s sexuality had been allayed but was wondering about the repercussions.

‘But you’ve never mentioned anything before, never brought a friend back...’

‘I hadn’t met the right one before. Most girls are so insipid.’

I was impressed with the word “insipid”. ‘I see. So you have had... *friends* before?’

‘Nothing serious.’

‘So how serious is this?’

‘We’re not getting married tomorrow, if that’s what you’re asking.’

‘No, of course not, but...’ I stopped, knowing that I would get nothing more from Dan. It had always been my dream to pass on my knowledge of chatting up girls to my son, but it looked like Dan had more to teach *me* about chatting up girls than the other way round. Not to mention that my knowledge was mainly theoretical rather than practical. My son had already started to impress me, but now had gone up even further in my estimation.

I said, ‘Um, why is she wearing second-hand clothes?’

‘Dad! They’re not second-hand! They’re *vintage!*’

‘Ah,’ I said, after a brief pause, still only half understanding but deciding not to pursue it for the time being. Instead I said, ‘Well done, son.’

‘For what?’ asked Dan.

‘Um –’ I shrugged. ‘For everything. For being such a good boy. I’m proud of you.’

‘Oh, thanks, Dad.’

Unable to think of anything more to say, I turned and left the room.

Monday 27th December 2010

‘Don’t leave me, Dad, I don’t want to stay here on my own.’

‘But Dani, I can’t afford to take both of you, and plus she’s a girl. You’re a man, you can look after yourself, you’re almost eight years old. I’ll be back soon.’

‘No you won’t, Dad, you’ll forget me.’

‘I’ll never forget you, son, I’ll be back soon.’

‘Bye, Dad.’ Dani held out a small hand as he receded into the distance.

*

I awoke, my eyes squeezing out tears. I was not a sentimental man and had never cried in public; I wondered if my dreams were my body’s way of getting rid of pent-up tears that needed to be released. It had been the night of Boxing Day and there had been a documentary on TV, on the sixth anniversary of the Indian Tsunami. It had included the story of the mother who had had to decide which child to let go, unable to hold on to both of them in the torrent. She had relinquished the older one.

I went over to Dan’s room to make sure he was there, the creaking of the floorboards sounding loud in the silence of the night. Sure enough, he was. Thank God the children were home for Christmas. I resisted the temptation to go over and shake him gently, to make sure he really was there and breathing, the way I had used to do

when he was a child; Dan would not be amused to be awoken. I returned to my bed and lay, staring up into the darkness. Zara murmured and turned in her sleep.

The dream made me think about my father, who had emigrated just a few days after my birth. And it had then been six long years before I was to see him again. My father had arrived penniless and worked double-shifts, before finally being able to call over his wife and children. And in all that time, as far as I knew, he had never got up to any shenanigans; or at least he hadn't married a white woman and started a whole new family, abandoning his old one, like that bastard in *East is East*. And as thanks for all this, half his children no longer spoke to him, and the other half, including me, barely tolerated him. Whether the fact that he was almost impossible to deal with was relevant, I was not sure.

With my children away at university, and having to get used to not seeing them all the time, not being there for them should they fall over and hurt their knee, I had found myself hardening my heart. I wondered if this was the reason why my own father seemed so callous and unfeeling. I remembered what had happened once when my father had been ill, a few years ago, when his normally iron health had finally started to fail him. I had received a call to say that my father was unwell. I had come by after work, stopping on the way to pick up some chicken soup, his favourite. The journey to my father's house was now half an hour rather than the five minutes it had used to be, before we had moved house. I had heated up the soup and toasted some bread. My father kept some lodgers for company and for extra income, and I had tried to engage the downstairs one in conversation as I did so, but without success. I had brought the tray in and placed it in front of my father. But before he could eat, he had started to retch. I had rushed for a plastic bag. I had tried to put an arm around him, but he had looked at me with a puzzled look on his face and pushed me away.

But, could his disregard for his children, despite having worked for them all his life, be explained by that same hardening of the heart that I, on a smaller scale, was having to undergo? To spend *six years* without your wife and children; in a foreign land, in a foreign culture. I had once spent four months in the States, as a young man, and distinctly remembered feeling homesick after just three.

And my mother? I had only vague memories of her. Had she too had to harden her heart? Was that the real explanation for her coldness and distance? My siblings and I had had to be brought over in two batches, for financial reasons, which meant that two of us, at the age of ten and twelve, had had to be left behind with our grandparents, for

over two years. Was it merely a coincidence that they were the most bitter? Had my mother too had to harden her heart when she had left those two behind? Or was it simply because she was tired after raising seven children, me being the last?

Did all this help to explain, I wondered, why my family was so fragmented? My blood began to boil at my thoughts, without any need of the relentless Pakistani sun; indeed, boiled in the midst of the freezing English winter night, as I turned on my side and tried to get back to sleep, hopefully devoid of further nightmares.

Friday 31st December 2010

It was the morning of New Year's Eve and I was in the lounge. Ayesha came in, still in her purple pyjamas. I put down my book, a flush of paternal pleasure going through my body at the sight of her face which was a female version of my own; my son had gone after his mother. Ayesha was a welcome relief from the cancer in my brain which was showing signs of remission, a result of the impressive ability of the brain to forget painful things over time. She was also a welcome relief from my heavy reading: I had asked Catherine for some books to read and she had recommended *Empire* by Hardt and Negri. I was finding it hard going, but what it seemed to be saying was that the old forms of imperialism, such as colonialism, had been replaced by more subtle versions, using economics, "soft power" and cultural imperialism. Ayesha had said that I had been a bit quiet since returning from Pakistan, so I made a pro-active effort to be cheerful.

'Good morning, Ashi!'

'Good morning, Dad.'

'You know, we haven't really talked about uni. Have you made friends? Tell me about the *wild parties*. Have you any idea how lucky you are to have a dad like me who lets you go to wild parties?'

'There's no wild parties, Dad. All they do is drink.'

I opened my mouth to say "There's no harm in the odd glass of wine" but closed it again. I could hardly encourage my children to drink.

'But you don't have to drink. You can dance, have fun...'

'Whatever you say, Dad.'

I sighed. 'Okay, fine, tell me about your studies. I'm expecting a First, you know. You have to surpass your old dada.'

'Whatever, Dad.'

I sighed again and picked up my book; even Hardt and Negri were easier than having a conversation with your teenage children. Ayesha went off to the kitchen, her slippers padding on the wooden floor, and returned a few minutes later with her cereal, the bowl and spoon clinking.

‘Dad, can I ask you something?’

I looked up. *Please do. For God’s sake, ask me something, anything, talk to me, distract me from my nightmares, help keep this cancer in remission.*

‘Yes, of course.’

‘You’ve always said that uni was the best time of your life.’

‘That’s right.’

‘I’m not finding that.’

I put down my book and thought for a moment, formulating my response. ‘Actually, it’s not as simple as that. If I look back, I do agree that the first term, maybe even the first year, was not that great. It takes time to make friends, quite often you end up with the wrong ones because you’re desperate not to be left out. But trust me: it all gets sorted out in the end. It’s not like every day is a riot. It’s just that you’ll make the friends you’ll have for the rest of your life; you know I still meet up with my uni friends – some of them even used to play with you when you was a baby. And there’ll be great times you’ll look back on: parties, the “Brighton run”. Have you done the Brighton run yet?’ She shook her head. ‘You haven’t lived. But you’re right, if I think back there *were* a lot of boring times as well, a lot of stress with studies and so on. So it’s not quite as simple as that. Give it time.’

‘What’s the Brighton run?’

I laughed. ‘I’m not sure if I should tell you.’

‘Please, Dad.’

‘It’s when you’re bored, there’s nothing to do, it’s late at night and you suddenly decide to go to Brighton. You get there, everything’s closed, it’s butt-freezing cold, and you come back again.’

‘Sounds like a nightmare.’

‘So what do you guys do then, when you’re bored?’

She shrugged. Another pause.

‘And what about *b-friends*?’ I asked, smiling.

‘For God’s sake, Dad.’

I shook my head in puzzlement. In my day if I had even tried to talk about such matters I would have ended up in the chicken position – squatting, hands through the legs from behind and holding the ears to the point of suffocation – and here *I* was, giving my children all the freedom in the world, in talk and action, and they weren't interested.

But there *was* a less trivial side to it. 'I'm serious, Ashi, uni's the best place to find a partner.'

'I'm only eighteen.'

'I know, but you wouldn't believe how time flies. I meet so many girls at work, late twenties, even thirties. And they're all desperate: they just can't find someone.'

'So can I go for anyone?'

I paused. My own answer would have been "yes", but I had to be careful. I said slowly, 'Well, I personally don't think it matters but I suppose Mum and Nano would prefer a Muslim. It might make things a little easier. But just make sure he's a modern Muslim.'

'Why does Nano have to control *everything*?!'

'I know it's annoying, sweetheart, but unfortunately we all have to live in a network.'

'Yes, well.' Ayesha put down her finished cereal and flung herself into the corner of the sofa, put up her legs, and started to play with her iPhone.

I picked up my book but my eyes did not take in the words. I often wondered if there was something wrong with me – the fact that I actually wanted my children to have boyfriends and girlfriends, to have sex, to enjoy the incredible gift that was the body; whether there was some dark incestuous side to me, vicariously enjoyed. I didn't think so. Whatever else I might think of Muslims, from my experience there was no evidence to suggest that Muslim parents were any more incestuous than the average, although it certainly was true that I had heard many stories about uncles abusing their nieces, especially in Pakistan, and things being hushed up for the sake of family honour.

But it was more than just me as a father wanting my children to enjoy their lives. It seemed to me that one of the other reasons Muslims were so unsuccessful was that they were stuck at the sexual stage: you really needed to move beyond that if you wanted to get any work done. I sighed and tried to focus my eyes on the page; why was there never an easy answer to anything?

*

Later, as we sat in the lounge, Dan announced that he was going to a party. For once, even Ayesha stood up for herself and said that if Dan was going to a party so was she.

‘Over my dead body!’ said Zara.

Ayesha turned to me. ‘Dad, if Dan’s going, I’m going.’

I said to Zara, ‘Look, be reasonable. She lives away from home now anyway. If she wants to go to parties she can do it whenever she wants; we wouldn’t even know about it.’

‘That’s different. That’s your responsibility. If she does it here, it’s mine.’

‘I just feel that we should treat our children equally. If Dan can go, then she should be able to as well, don’t you think?’

‘Fine, stop Dani as well then.’

We heard the front door bang just as she finished her sentence: Dan was already gone.

Zara’s darkening face gave me the familiar sinking feeling and tummy ache of having to fight domestic battles I really did not want to fight, but I felt that in this case I was in the right. I turned to Ayesha and said that she could go, on the understanding that I would pick her up from the party when she was ready. I suggested 1am; she said the party would just be beginning and parried with 3am. I said, no way; she came back with 2am. We finally compromised on 1.30.

‘It’ll be late, Dad, you’ll be asleep. I’ll just get a cab.’

‘It’s fine. It’s not like I have to go to work.’

Normally, we would all sit in front of the TV watching the fireworks and celebrations, but Zara had now stalked off. I was left alone, my mind only half on the TV. I was thinking about the return to work on Tuesday, snow allowing, and my discussions with Catherine. My experiences in Pakistan had pushed aside all thoughts of shenanigans and even the events of the Christmas party were like a distant dream. I wondered once more whether to discuss my findings with Zara. But I knew it would just lead to a fight and things were already bad enough. Plus, to be fair, she had nothing to do with it, and to be fair even to Uncle, the cause of my cancer – Farina – was not even our employee.

I was exhausted and just wanted to go to sleep. But I still had Ayesha to pick up. I put on my phone alarm for 1.15; fortunately, Ayesha’s party was only in Acton.

As midnight struck and the fireworks started, I thought about the New Year’s Sales that we would be attending later that day and wondered how much of the goods

we returned with in triumph would have been made with the sweat of children. After the sales trip would be the second annual hell with my family in the evening; the *first* annual hell had been Christmas Day with my in-laws.

I also wondered if the child workers in Pakistan got a day off on New Year's Day, or whether they were even aware that a new year had started. One thing was for sure, this year for them would be the same as the year before, and the year before that, and the year before that ... their very own hellish version of Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence.

Was there anything I could do to make a difference? To excise this cancer from my brain, once and for all? I looked forward to my chat with Catherine on Tuesday to see if we could thrash out some ideas, before tackling Uncle about it.

Part 3: The Carpet Mafia

Wednesday 2nd March 2011

It was two months later and I was in my office, on the phone, early morning.

‘The bosses are not being happy, sir,’ said Sharif, in his high-pitched voice.

‘What?’

‘The bosses are not being happy.’

‘What bosses?’

‘The other bosses, sir, of the other factories.’

‘About what?’

‘About our changes.’

‘What’s it got to do with them?’

‘They are saying we are distorting the market, sir. They are saying that all their workers are asking for the same. They say we must be going back.’

I was talking to Sharif on the phone. I had just got into work; in Sheikhpura it would be about 2pm. Outside, it was cold and gloomy; inside, it was still a bit chilly, as I had come in extra early and the heating had only just come on. The office had that early morning yellow glow; I had never quite worked out whether that was just because the senses were still half asleep, or because the sight adjusted itself over the day. It was quiet so that Sharif’s voice sounded in my ear as though it was in the next room rather than eight thousand miles away. I marvelled at the pace of technology, remembering when my parents had used to phone Pakistan in the early days and would have to close the door and shout at the top of their lungs.

‘When you say “bosses”, who exactly?’

‘The carpet mafia, sir.’

The word “mafia” would normally have made me shiver but combined with the word “carpet”, I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or be afraid. ‘Sharif, I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Sharif remained silent. After waiting a few moments, and realising that he was not going to expand, I said, trying hard not to shout, ‘Sharif, can you tell me something about these people?!’

‘They are the carpet mafia, sir. *The Pakistan Carpet Manufacturers and Exporters Association*. They are controlling everything around here, making sure the workers stay under control.’

‘How do they do that?’

‘They are capable of anything, sir.’

I began to realise that perhaps laughter was not the appropriate response. ‘Give me some examples.’

There was a short pause and a small intake of breath and I could imagine Sharif shrugging. ‘Anything, sir: threats, beatings, kidnappings, even shootings. Anything is possible. They even killed a twelve-year-old boy once, a child protester, as he was riding his bike. Not far from here, in fact. Iqbal Masih, his name was.’

I took some deep breaths. ‘I’m a British Citizen. If they threaten me or my workers I’ll report them to the authorities.’ (*Oh, so now you’re a British Citizen?*) The name Iqbal Masih rang a vague bell in my mind from some of the research I had done, but that case had been fifteen years ago, if I recalled correctly, and I had hoped that things had improved since then.

There was no reply from Sharif.

‘I don’t suppose there’s any point in telling the police?’

Sharif laughed. ‘The police are working for them.’

This did not come as a surprise to me. ‘Why didn’t you tell me about this before?’

‘I did tell you, sir.’

I was astounded. I sat abruptly forward, my momentum almost making my wheeled chair slide away from me. ‘When?’

‘Sir, I told you if you tried to change things, there would be trouble.’

I stood up and began to pace. I did indeed now vaguely recall something along those lines when I had rung Sharif, after finally putting my foot down with Uncle and saying that changes needed to be made: at the very least to obey Pakistani law of no children under fifteen and a new formula using the Pakistani minimum wage as its basis; I had threatened to tell all the members of staff unless Uncle agreed. My only exception had been that children who had no families should be allowed to continue; I was thinking in particular of Javed.

‘I didn’t realise ... I thought you meant ... I didn’t realise you were talking about some fucking mafia!’

‘I thought you understood, sir. Everybody is knowing about these people.’

You mean, all Pakistanis know about them. I’m not a fucking Pakistani. (Oh, so now you’re not a Pakistani? Since coming back from there, I thought you had decided you were, after all?)

‘Does Mr Chaudhary know about them?’

‘He always allowed me to handle things here, sir. I believe he was new to the carpet business when he started; it was rice before, was it not?’

I took more deep breaths. ‘So what are you saying?’

‘They say we must be going back,’ repeated Sharif simply.

I needed time to think. ‘I’ll call you back. And don’t tell anyone else about this just yet. Especially not Mr Chaudhary, he’s had a heart-attack and I don’t want to upset him.’

‘Yes, sir.’

I put down the phone. I still had my coat on because of the cold but the office was now warming up. I took off my coat, went over to hang it up on the door hook, returned and sat back down, staring at the black leather rest on my desk. *What the fuck?!* Despite what I had just said to Sharif, I thought about phoning Uncle myself; I was an IT expert, a manager, how the hell was I supposed to know how to deal with the fucking mafia! But then I realised that there were two problems with that. One, Uncle was recuperating from a heart-attack. Two, not entirely unconnected, Uncle would go berserk if he found out that I had got his business involved with the mafia, with unthinkable consequences for my family life and my career; it suddenly occurred to me that I might well have to get a reference from Uncle if and when I went to my next job. I saw Catherine come in and wondered if I could talk to her about it but decided it would be wiser not to for the time being. I thought about phoning Zara but dismissed that idea also.

Catherine came in for her morning check-in with *that* smile on her face, the smile I had told her to be careful of, the smile that would reveal to the whole staff what we were up to. When she saw the worried look on my face, the smile disappeared of its own accord.

‘Is everything all right? It’s not –’ She lowered her voice, even though there was no one else around. ‘It’s not us, is it?’

‘No, no, everything’s fine, I’ve just got a few things on my mind.’

She nodded and went off, still looking a bit unsure; the pace of her walk seemed to have slowed down somewhat since *that* Tuesday, or was that just my imagination? I got up and went to the window, feeling as though I had just been hit by my own mini-tsunami; all weekend the events in Japan had unfolded on TV and I had watched horrified, now with some personal interest because of Mimi, although she had reportedly said that her family in Tokyo was not affected. Perhaps if I just ignored the problem it would go away. I knew, at the back of my mind, problems never went away: if I had learnt one thing in my forty-five years, I had learnt *that*, but right now my mind was in a daze and I simply could not think. I went back to my desk and opened up my emails, my word documents and excel spreadsheets, suddenly finding them endlessly fascinating, wondering why on earth I had ever found them boring, why on earth I would sometimes long for excitement, the sort of excitement that had been engendered by the phone call; the sort of excitement that had turned my kissing-affair with Catherine into something more than that, which still made me sweat at the thought of people finding out. More staff came in, coincidentally together, talking and clutching steaming coffees, and I looked up to see Catherine waving to them.

Thoughts of Catherine were a welcome diversion, reminding me, with a smile despite everything, of the day our kissing-affair had turned into something more substantial.

Tuesday 4th January 2011

It had started two months earlier, the first day back at work in the new year, the Tuesday. Most people had managed to struggle in and I had already told everybody to leave early, around 3pm, because of the snow. And now, everybody had indeed left and only Catherine and I remained. She rushed in.

‘So, how was your trip?’

I gave her a brief summary, but leaving out my most traumatic experiences; the cancer was now in remission and I feared that if I talked about it, rather than helping it to go away, it would return with renewed malignancy. ‘Before I talk to Mr Chaudhary, the question is this: what would be the bare minimum we would be happy with?’ I asked. ‘I mean, imagine you’re setting up your own ethical trading company, what would you do?’

‘The bare minimum is simple: we should obey the law, no children under fifteen and minimum wage. Ideally, it would be nice if there was a little school for the children to go to.’

I thought about Uncle; strangely enough, even after twenty years of being married into the family, the man was a mystery to me. But I knew enough, including from our brief conversation about this issue on Christmas Day, to say, ‘The school’s not going to happen. As for the children, I’m pretty sure he’ll just say that as far as he’s concerned he’s doing the families a favour. He can just as easily get other workers – they’re lining up. He’s right in a way, and then there’s the whole cottage industry to fall back on, which is *completely* unregulated; even worse than the factories, I’ve been told. Basically we employ families. The very young children are a small proportion of the workforce, so I don’t think he’ll actually object to stopping them from working. I think he’ll be more resistant to increasing the wages generally, that it’ll make us completely uncompetitive. Which would be true, really: I’ve done some quick calculations. You would think that if you’re just paying a pound a day, you could easily double it and still make money but it’s not so easy. Bear with me, you probably know more about this sort of thing than I do, but a medium-sized handmade rug takes one person about a year to make. So 52 weeks * 6 days a week * 1 pound a day = £312. If we double the pay the labour cost becomes £624 pounds. Add in all the other costs: import duty, delivery, storage, our wages here etc. We normally try and sell such a rug for under a thousand. So you can see it’s not quite so easy.’

‘I know, but that’s what I was saying about the figures not adding up.’

‘So what do we do? Increase our prices?’

‘I’m not sure,’ she said slowly, revealing that despite her acumen she still had some way to go before she could set up on her own.

I said, ‘Come on, Catherine, imagine you’re the MD now, what would you do?’

‘I would tell Mr Chaudhary to be less greedy and take less profit.’ The words clearly came out before she could control them, her thorns surfacing again. She opened her mouth as though to apologise but then closed it again. She shrugged as if to say “You asked me.”

I nodded as though to reply “Yes, I did.”

‘Plus we could easily increase our prices,’ continued Catherine, more confidently. ‘Right now, we’re not just a little bit cheaper than our competitors, we’re a lot cheaper. I’m sorry, Imran, I don’t have all the answers. That’s the whole point.’

That's why I'm a little bit upset. The reason I joined this company was to learn these things from Mr Chaudhary. I specifically asked this question and he assured me on this point. I wanted to study the business model so that I could apply it to my own start-up; I was puzzled as to how they sold these things for such low prices without using child labour.'

I held up a hand to calm her down. 'Don't worry, you're not as upset as I am. I hate working for my in-laws but they roped me into it somehow, and now I find I'm living off the sweat of children.'

'How did they rope you in?'

I shrugged and looked away briefly. 'I really shouldn't involve you in my personal family affairs but basically I'd paid off my mortgage; but my wife forced me to buy this expensive new house we don't need. Said our old house was embarrassing compared to her family's. I took on this huge mortgage just before the crash.'

'How did she force you?'

I shrugged. 'To be fair, I suppose I wanted it as well.' I took the opportunity to impress her with my new reading: 'That's the way capitalism works, isn't it?'

She ignored my rhetorical question. '*Aap biwi ke saath kush nehin hain, hanna?* You're not happy with your wife, are you?'

'Why do you say that?'

She shrugged. 'You never talk about her. You never seem to be rushing off to her, or talk about buying presents for her or flowers. You're not rushing off to her right now.'

'I bought her flowers a few months ago,' I said defensively.

She smiled apologetically. 'I'm sorry, maybe it's none of my business.'

'We had an arranged marriage, you know,' I said, still defensive. 'We've been married a long time.' *Why was I defending myself against an employee? But then, I was an employee myself, wasn't I?*

Light snow had started to fall outside but Catherine seemed to show no signs of panic about getting back home either. She went and stood at the window, hands and forehead pressed against the pane, one knee bent and one foot on its toes, in that typically feminine posture; her breath frosted the pane. 'This is so romantic. I so wish I had a boyfriend; that's all I want, right now.'

‘But why is it so hard?’ I said, repeating the words I had already said to her several times before during some of our conversations. ‘You’re beautiful, you’re intelligent, you’re working...’

‘I’m not beautiful. But anyway, you wouldn’t believe how hard it is. Sometimes I think arranged marriages are a brilliant idea.’

I decided not to get into an argument about whether she was beautiful. ‘Trust me they’re not. But what about at uni?’

She said wistfully, ‘Uni just isn’t the same when you’re doing a PhD, as the first time round.’

There was silence for a while, save only for the hum of the computer.

‘How was your Christmas?’ I asked, to change the subject, looking at her as she stood by the window. She was wearing a black and white polka-dot *shalwar-kameez* today, the *kameez* pulled tight by the swell of her hips. She had small breasts and a big bum and I knew from overhead comments that she herself was not happy with her figure, but to me it seemed a classic case of media-induced negative self-image no matter how attractive a woman was. I shifted my gaze beyond her to Chiswick Common, where I could see a black dog bounding about; I had to admit, Chiswick wasn’t a bad place to work, with Gunnesbury Park just down the road, and very convenient. In an emergency I could almost walk home.

‘It was fine. Got a lot of work done on my PhD, what with everybody else away.’

I waited for her to elaborate but when she did not I didn’t push it. I considered asking her if she had seen her mother for Christmas, whether there really was some news of her father, but decided against it; why stir up a mad mother’s nest if you didn’t have to? ‘So what are you working on at the moment?’

‘Just reading. Making notes. Learning how Western countries foment trouble abroad for security at home.’

‘How does that benefit them?’

‘Lots of reasons: divide and conquer; to keep them poor so they can use their cheap labour; sell them arms. The world is run by a few powerful people, and they use whatever they can – religion, nationalism, whatever – to maintain the status quo. Governments and international institutions which are meant to be for our benefit are really just a cover for these few.’ She was obviously quoting one of her notes.

This was all so depressing. To change the subject I said, ‘They have special music in Pakistan for occasions like this.’

She turned. ‘Really?’

‘I mean, not like this, not snow, though they do have snow up north of course. I mean for their equivalent: the monsoon season.’ I was suddenly struck by an idea. ‘I’ll show you.’ I opened up YouTube, wonderful YouTube, and searched for the song: *Aye Mausam Rangeeley Suhaney* (The colourful, beautiful season has come). I selected the version with the young woman dancing in the woods beside the stream. As the haunting music filled the room I said, ‘This was my mother’s favourite song.’

‘Was?’

‘She’s dead now.’

‘Ah.’

I tried to translate the song. ‘It means, “When the colourful season comes, I am unhappy without you, take the day off and come to me”.’ But then I remembered that she understood Urdu better than me.

She smiled and nodded and said, ‘I know.’

I suddenly realised that actually *I* did not understand all the words. ‘What does this bit mean?’

She came over, stood next to me, listened carefully with head cocked, looked around for a chair but then sat down casually on my lap as though it was only because she could not be bothered to go and fetch the chair from the other side of the table; she rewound a few seconds, and said, ‘It means “When the stream makes its sound my heart longs for you.”’ Faint traces of her medium-sweet perfume lingered from the morning.

So far, neither of us had mentioned the kiss of the Christmas party, but with her action it was as though we were resuming where we had left off. I could feel every contour of her soft body through her *shalwar-kameez*, which was what I loved about this mode of dress. The heat of her body was like a radiator. She started to do some seated dancing, putting her hands in the air and swaying. This meant that she was rubbing herself against me; whether this was intentional or not, I wasn’t sure. She had caught me in an uncomfortable position but I dared not move in case she got up; fortunately, she was not too heavy. I wondered if the ecstasy I was feeling was being heightened by the contrast with the misery of my recent experiences, and my continuing drought with my wife which had now become a battle of pride to see who would give in first. We had had similar battles in the past but this one had broken all records. I

wondered if all this was at least part of the reason why I was not feeling the reservation I had experienced towards the end of my last encounter with Catherine.

‘When did your mother die?’ she asked.

‘I was very young.’

‘Do you miss her?’

‘I suppose. What about you? Do you miss your dad?’

She stopped dancing abruptly, put her hands down and nodded emphatically, without any of the ambiguity of my own response.

‘You know, all my married life my wife and in-laws have tried to look down on me because I’m not rich, because I wasn’t born in the right place, and all along this was how they were making their money. Mr Chaudhary was in the rice business before; I don’t know if you can use child labour in the rice business but I do know that there was something dodgy going on there as well. I – ’

Catherine had shifted slightly, halting my words, and now sat sideways to me, but thankfully (?) showing no signs of getting up; indeed she put an arm lightly around my shoulders to balance herself.

I had lost my train of thought. There was a pause. I looked at my watch. ‘We’d better get going.’

This time I was convinced there was a look of disappointment on her face. She said, ‘Can we just listen once more? It’s a lovely song.’

‘Sure. Of course.’

She clicked the button and then, before I knew it, she had twisted round even further, her *shalwar-kameez* rustling, almost strangling herself on her *dupatta*, and we were playing Pakistani hockey again, and for the first time we were completely sober. We were both trembling. When the song came to an end about three minutes later (perfect length for a lap dance) I reached out with my left hand, since my right was now deliciously burning just above her bottom, and clicked the replay button.

Once again, my free hand wandered to her thigh, as though it had a will of its own. And this time, to my delight and horror, she made no objection, but because of her words at the Christmas party I was not entirely surprised. My heart thudding faster than when I had done my one and only bungee jump, my hand started to stroke the soft fabric which did little to obstruct what was beneath. As I stroked I expected at any moment the slap that I surely deserved, not quite able to believe that what I thought was about to happen, really would happen.

But the slap never came.

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I had always wondered what it would be like to have sex with another woman, different to my wife. True, I had been to prostitutes before but that was different; besides, I had never actually had sex with any of them. Initially this had been for fear of the *jahanum* fire that my parents had instilled in me from an early age, and on the grounds that hand-jobs and blow-jobs were not “real” sex, having come up with this excuse well before a certain American president. Later, when that fear had evaporated, fear of disease and mere habit had meant that I had continued with the practice. In any case, I went to prostitutes not for sex but for the excitement: pre-marriage, simply to satisfy the overwhelming and irresistible compulsion to spend time in the presence of a strange, naked woman; post-marriage, after the honeymoon period, to make up for the rationed sex with my wife. That was why the arrival of lap dancing clubs, an import from the Great Satan, had been such a godsend – or should that be devil-send?

I trembled as I undressed Catherine, but despite my excitement had the presence of mind to say, just to check the parameters and give her a final chance to change her mind, ‘But you know I’m married, right? You want this just as much I do, don’t you, I’m not forcing you? Maybe just a bit of fun until you find someone of your own age?’ She nodded breathlessly. I also had the presence of mind to say, ‘Condom?’ She nodded, covered herself up, ran to her desk, scabbled about in her handbag and returned with a rather crumpled looking small red packet with the word “Featherlite” on it. I had a box of them at home which now lasted me months or years instead of days or weeks.

And then, for the next hour there were only vague and half-formed impressions, dimly seen through a mist, of swirling shapes and figures, of warmth and wetness, of probing tongues, of thrusting hips, of arching backs, of clutching hair, of moans and sounds of ecstasy, of thudding hearts.

‘Oh, Imran, it’s been two years!’

‘*Two years?!?*’ I said, astounded. ‘Why? You’re always telling me about these fancy young men you meet in clubs.’

‘I only dance with them; I don’t take them home and fuck them. I’m not a slut you know.’

‘Of course not. I didn’t mean it like that. I...’ But I could say no more as she reached for me hungrily. I suddenly had another thought: *what was the expiry date on*

these things? I scabbled around for the discarded packet, managed to find it, looked at it through the corner of my eye, and to my relief noted that it was dated 2013. I cast it aside again.

And then, inevitably, an hour later, for seconds, she gave me the lap dance of my life, with no restrictions on touching and no time limits. But, because it *was* seconds (when had I last had seconds within the hour?!) partially drained, with one corner of my mind I was able to wonder how on earth I would look my wife in the eye when I got home and what on earth I was getting myself into. I had very occasionally, despite my best efforts to control my thoughts, fantasised about this but had never seriously expected it to happen.

In between courses, as we had lain on the floor, the smell of the carpet and show-rug in our nostrils, she had said, ‘Oh, Imran, we’d make such a good team. Why don’t we start our own ethical import/export company?’ ‘We’ll see,’ I had said.

Afterwards, passion spent, I said, ‘Oh Catherine, what have we done?’

‘What we’ve been aching to do for a long time.’

‘Really? You’ve been aching too?’

She nodded.

‘But, Catherine, I’m married. I’ve never slept with another woman before.’

She sat up in amazement, covering her chest with her crumpled up *kameez*, turned on her side to me, propping herself up with one arm. ‘How come?’

I shrugged and turned my face towards her. ‘I got married when I was twenty-four, and I’ve been married since.’

‘And before that? At uni?’

I gave an embarrassed laugh. ‘I didn’t really know how to talk to girls, you know? Had a few friends, a few slow dances, but could never quite *convert!* Even spent the *night* with a girl once and still couldn’t convert! How is that possible?’

She laughed and lay back down. ‘It happens. Never mind. That’s probably not quite as rare as you might think.’

‘What about you? How many boyfriends have you had? Or shouldn’t I ask?’

‘I don’t mind. I don’t know really: depends on what you mean by a boyfriend. I didn’t have much luck at uni either. I mean, obviously I had the usual few one-night-stands but nothing serious, you know, which was what I really wanted. And then, in my final year, I was desperate I would leave without having had a serious relationship so I went with my dissertation supervisor who said he was crazy about me; I was flattered.

But that fizzled out after I graduated; I think he left a few years later as well. And then there was this guy two years ago. We were together for about two and a half years. We met at work. The sex was great but when I started talking about settling down he said no, but wouldn't give a reason. Eventually, he confessed that he was married with three young children and was never going to leave them. Mind you, I did have a suspicion by then.'

'What was he?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean: South-Asian, white...?'

'Oh. South-Asian.'

'And the other guy?'

'South-Asian too.'

'Have you never thought about going for an English guy? White English, I mean?'

'Not really.'

'How come?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. I don't have anything against them. I just don't fancy them.'

'I see.'

There was a pause. I said cautiously, experimentally, 'Maybe we shouldn't do this again?' Half of me hoped she would agree, the other half dreaded it.

There was no reply; we were now lying on our backs, talking to the ceiling, so I turned my face to see that she was staring into space, a relaxed and faraway smile on her face. I wasn't even sure she had heard.

I looked at my watch. 'We really should get going.'

She turned, wrapped her arm and leg tight around me and said, 'No.'

I felt a mixture of fear and love, the rare feeling of being wanted. 'But I have to.'

She relented. 'Okay, but can we just cuddle for five minutes?'

'Okay.' I looked at my watch again: 4.36. Her body, I noted, was firmer than Zara's, perhaps from all the boxing training, but not a jot less delightful for that. Her feet, on the other hand, were warmer than my wife's: was that the exercise again?

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By the time we left the office – half an hour, rather than five minutes, of cuddling later – it was already dark; the extra time was as much, if not more, my desire as hers. Luckily

the snow had stopped and, when we got to the station, the trains were running. This time we waited together whilst listening out for a train, in the tiled hall itself, leaning against the rounded wall, oblivious of the blur of hurrying fellow commuters. I had my back against the wall and she leant against me, with that relaxed, faraway half-smile and look of the girl who has recently had sex and thinks she is in love; not that I was an expert in these things but I had seen enough films and read enough novels to recognise the look. I felt a ridiculous and inordinate sense of pride and happiness at being the cause of it; I had *never* seen that look on my wife's face, not even in the early days.

I now registered every mark and blemish, including a few tiny freckles, on her face. I noticed a small scar just above her right eyebrow; her body had been without blemish. I too smiled at some of the intimate images that flashed through my mind at this thought.

‘What's that?’ I asked, pointing.

‘What?’ she asked, touching it. ‘Oh that. I fell in the playground once. Why? Does it look horrible?’

I laughed. ‘*Tch!* Of course not.’

She said, her head tilted to one side, ‘I'm not going to make any demands on you, darling, but will you promise me just one thing?’

Her use of the word “darling” sent another thrill of happiness through me. My wife had used to call me “*jaan*”, life, in the early days, and I had used to call her “*shoni*”, beautiful, but I couldn't remember when we had both stopped using those endearments.

‘What?’

‘That you won't have sex with your wife on the same day that we do.’

‘I wouldn't worry about that, if I were you.’ I blurted it out before I could control myself.

‘What do you mean?’

I hesitated, regretting my indiscretion, but she was waiting for an explanation. I shrugged. ‘We don't have sex very often.’

A strange look came briefly over her face and I genuinely regretted my outburst. It started out as a look of comprehension, as though this explained a few things to her, but then turned into something else: into one of triumph and, I had to admit, a touch of cunning quickly covered up, reminding me of something I had once read about how some young women saw it as a challenge to take husbands from their wives. But right

now, I was in no mood or position to be judgemental, and would not exactly have had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, from my wife.

We were both saved from embarrassment by the sound of an approaching train, and I made a leaving gesture. She allowed me to go, but insisted on a quick but lingering kiss, the tips of our tongues flickering against each other's; her lips too were firmer than Zara's, thin as opposed to Zara's full ones.

Half an hour later, walking home from Ealing Broadway Station, my phone beeped. It was a text from Catherine: *Missing you already my darling. Love you. Xx.* I felt a heady mixture of fear and excitement, and again the stab of pleasure that I was being thought of. I texted back: *Me too but maybe we should not text, too dangerous?* Her reply came back a few seconds later: *Ok.*

My wife never checked my phone, as far as I knew, but I deleted all three messages, sent and received. I looked down at myself for any tell-tale signs, stray hair... I would have looked into a car mirror for any signs on my face but it was too dark to see anything in any case; luckily Catherine had not been wearing lipstick. Of course, I had done all this in the bathroom, before leaving the office, but it was the Lady Macbeth syndrome: guilt left its invisible but indelible mark.

Guilty *conscience*, I corrected myself; I was surprised to note that I did not feel guilt or remorse, rather a sense of triumph, of revenge for all the sex-rationing; and in particular for our wedding night when I had been unable to perform due to nervousness and lack of experience, and she had told her aunt which had been the equivalent of telling the whole Ahmadiyya community, no matter that I had more than made up a few days later, resulting in Dan. And not to mention my suspicion that my wife had not been a virgin when we had got married, as was implicitly understood and expected in our wonderful culture; and which was in total contrast to her supposedly pious lifestyle and attitudes.

Saturday 15th January 2011

The second weekend after starting back at work in the New Year, after my chat (and some other things) with Catherine, I visited my in-laws. I had waited for the children to return to university knowing that there was a good chance that arguments with my wife would follow; the only good thing about the children being away was that they were now spared the trauma of watching their parents argue. I honked my horn, waited for one of the twins to open the wrought iron, gold-embossed gates and drew up my car into

the driveway of the large detached house. The gates were not strictly necessary, even though the house was now worth 1.5 million pounds as Zara did not tire of telling me. I parked behind the Mercedes and the BMW. I followed the silent twin, not sure, even after twenty years, which one it was; as I did so I looked around the edges of the front garden which had been cleared and weeded for the winter but remembered that Aunty kept a beautiful and colourful flower-bed there in the summer. Gardening and cooking were her saving graces, two positive things she had passed on to her daughter to balance the negative. I was led into the rear-lounge where Uncle sat watching MTA, the very own satellite channel of the Ahmadiyya community, who were never loath to run down science and technology but were no slouches at using it when it suited their purpose. To be fair, thank God, the channel did actually have some useful programs nowadays, and Uncle was watching the news, in Urdu, of the fall of the Tunisian government, as I came in. As always, Uncle was dressed in a suit and tie, even though he was at home and relaxing.

‘You lied to me about the child labour,’ I said, as soon as we were alone and I was seated, and without wasting time on pleasantries.

Uncle’s expression changed slightly; he was not used to this tone of voice from me.

Uncle had the infuriating habit of taking an age to answer any question. He switched off the TV and in his reedy voice said, ‘In what way?’

Shaking with anger, which I half knew was not really about this issue, but merely an excuse to vent the frustration of the past twenty years, I described my experiences in Pakistan; the anger and frustration were because I still often thought that if only my in-laws had let my wife go, allowed her to become a wife instead of remaining primarily a daughter, we might possibly have been able to find some common ground.

‘Yes,’ said Uncle slowly. ‘Sharif told me what happened. I...’

I interrupted, ‘Can you stop talking to Sharif behind my back! Either you’re running the company or I am. Please go through me and tell him to do the same.’

Uncle shrugged. ‘I don’t have a problem with that. Why did you not talk to me about this last time?’ He was referring to Christmas Day.

‘I wanted to think things through and I didn’t want to ruin the day with the kids around.’

Uncle nodded. There was silence. When it became clear that he was not going to continue, I said, twisting my hand, ‘You were saying?’

‘I have nothing to add to what I told you earlier. Nobody can define what child labour is. We employ families. If the parents want their children to help them, who are we to say no? It is not my job to change the world. I have a business to run.’

‘So you are not going to do anything about this? You seriously expect me to sign these disclaimers?’

‘You don’t have to sign them. I will sign them; I am still capable of signing documents.’

‘And you expect me to look the other way?’

Uncle nodded.

‘And if I don’t?’

A cunning smile came over his face. ‘You are still my son-in-law. You are still married to my daughter. And if you want to remain married to her, you will do what is best for the family.’

The paper-thin veneer of Pakistani civility was off, but I was glad; *this* I could handle, *this* I could deal with. ‘Best for *your* family; not for mine.’

‘We are all one big happy family.’

‘Are we? My wife does not get anything out of this business. And all I get is a salary.’

‘Fine. How much do you want?’

I could not believe my ears. ‘Are you trying to bribe me?’

In all fairness, the expression on Uncle’s face implied that this wasn’t quite what he had meant. ‘No, I just mean how much do you want to feel part of the family?’ I noticed for the first time that his trimmed beard, which had been black and grey when we had first met, was now virtually all white.

I said, ‘Let’s leave that to one side for the time being. What do you mean when you say “If you want to remain married to her”?’

‘If you are going to go against the family, you cannot expect my daughter to take your side.’

‘She is not your daughter anymore; she is my wife.’

Uncle laughed, revealing the discoloured tooth that had apparently been knocked out during a basketball game in his youth and reinserted. ‘You are so naive.’

Strangely enough, the insult gave me a happy feeling; again, I was glad that things were finally coming out into the open. ‘Is that why you married her off to me? Because you thought you could easily control me? And that’s why you’re all so angry with me, why none of you barely talk to me, because it didn’t quite work out that way.’

‘You don’t talk to us either.’

I opened my mouth to say something that would imply that they had started it but realised that I would be getting into a childish tit-for-tat argument; besides, I couldn’t remember who *had* started it, if indeed anybody had. Instead, I gazed at this man, finding it hard to believe that for twenty years I had felt sorry for him. Aunty was revealed as the fat, foolish Pakistani woman she was, whilst in front of me sat the real child-exploiting monster: my own father-in-law, grandfather of my children.

‘What if I don’t want to remain married to her? Do you want a divorced daughter on your hands?’

Uncle’s face was a mask. ‘You will never see your children again.’

I laughed. ‘Like father, like daughter. That’s exactly what she used to say. Did you teach her to say it?’

Uncle did not reply.

I said, ‘The “children” are not children anymore. You wouldn’t be able to do that.’

‘Trust me: children will always take the mother’s side, no matter how old they are.’ There was a trace of bitterness in his voice which I knew was based on his personal experience and which almost made me feel sorry for him all over again.

There was a knock on the door and Aunty came in to ask if we wanted tea, her square, dark face with a hint of Nepalese in it, indicating that she was unsure of what was going on; apparently, she was indeed descended from Nepal. She was wearing one of her fancy *shalwar-kameez* suits that hung on her matronly figure like sackcloth, despite their expense. I held up a hand and said, ‘Aunty, please give us half an hour.’ There was a time when she would have taken the peremptory tone of my voice as rudeness and objected but for once she took the hint and left.

‘Look, if you’re so concerned about child labour, let’s talk about child labour. What is it exactly that’s bothering you?’ asked Uncle.

‘We shouldn’t be exploiting children.’

‘We are not exploiting them; we are giving them opportunities.’

‘Bollocks.’

Uncle seemed taken aback by the swearword but ignored it. ‘Okay, fine, when you say children, what do you mean exactly?’

‘What do *you* mean?’

‘I mean, what age is a child?’

I shrugged. ‘Well, if I had my way, it would be eighteen.’

‘So anybody under eighteen is a child?’

I nodded.

‘So a sixteen-year-old is a child?’

I nodded again, impatiently.

‘But in this country sixteen-year-olds – ’ Uncle leaned forward slightly and lowered his voice ‘*can have sex.*’ I could see that he was genuinely horrified and not just being foolish and old-fashioned. ‘Are you saying that it’s okay for children to have sex but not to work?’ He leant back again.

I had to admit that in this case, Western though I was, I had to agree with him; it had always puzzled me that you had to be eighteen to *watch* sex but only sixteen to *have* it. ‘No of course not; I agree with you about that.’

‘Oh you agree with me about that. Thank God you agree on something with us backward Pakistanis. What about soldiers?’

‘What about them?’

‘You only have to be sixteen to join the army.’

‘Really?’ I had thought it was seventeen. ‘But they don’t actually fight, I’m sure.’

‘There was a case some years ago of a seventeen-year-old soldier who was killed.’

I remembered the case. ‘Okay, fine. I take your point. Let’s say sixteen then.’

‘But children here, younger than that, can work.’

‘Can they?’ I was floundering. I was used to floundering with Catherine, but had never expected to do so with Uncle. But then I thought, Yes of course they can: paper rounds, baby-sitting... I myself had had a paper-round for a while and remembered the thrill of having my own spending money and how proud I had been to give some of it to my father to “help with household expenses”. ‘Yes, okay, I know what you mean, but I’m sure there are rules.’

‘In this country, thirteen-year-olds can work. And any age can work in sport or entertainment.’

‘But that’s different,’ I said, knowing even as I said it that I wasn’t convinced about that: how it could affect young children to be rich or famous at a young age. Michael Jackson was only one example.

‘Is it? You mean because they become rich and famous?’ Uncle was echoing my thoughts.

‘But I’m sure there are rules,’ I persisted, stubbornly. ‘I’m sure young children here cannot do heavy, physical work.’

‘So the only rules that matter are the rules here. If *Englaand* says so, it *must* be all right. Pakistani rules don’t matter, of course.’

‘But you don’t follow those rules,’ I said, with something to finally clutch on to.

‘What rules?’

‘The rules. The government rules; there are laws against this sort of thing.’

‘I’m not talking about the government rules. I’m talking about Pakistani rules. Pakistani traditions and culture.’

‘People just use traditions to suit their purpose.’

‘And you don’t? You are always ranting against the Pakistani government, and now you suddenly want me to follow their rules?’

I had no response to that.

‘And besides, carpet weaving is *not* heavy work. And it requires no electricity. It is a godsend for these children and their families. Did you see the brick kilns while you were there? The heat and the dust and the back-breaking labour? Would you prefer the children to be working there? Those are full of bonded families. And does the West care about those? No; because that is an internal industry.’ Uncle shook his head. ‘Only God knows where these children would be without the carpet industry, and without people in the West to buy the carpets. It is mainly an export-driven industry. It is one of Pakistan’s leading exports, earning valuable foreign reserves, and it is the second largest cottage industry. Pakistan would suffer badly if the carpet industry was hurt. Many companies just use the cottage industry to get past the regulations but that means that the families have to buy their own looms, and believe it or not the families often treat their children worse than employers do. We treat them well *and* we provide them with looms.’

‘But they say it is bad for the eyesight.’

‘So is reading.’

‘And the posture.’

‘So is studying.’

Uncle seemed to have an answer for everything. From the kitchen came sounds and smells which indicated that Aunty was preparing something for us. Pakistani families might kill each other over trivial matters but they would always feed them first. I looked through the patio door at the huge garden, mostly brown and burgundy now, and at the radial tile centrepiece with its water feature.

‘And what about religion? What about Islam?’ continued Uncle, sensing victory.

I looked back at him, seeing in his face an animation I rarely saw. *There* was the trump card: religion. I was used to this but was genuinely confused in this case: ‘What has Islam got to do with child labour?’

‘It has everything to do with it. The Quran says clearly, children should help and support their parents, especially in their later years. “Support them in their old age as they supported you when you was a baby, and do not say even ‘boo’ to them.” Under certain circumstances, Islam *requires* children to work. When families send their children to *madrasahs*, they require no payment; merely that the children do some work to pay for their upkeep and instruction. Are you going to tell me that’s wrong as well?’

Yes! I wanted to shout. *That most of all.* But I did not want to go down the slippery slope of religion, where there was nothing to cling on to.

‘And what about the fifteen-year-olds who fought for the Holy Prophet, peace be on him, in the early battles? Are you saying that was wrong too?’ continued Uncle.

I sat silent under this tirade, not even bothering to say “But that was fourteen hundred years ago”. But Uncle had not finished with me yet. ‘Fine, let’s assume you do not agree with Pakistani traditions or even, God forbid, Islamic ones. It is possible, is it not, that your wonderful *Englaand’s* Industrial Revolution might not have happened without children?’

I sat speechless. *Where had Uncle learnt all this?* There were *no books* in the house.

‘But that was two hundred years ago. That’s the point I’m making: Charles Dickens was writing about this in the nineteenth century. Nothing changes in Pakistan, because of people like us continually exploiting it. First the whites did it to us, and now we’re doing it to ourselves. When will it end?’

‘But maybe we are going through our own industrial revolution,’ said Uncle. ‘Many people say that without children, the growth that Pakistan has seen would never have happened. If you stopped all child labour in Pakistan today, the country would

collapse. Even the children do not want it stopped. You of all people should understand that. You believe in children deciding for themselves, don't you?' He was clearly referring to the disagreement over Ayesha.

'Bollocks,' I said. 'No child wants to work.'

Uncle held up a finger and stood up. 'I will show you something.'

He left the room and returned a few minutes later with a bunch of keys; whilst the door had been open the sounds and smells from the kitchen had been intensified. He went to the display cabinet, which was full of religious books as well as decoration pieces and photographs, including of Dan and Ayesha as children. The top half was open shelves but the bottom half had closed doors. He opened the small lock on one of them and opened it a crack. I craned my neck to see what was inside it.

I had always thought it a private joke that maybe some Muslims read in secret, the way people in the West watched Internet pornography, but to my astonishment I saw *books*; books which were clearly not religious ones. I was reminded of *Fahrenheit 451*, a novel in which books were banned and people had to read in secret. I also now wondered if it had been my own arrogance and prejudice that had prevented me from recognising Uncle's abilities all these years, despite the evidence of his successful business. Uncle extracted a book and handed it over to me open on a page. 'I don't know about your Charlie Dickson fellow but you can read this.'

I read the page that Uncle had opened for me. It was a manifesto of sorts, by an International Meeting of Child Workers. Amongst the proposals, it said: "We are against the boycott of products made by children." It also mentioned that child workers' dignity and hard work should be appreciated. I read through the rest of the proposals. 'But it also talks about health and education.'

Uncle shrugged. 'That is not my problem. You think you are so clever, Imran, with all your reading. You think you are so Western. You think we Pakistanis know nothing. These Westerners are such hypocrites. On the one hand they go on about child labour, and at the same time it is their very own companies which are exploiting it. Have you not read in your fancy books how the IMF and the World Bank impose their *structural adjustment* programs' (this said with a sneer) 'which cause the very problems they then moralise about? If you are so clever, how is it that *you* are working for *me*?'

My self-doubts were accentuated by his words. I fought to defend myself. 'I didn't say I was clever. And the reason I am working for you is because your daughter

nagged me into buying a house we didn't need, and take on a huge mortgage just before the bloody crash.'

'*Tum chuah hoh, ya banda?*' asked Uncle, briefly reverting to Urdu. 'Are you a man or a mouse? And as far as the crash is concerned, who caused that? And is that going to stop your child labour or make it worse? Go and fight with Nike and Gap, not with me. I am just trying to make a living. Do you want to resign? I am strong enough to come back for a few years now, until Jami is experienced enough to take over.'

I was tempted to retort, in response to Uncle's first sentence, "Who are *you* to talk about being a man or a mouse?" but instead said, 'I *will* resign. And I will tell all your customers.'

'And your mortgage?'

'I will sell the house.'

'You will lose a lot of money.'

'I don't care. I will go back to where I was. And if your daughter moans, I will throw her out. And if the children moan, I will throw them out too. I have had enough of being controlled.'

'In this precious country of yours, it is not the *man* who throws the woman out, it is the *woman* who throws the man out.'

'Fine, *I'll* leave, and *you* can look after your daughter and your grandchildren, and pay the mortgage.'

There was silence for a while before I spoke again, my anger having subsided somewhat. 'Look, I'm not necessarily disagreeing with some of what you say, but the fact remains that you are lying.'

'Have you never told a small lie, especially when you felt it was for the best? And have you never wondered why none of our customers have ever checked? Do you seriously think they care as long as they have their bits of paper?' Uncle was confirming something that I recalled Catherine saying also.

And thinking of Catherine: not only had I told small lies before, I was *living* a lie, cheating on my wife, perhaps the biggest lie of all. But if anything I felt even less guilty now: if the whole world did whatever it wanted, perhaps it was time I started doing the same.

There was a short stand-off before I broke the silence, trying to be reasonable. 'Look, I may not be very good at starting and running my own business, but I *am* quite good at managing other people's. I've streamlined the London end; you've seen the

results already.’ My improvements to the company were on track to deliver efficiency savings of almost ten percent by the end of my first year. ‘Why don’t you let me have a go at the Pakistani end? For instance I found out about these new ergonomic looms whilst I was there, which are more suited to adults.’

‘They are very expensive.’

‘But much more productive. I think we would gain in the long term and it would mean the adults could earn enough to send their children to school.’

Uncle shrugged but looked vaguely interested. ‘Make a proposal.’ He reached into his pocket, pulled out his asthma inhaler and took one puff.

I waited for him to finish before continuing, ‘In the meantime it seems very unfair that you pay the children so much less than the adults. At the very least, if you’re going to use them, pay them the same.’

‘Why? The minimum wage here is different depending on age, isn’t it?’

Again, I had no response. I sighed. ‘I was thinking we could set up a little school, so at least there is some hope for the future. I spoke to some of the other factory owners there and even they all said that if there was what they call informal schooling, just one or two hours a day – basic reading and writing – they would cooperate.’

‘They are just saying that, and anyway is a school not a factory? What’s the difference? Here they use your mental labour, there they use your physical labour. You will only give them false hope; what use is education for them? Even here the government wants to reintroduce apprenticeships for fourteen-year-olds instead of school.’

‘Come on, you can’t be serious? Look, in a way I’m not necessarily against child labour as such, but it’s all about money surely. By being educated they can earn more money, live a more decent life. If we don’t educate them we are going to perpetuate this global imbalance which is no good for anybody: terrorism, mass migration, climate change...’ I was regurgitating some things that Catherine had told me. I still wasn’t sure how the climate change came into it but it sounded good. ‘And as far as the apprentices here are concerned, they would have a choice; it wouldn’t be forced on them. Shouldn’t our own Pakistani children at least have the choice? Otherwise, how will things ever change? We will perpetuate this forever. Look at India, and look at us.’

Uncle leant back and put his hands behind his head. He looked up at the ceiling revealing his cavernous nostrils. He said, ‘Let me tell you something about these people – your wonderful Pakistanis.’ I managed to restrain myself from mentioning that in the

early days my in-laws would often argue with me about being too “Western” and having forgotten my country and culture. ‘Do you think they will thank you? They’ll stab you in the back as soon as look at you. You want to start a school? Try it – the bureaucracy alone will kill you. But before you do that let me tell you a story.

‘Before we moved over to England, back in Pakistan, when we were in the rice business, there was one boy who used to work for us. My father took a shine to him. One of my father’s children, my brother I suppose – he died before I was even born – had died when he was very young from meningitis, though they didn’t know what it was at the time; I suppose this boy reminded my father of him. We, my parents I mean, took this boy in. He used to sleep in the house, became part of the household. Sometimes we would actually have to force him to go and visit his own family.

‘One day, burglars broke in, ransacked the place, beat up my father. We were all young then. Later, when I spoke to my father he said that he was just grateful that we got away lightly. He had two black eyes, a broken nose and three cracked ribs! What he meant was that he had been terrified they would rape his wife – my mother – or my sisters. It turned out that this boy had been on the inside. It happened on a night that we had a lot of cash in the house, which we were going to use to pay the workers the next day.’

Uncle went silent for a while. Then he leant forward and for once there was a hint of genuine friendliness and sympathy in his reedy voice when he spoke again. ‘Look, Imran, I understand how you feel, but trust me, we are small men. Big men run the world, and we just struggle along.’ I was reminded of Catherine’s comments. There was another pause. ‘By the way, why do you think schools have such long summer holidays?’

This, I had the answer to. ‘Yes, I know, the children used to help out on the farms, but that was two hundred years ago.’

‘Yes, well, I’m sure when Pakistani parents no longer need their children to help them I’m sure they’ll stop too. Do you think Pakistani parents love their children any less than Western ones?’

‘No, of course not.’

Uncle fetched another book from his shelf, looked for a page and handed it to me. There was an underlined paragraph:

Beneath a humanitarian facade, lurks a power that is prepared to go to any lengths to thwart the least action to prevent this vast flow of money from East to West.

Uncle said, ‘That is referring to your wonderful Western governments and institutions.’ Further down, in a passage that Uncle had *not* underlined, I also read:

Anyone trying to tackle child labour must be prepared to combat violence and even murder from vested interests.

But before I could reflect on this, Uncle said, ‘And by the way, don’t forget where the rug in your house came from.’

Astonishingly, I *had* forgotten this: my in-laws’ house-warming present to us had been to carpet the whole of the upstairs and also a beautiful Persian rug that occupied pride of place in our new lounge.

And this realisation triggered the thought that my hot and sweaty couplings with Catherine on the floor of the MD’s cubicle, which was covered by a showpiece rug, would have mixed our sweat with the sweat of small Pakistani children.

I left just as Aunty came in with a serving trolley containing the fruits of her labours, leaving her standing puzzled in the hallway.

Sunday 16th January 2011

It was the following afternoon. I was sitting in my den, reading.

Zara came in looking puzzled, her face still pinched and drawn from the cold. ‘Where’s the rug?’

I spoke without looking up: ‘It’s in the garage.’

‘Why?’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t like it.’

‘What do you mean, you don’t like it? You chose it yourself.’

‘We all chose it.’

‘Yes, but you had equal say. You seemed very happy with it.’

I remained silent.

She came and stood in front of me, in that confrontational stance that she had in these sort of situations, forcing me to finally look up. ‘Can you please tell me what’s going on? That’s a thousand pound rug. It’ll rot in the garage.’

I put down my book. ‘All these years you’ve tried to look down on me, where I was born, my background... And all this time your money was coming from dodgy dealings.’

Her face darkened but she also looked puzzled. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Your father’s business is based on child labour.’

She looked totally confused, shaking her head. ‘What *are* you talking about?’

I explained, a torrent of emotion and words, only half related to the business, the rest an outpouring of twenty years of feeling over a mismatched marriage. I finished with: ‘And another thing: what happened with his rice business? Something dodgy happened but nobody’s ever explained what.’

For once, Zara had listened to my tirade without interrupting, clearly at a loss as to what this was all about. Now she said, ‘I have no idea. I don’t take any interest in my father’s business; you know that. Besides, I was young then.’

‘He’s using child labour and paying pittance wages,’ I repeated, summarising.

But now she put her hands to her ears. ‘I’m not going to listen to this! I’m sure he wouldn’t do anything wrong. You’ve *always* been against my family. And now you think you’ve found something. *I will not tolerate it!* I will not! Ummy says she slaved to prepare something for you when you turned up unannounced and you left without touching it or even saying goodbye properly.’

She was standing over me and, without the children to separate us, we were on the verge of reverting back to our physical fights of earlier in the marriage. Normally, I would have been the one to give in, to soften, but this time I held her gaze. A series of emotions crossed her face: puzzlement, anger, despair, resignation, resolve. After a short stand-off, she pursed her lips and left the room.

I had returned on Saturday evening and had slept badly that night. The following morning I had waited for Zara to go to the mosque before removing the rug; I was prepared for a fight but saw no reason to actually go out of my way to provoke one.

I heard Zara pick up the phone and start to talk in low tones. I was able to make out some phrases: ‘Can’t take this anymore... I’ve had enough... You’ve forced me to stay with him all these years...’

Fine, let her leave. Let her make it easy for me. And if she thought I would come running after her like in the early days she would have another think coming.

I heard the door bang and wondered where she was gone. I pulled out my mobile and toyed with the idea of texting Catherine. I noticed that, now into the second term of

university, I no longer waited on tenterhooks for messages from my children. But I put the phone away; having told Catherine not to text me, I could hardly break that rule myself. Besides, I would see her tomorrow. I turned instead to my laptop and to *jobserve.com*.

Tuesday 15th March 2011

It was two months later and I was in my office, on the phone, early morning.

‘There has been an attack, sir.’

‘What?’

‘There has been an attack, sir. Luckily, Hafeez managed to beat them off.’

Hafeez was our security guard, a Pathan. Mention of his name reminded me of my childhood in Pakistan, when the local night watchman would do his rounds, blowing his whistle to show that he was there. Those watchmen had also usually been Pathans. Good luck to the Americans and my very own fellow *Englaands* out there in Afghanistan; when would they ever learn not to mess with Pathans? And when would they ever learn to stop *interfering* in other countries – honestly they were worse than bloody Aunties!

‘What happened?’

‘They were going to burn down the factory, sir, but Hafeez managed to stop them. He was very brave. But I think this was just a warning, sir. They say we must go back.’

My mind had been full of Libya until the call came, as always first thing in the morning. This was partly by accident and partly by design: the time difference between Pakistan and England was such that this was the most convenient period of the day, and I had also told Sharif to phone at this time, especially since things had turned precarious. I had been catching up with the news on the BBC website, which reminded me of my conversations with Catherine, which I enjoyed almost as much as my other “negotiations” with her. I had been reflecting that the Western powers were up to their tricks again; not that I was any fan of Gaddafi, but it was yet another clear-cut example of destroying somebody they themselves had built up. But now I had more immediate problems to hand.

After that first call from Sharif, I had indeed done nothing, burying my head in the Quran, metaphorically speaking, and hoping for the best. Surely there was nothing

they could do; surely it had nothing to do with them, what wages I paid or how I ran my factory. They must be bluffing; what was the worst they could do?

‘But how can I go back? What will the workers say?’

‘I have spoken to the workers: they also want to go back.’

I was astounded. ‘What do you mean?’

‘They have been threatened, sir. Their children have been threatened. They are willing to go back to the old wages; all they ask is that you allow their children to work. Some of them have had to resort to unspeakable measures, sir.’

‘What do you mean?’ I parroted.

‘Sir, how can I say it? Some of them have had to send them to the brick kilns, sir. It is so awful there, you saw them yourself. Some people are even selling their daughters.’

My eyes closed involuntarily and a hand went to my forehead. This was too much to take in. ‘I’ll get back to you. Give Hafeez a bonus – five hundred rupees.’

‘Yes, sir.’

I slammed down the phone and looked out of the window. The weather had become mild and the usual grey clouds of London filled the sky. My question about what was the worst they could do had been answered. And was Sharif telling the truth about the daughters? I knew, somewhere at the back of my mind, that such things happened but for God’s sake! I had increased their wages! But to what? From a pound a day to one pound fifty! But that wasn’t my fault, was it? I couldn’t change the whole business model of the world overnight. Why was it my problem anyway?

I saw Catherine come in, look at me and smile, though her smile slipped when I did not return it. She came towards me and I wondered whether to tell her about the attack; I was finding events spiralling beyond my control and, with my children away, a hostile and silent wife at home, Catherine was the only support I had at the moment. But would it be fair to get her involved? I decided to say nothing for the time being until I’d had time to think.

She came in and smiled. ‘It’s our tenth-week anniversary today.’

‘Is it?’ I made an attempt to smile and to put some cheer into my voice to make up for my earlier lack of the same. ‘Is that why you’re all dolled up? She was wearing lipstick and full makeup, and wearing an embroidered *shalwar-kameez*, instead of her normal plain ones which were presumably more practical.’

She smiled and nodded and looked briefly down at herself. ‘You noticed? I thought maybe we could do something.’

I was sorely tempted. But the remnants of my moral sense still made me think that I was leading this poor girl on and that she would be better off with someone her own age, that I really should put an end to this “affair”. I said regretfully, ‘But it’s Tuesday. You know I can’t. And I thought we agreed that this was just a bit of fun and you were going to seriously look for someone more suitable. What’s happening with your Internet dating thing?’ Before our affair had started in earnest, Catherine had once told me that she was on *match.com* and *shaadi.com* but that apart from having had some “fun”, she had had no real luck.

She looked astonished at my question. ‘I’ve cancelled that,’ she said, furrowing her brow and shaking her head. She sighed. ‘Oh my darling, I don’t want anyone else. And you’re not happy. Your children have left home. You’re not satisfied in your job. Why don’t we both look for new jobs and start a new life? We could stop living a lie. We could buy a small place of our own – a beautiful little flat has come up in my building. You said you always wanted more kids.’

‘I’ve changed my mind about that.’

‘How come?’

‘Because of everything that’s happened to me recently. I’ve realised that children don’t solve problems, they create them. I’m also wondering whether I really want to be one of those people with kids from ten different mothers.’

‘But it wouldn’t be ten: just two. Loads of people have two families nowadays.’

I made no reply.

‘Okay, fine, forget that. But what about us?’

‘But you want kids, right?’

She hesitated.

‘Of course you do,’ I said, without waiting for her reply. ‘I know you do. It wouldn’t be fair on you.’

‘We can talk about that later; I’m in no hurry.’

This did not tie in with her past comments but I let it go. I saw Suki come in and nodded towards her. ‘We’d better get back to work.’

She left, half angry, half tearful. I hoped that she would gather herself together before Suki noticed something. I did not fancy getting on the wrong side of Suki, any more than I wanted to be on the wrong side of the carpet mafia. Mind you, now that I

had got to know Suki better, I had realised that actually she was a pussy-cat, her tough exterior mostly bravado; no doubt that was why she had got herself into her own arranged marriage nightmare in the first place. She had also, rather grudgingly it seemed to me, slowly grown to accept me and had remarked on how unusually open and liberated I seemed to be for a Pakistani man. In fact, Catherine had told me that Suki *did* suspect that something was going on but was being discrete and had said nothing; but Catherine's feeling was that Suki thought we were having a kissing-affair and nothing more serious than that.

I looked at the calendar: it was Tuesday, 15th March, indeed our tenth-week anniversary. There was another significance to the day of course: as well as being the Ides of March, when people got up to no good (when did they ever not?), it was my wife's fortieth birthday, our grand plans for it, during the upcoming Easter holidays when the children would be home, ruined; but then, my own "big one" last year had also been ruined, so why shouldn't hers be? True, things had calmed down a bit since our fight over the rug two months ago, one of the few I had not given in on. Indeed, I had used her approaching birthday to extend an olive branch, saying that perhaps we could go for nice meal together, just the two of us. She had grudgingly accepted. I thought about Catherine's remark about the flat, and wondered whether to be excited or alarmed. Things were indeed spiralling out of control, and not just on the mafia front.

*

I was in my office in Pakistan, cursing the heat and the flies. There was a knock on the door.

'Come in.'

The door opened: it was one of the workers, accompanied by a little girl, who was dirty, unkempt and snot-nosed; I thought I recognised her.

'This is my daughter, sir. Her name is Fatima.'

'Yes.'

'I can leave her with you, sir.'

'What do you mean? Do I look like a fucking babysitter?'

'I mean, I can leave her with you, sir. For an hour. Just one hundred rupees.'

'You want me to babysit your daughter for an hour for one hundred rupees? What the fuck is wrong with you? I'm trying to work here.'

'No, sir, I mean you will pay me only one hundred rupees.'

'You want me to babysit your daughter, and you expect me to pay you for the privilege?'

'No, sir, I mean you can do anything you want with her. Just one hundred rupees.' He rushed off before I could react further.

The little girl advanced. With her father gone, she was transformed. A coquettish smile played on her face; she started to dance, to sway, her little ghagra suit – tight at the top, flowing at the bottom – making her look like a little doll. She slipped the suit off one shoulder, exposing brown skin and bone. She slipped off the other; the ghagra suit fell to the floor, revealing an emaciated little body, all skin and bone, flat-chested, narrow-hipped. She started to come towards me, dancing as she came. To my horror, I suddenly realised that it was not Fatima, it was my daughter, Ayesha; but Ayesha was nineteen years old, she had just had her birthday, how could it be her? The whirr of the table-fan was suddenly a roar in my ears. She advanced, reached knowingly for my crotch...

I sprang away, flinging out my hand to knock her tiny, bony one aside, catching the table-fan as I did so, sending it flying. The heat was stifling...

*

I awoke, drenched in sweat, unable to breathe, my hand hurting from the impact with the bedside table. I turned my head to look for the comforting presence of my wife, of another human being, even though cuddling was not an option, but then recalled the events of the previous evening. The birthday meal had been reasonably successful, almost leading to a thaw in our relationship with even the remote possibility of sex on the cards. True, I now had Catherine but I still missed my wife, I had to admit. For some strange reason that I could not fathom, and in contrast to most other men apparently, I actually found the idea of sex with my wife, the mother of my children, more erotic than sex with a girlfriend or a mistress. But the possibility had disappeared when I had cracked a joke about having to sleep with a forty-year-old. She had gone to the other room again – we now intermittently slept in different rooms. Was she being unreasonable, or was it that my joke had really been in poor taste, even though I genuinely had not intended to be mean? I had gone after her, tried to apologise, but she had closed the door firmly in my face and locked it to show that she was serious.

I now sat up in bed, fighting the impulse to go to my wife with two possibilities in mind: to knock entreatingly on the door, beg forgiveness for whatever I had done wrong, promise never to do it again, and plead to be taken into her comforting arms;

either that or break the door down, demand my conjugal rights by force if necessary, and strangle her with my bare hands if she refused. I managed to resist both impulses.

Instead, I thought about phoning my daughter to make sure that she was all right, wondering if the dream had been some kind of premonition. But I did not believe in such superstitious nonsense, could not believe it if my lonely life, cut off from my family and community for this very reason, was to make any kind of sense. Nor did I want to ring her in the middle of the night, be the kind of typical over-protective parent of the culture I was trying to overcome.

I lay back down, my heart still thumping, knowing that I would get no more sleep that night.

Wednesday 16th March 2011

It was the following morning. ‘Okay, reverse the changes, but don’t let any of the really young children work until I get back to you. Pay them something, but don’t let them work.’

‘Sir, where will they go?’

‘What do you mean?’

Sharif spoke patiently, as though to a retard. ‘Sir, we hire families. They cannot leave the children at home. There will be nobody to look after them.’

‘Okay, fine, let them come to the factory but don’t let them work. Let them run around or something; let them play.’

‘Sir, you have been here. There is nowhere for them to run around or play.’

I jumped to my feet. ‘*For God’s sake!*’ I shouted. ‘Think of something! Do I have to do everything?’

There was a knock on the door, a short pause and Catherine stuck her head in, a slightly worried expression on her face. I had not heard her come in.

I waved her in, said a quick ‘I’ll call you back’ to Sharif and slammed the phone down.

I laughed briefly to set Catherine’s mind at rest. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘I’ve never heard you shouting before,’ she said. She was still wearing her coat.

I felt like saying, *It’s these fucking Pakis, they’re like fucking children*, but instead spread my hands and said, ‘I’m trying to sort things out in Pakistan with the children and everything, but it’s impossible.’

It was no good – I felt compelled to confide in someone. I waved her to the chair and explained briefly that the other bosses were not happy, carefully avoiding the word “mafia”, not wanting to frighten her.

She nodded knowingly. ‘Ah, the mafia.’ She took off her coat and twisted round to put it over the chair.

I looked at her in astonishment. ‘You know about them?’

She turned back to me. ‘The mafia’s everywhere, Imran. Even here in England.’

I shook my head in bafflement: I knew that she was bright but this was on a different level completely. ‘How can you be so wise at such a young age?’

‘It’s not about age, it’s about... I don’t know, personality, I suppose.’

‘But you’re so sweet and innocent! You’re a... *girl!*’ For a moment I almost forgot the gravity of my situation.

She laughed. ‘I’m not as sweet and innocent as I look. And trust me: girls generally are not sweet and innocent.’

‘Really? I don’t get it. I’ve managed to reach almost half a century and I still don’t get it.’

She made no reply. I noticed that all hints of *that* smile had disappeared, presumably because of our argument yesterday, but was grateful that she was at least being adult about the situation.

I had been leaning forward. I leant back and said, ‘What do you mean the mafia’s here in England too? Do you mean like gangs, organised crime...?’

She pursed her lips. ‘To a certain extent. But actually they’re not the real mafia. You can just deal with them using normal law enforcement. The real mafia are people like Cameron, Murdoch, Obama...’

Now she had gone too far! ‘I can possibly see what you mean by people like Murdoch. But Cameron?! Obama?!’ I had to laugh. ‘Come on.’

She looked impassive.

I was hooked. ‘Well come on then: explain yourself.’

She shrugged. ‘Read *A People’s History of the United States*. Have you heard of it?’

I shook my head.

‘Have you seen *Good Will Hunting*?’

I nodded, wondering what that had to do with it.

‘You remember that scene in the psychiatrist’s office with Robin Williams and Matt Damon, when Damon looks at the volumes on the shelf about American History?’

I nodded again.

‘So Damon tells Williams to forget all those volumes and read this book instead. “It’ll blow you away” he says.’

‘Okay, I will read it, but give me a summary.’

She shrugged. ‘The point about Cameron and Obama is that we think we live in a democracy, we think there is law and order, but actually all these things are just for the ruling class. They give us the *illusion* of fairness and justice, but it’s not true. Foucault made similar points, except that he’s really hard to understand. Howard Zinn makes it readable.’

‘Howard Zinn?’

‘The author of *A People’s History*.’

‘Ah.’ I paused and then said, ‘But come on, *Obama*? He’s a munchkin!’

She laughed. ‘He’s not bad, as politicians go. But what has he actually done? What has he done for equality, for Africa?’

I could not argue with that. I smiled at her. ‘But it’s not a conspiracy, right?’

She smiled back. ‘Anyone can join. It’s a bit like Cowboys and Indians, really. You just have to decide which side you’re on.’

I remembered playing the game, always wanting to be a cowboy of course.

I said, knowing the answer she would give, ‘And which side are you on?’

‘Indians, of course.’

I nodded. Of course. What else would she be?

‘Or should I say Pakistanis?’ she amended.

I said, ‘But tell me one thing: these people are so clever, I mean all these people that you’ve mentioned. We’re nothing compared to them. What makes you think you know better than they do?’

She thought for a moment and then said, ‘If they’re so clever, why is the world in such a mess?’ She paused and added, ‘No, they’re not cleverer than us; they’re just more ruthless and heartless and unconcerned for the consequences of their actions. And because they know they’ll never be held accountable. Look at the banks: they robbed us dry and got away Scott free; a petty thief steals a pair of shoes and they put him away for six months.’

I shook my head in mystification. ‘Why am I the only person in the world who doesn’t seem to know how things work? It’s taken me forty-five years to learn that the world is basically run by gangsters.’

She nodded in agreement.

I leant back and put my hands behind my head. ‘You know, *I’ve* always wanted to be a gangster. Or should I say *goonda*? That’s what they call them in Pakistan.’

She laughed. ‘You’ll never be a *goonda*!’ She was able to pronounce it reasonably correctly since the “d” was hard as in English, rather than soft as was more common in Urdu, although she had said the “oo” much longer than it should have been.

I wondered whether to be offended. I brought my hands down and folded them in front of me instead. ‘Even with my black belt in Judo?’

She laughed again. ‘*Even* with your black belt in Judo.’

I became slightly more serious. ‘Why?’

She shrugged. ‘You just haven’t got the personality for it.’

‘What about you? *Are you a goonda?*’

To my surprise, she nodded in all seriousness. I wondered if I needed to be afraid of her as well. ‘How come?’

‘Because I’m Pakistani. All Pakistanis are *goondas*. It comes from growing up in a lawless country.’

I had almost exploded after her first sentence, throwing up my hands, but had waited for her to finish. Now I said, ‘But Catherine, for God’s sake, I haven’t contradicted you before but this is ridiculous! You did *not* grow up in Pakistan. You are *not* Pakistani. *I* am Pakistani. I was born there. I lived there for the first six years of my life.’

‘Yes, I am,’ she insisted obstinately.

I calmed myself down. ‘Even after all this, you still want to be a Pakistani? And are you sure you still want to start your ethical import/export business?’ I said cynically. ‘This is what you’re going to have to deal with.’

She made no reply.

I said, ‘So, which mafia is worse, the one here or the one there?’

I expected her to say “the one there” but to my surprise she said, ‘The one here, of course.’

‘How come?’

‘The one *there* only exists by permission of the West. We’re all complicit. Do you seriously think that if that mafia stood in our way, we wouldn’t have the drones out there this very minute? The one *here* is the one that is truly evil, the one that exists in and of itself, the one that disguises itself as good.’ I was vaguely reminded of that quote in the book that Uncle had shown me, something about a “humanitarian facade”.

There was another pause as I tried to digest this. She said, ‘So what are we going to do?’

I sighed, stood up and went to the window. ‘We’re going to have to back down; I’ve already told Sharif to reverse the changes.’

‘What if we move the business to a more built-up place? Maybe these things only happen in the remote areas?’

‘I doubt it. I mean, you’re probably right to a certain extent, but this is the reason why Pakistan is the way it is. And it’s never going to change. Look at India. Look at...’ Words failed me and I went silent for a moment. ‘Anyway, I can’t see Uncle relocating his whole business. I’m just hoping to sort all this mess out before he finds out and has me up on a “due diligence” charge.’ I sighed, came back to my desk and sat back down. ‘Anyway, what’s wrong with me? Why can’t I be a *goonda*?’

We both laughed. I stopped laughing and became serious. ‘I think that’s why my in-laws chose me for their daughter. They could see I wasn’t a *goonda*, that their daughter would be safe with me.’

I had got the impression that she was being a bit reserved because I had turned her down yesterday but she now reverted to normal, becoming animated and leaning forward. ‘Oh, darling, if you’re not happy in your marriage, why do you stay? We could start a new life. *Hum chota sa gar banaye genh.*’ She was using a Bollywood phrase, tilting her head in the way people usually did when saying those words; my in-laws often liked to quote Bollywood, but clearly they were not the only ones. The phrase meant: “We will make a cosy home together.”

Again I was tempted. But the complex repercussions, not to mention my nagging, guilty feeling that I would not be doing Catherine any favours if I were to continue with our relationship, still made me hesitate.

‘I really think you would be better off with someone more suitable.’

‘Don’t you think I should be the judge of that?’

I made no reply.

‘Don’t you *like* me?’ she asked, puzzled.

'Of course I like you! I like you very much. I... I...' I wanted to say "I love you" but thought it would sound ridiculous at this early stage of our relationship and because of our age difference.

She came around the desk and I rose to meet her. At the back of my mind was the thought that someone might come in at any moment but amazingly enough I suddenly didn't care. I *wanted* them to come in, to be able to say: Yes, we're together, we're having an affair, we're in love, go and tell my wife, make it easy for me.

She breathed in my ear, her breath hot and moist. 'What, darling? What?'

'I love you,' I whispered.

'Oh, darling, I love you too.'

'But I'm married. And you're half my age.'

She pulled her head back and we looked into each other's eyes for a moment; I was reminded of their remarkable colour: a dark, seaweed green. I had to admit she looked particularly radiant this morning, wearing the pair of earrings I had bought for her as a present, and I was tempted to drop everything, take her hand, and run from the office, never to return.

'But you're not happy, and I'm not half your age. And even if I was it wouldn't matter.'

'But don't you think you should find someone of your own age?'

'I don't want to. I want you.'

'It wouldn't work. In six months' time, once the excitement wears off...' I shrugged, reluctantly disengaged myself from her hot and fragrant embrace, as though relinquishing a hot water bottle on a freezing night, and moved away, sat back down.

She shrugged too but stayed where she was, standing over me, her whole body full of helpless frustration. 'Fine, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.'

'Let's think about it. But we need to get back to business right now. We've got a serious problem on our hands here: what are we going to do?'

She accepted temporary defeat and returned to her seat, reverting to her professional persona. 'We have to stand up to them.'

I sighed and looked away, shaking my head, looked at the rugs on the walls which I now wanted to tear down. 'That's easy for you to say in this cosy office.'

'I'll go there and do it.'

'What? Are you mad?'

She made no reply.

I spread my hands. ‘Are you serious?’

She nodded.

I noticed that people were starting to drift in. I sighed again and said, ‘Look, we’d better get back to work. Would you mind closing the door behind you and please make sure I’m not disturbed for at least an hour. I’ve got some urgent things to do.’

When she had gone, closing the door behind her as requested, I put my burning and exhausted head down on the cool black leather rest, and tried to catch up on some sleep. The cancer in my brain, which I had thought was showing signs of remission, seemed instead to be spreading to the rest of my body.

Wednesday 23rd March 2011

It was a week later and I was at my father’s house in Southall; it was evening.

‘I have decided to give my house to the mosque,’ said my father, in his slow, smooth, almost accent-less English, which always reminded me sadly that he had been a doctor back in Pakistan.

‘What?’

‘My house: I have decided to give it to the mosque.’

‘Why?’

‘Why not? None of my children care about me, why should I give it to you ungrateful lot?’

‘Look, Abu, you don’t have to give it to us, as far as I’m concerned. Give it to charity for all I care, but don’t give it to the mosque.’

‘Why?’

‘What have they ever done for you?’

‘It is not their job to do anything for me. It is *my* job to do things for *them*. Besides, giving it to charity is the same thing. They do lots of work for charity.’

I sighed. I was lying when I said that I did not care what my father did with his house. To my shame, I had taken that money into account when I had taken on the mortgage. *Waiting for my father to die so I could get my hands on the money and pay off part of the mortgage.* Well, at least I wouldn’t dream of actually killing my own father, unlike some cases one read about in the news. But now, with all that was going on with my in-laws, and if I wanted to set up a new life on my own or with Catherine, that money had become critical. But I was being mostly genuine: what would gall me

even above all of these considerations would be to see the money go to those bunch of charlatans and conmen.

I had to play it carefully. I had received a phone call at work, since my father refused to call me at home, saying that he wanted nothing to do with that “witch” (Zara), and that he needed to see me urgently. The reason she was a witch in his eyes was because we had initially lived with him until Zara had nagged me into moving away. Her logic had eluded me since all her family lived together but she had never fully explained. In all fairness I had not been totally averse to moving away and had used her as an excuse to justify it to my father; our decision had been mitigated by the fact that, until our recent, second move, we had still been within walking distance of him. She had mitigated further by cooking extra for him which I would drop off regularly. My father had had a brief second marriage, also arranged, a few years after the death of my mother – whom he had loved dearly, by all accounts – but it had been a disaster and he had accepted his sad fate after that. I had stopped by after work, having picked up the car first.

‘What’s brought all this on?’

‘I feel my time is coming. I saw your mother in a dream last night, calling to me from the other side of the stream.’ He was referring to the streams that flowed beneath the gardens of Islamic Paradise.

My father had been saying that his time was up for a few years now; the bit about the dream was new. ‘There’s nothing wrong with you, Abu.’ But even as I said it, the news of the death of the beautiful Elizabeth Taylor, which had been announced that very day, was fresh in my mind: a poignant reminder that even the most perfect examples of human physical form were not exempt from the scythe of *Azrael*, the Angel of Death.

‘I’m over eighty years old.’ Along with most of his generation, my father did not know his exact date of birth except that it had been sometime around the first stirrings of the Indian Independence Movement, in the late 1920s.

I knew that my father was looking for attention, but I also knew that he was capable of anything.

‘I have even got the paperwork from the mosque. They are very good, they make it so easy. It is all drawn up; all I have to do is sign.’

I bet they do. I felt sudden anger and alarm: my father had made this threat before but he had never gone this far. ‘You can’t do that, Abu. This is *our* money.’

‘It is not *your* money. It is *my* money.’

‘But you got some money from your father didn’t you? The house in Lahore? Why shouldn’t we inherit something from you?’ Grandpa had been a useless twat but he *had* left some property for his only son; the daughters didn’t count of course and had received nothing. True, my father’s sister, my aunt, was now living in that house but she had bought it from my father, or rather her dead husband had, who had also been my uncle on my mother’s side; oh happy, incestuous Ahmadi families! And if that was confusing, Islamic inheritance laws were even more so. I had once tried to work them out, sitting down determinedly with pen and paper and with the relevant Quranic *sura* in front of me, but after hours of flowcharts and calculations I had given up in despair. I could understand complex financial rules and regulations for the purpose of converting them into software, but that *sura* was too much.

‘Nobody comes to see me, nobody does anything for me.’ Abu was now rambling.

‘How many times did you see *your* father? You abandoned him in Pakistan to come here.’

‘I had to. I did it all for you lot.’

‘Fine. And I’m very grateful, but if you give this house to the mosque all your children will...’ I was going to say “hate you for the rest of their lives” but managed to stop myself. Instead I said, ‘Your children will not be happy with you.’

‘What do I care? They hate me anyway.’

‘They don’t hate you.’

‘They never come to see me.’

‘That’s not the same thing. And maybe if you hadn’t married them off to Mum’s nieces, you might have been better off.’

‘That was your mother’s idea.’

With just a small amount of pressure from her brothers in Pakistani, I thought, who had managed to mismatch off their daughters to my brothers. Wonderful Pakistani families.

My heart palpitations were starting. I contemplated my father’s increasingly frail frame, his dirty grey *shalwar-kameez*, steeling myself as always against the pity that threatened to overwhelm me; I felt helpless and angry at the ravages of time and the God I no longer believed in. I said, ‘It’s up to you, Abu. If that’s what you want to do there’s nothing I can do about it. Now, is there anything I can do for you before I go?’

‘You can make me a cup of tea.’

‘But I’ve already made you one.’

‘Can’t I have another?’

I sighed and went to make the tea. As I waited for the kettle to boil, my father’s downstairs lodger came in, bringing with him the other-worldly, exquisitely melancholic strains of the legendary Mehdi Hassan, *Pyar Bhare Do Sharmile Nain* (Those shy, love-filled eyes). I knew this lodger vaguely. He was retired and divorced, and had voluntarily left his house for his wife and children to live in, rather than drag things through the courts; this even though his children were now fully grown and he would have easily been entitled to half the house. I had often wondered whether to admire or to scorn him. The man had a small, pinched face, and was thin and unsmiling; his dark blue *shalwar-kameez* could have been cleaner and his odour could have been sweeter. He reminded me of the famous quotation: “The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation.”

‘And get some biscuits!’ shouted my father, just as the kettle came to the boil and the automatic button clicked off. ‘And make sure you put plenty of sugar in!’

‘You’ve got diabetes, Abu,’ I shouted back.

‘What difference does it make? I’m only hanging on by the grace of Allah.’

I put half a sugar in, added one biscuit to the plate, nodded to the lodger, who did not nod back, and came back with the tea.

‘You are a good boy. It’s your brothers who are the nasty ones.’ Abu was playing his version of good cop / bad cop again. ‘He was here again, wanting his share in cash.’

I felt renewed anger but this time at a different source: my father was referring to one of my elder brothers who had decided that he could not wait for our father to die before getting his hands on his inheritance. ‘I’ve told you to get a restraining order on him. I’ll do it for you, if you like.’ *Was it a coincidence that this brother was one of the ones who had been left behind for an extra two-year-stretch at the age of just ten?*

‘How can I get a restraining order on my own son?’

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. ‘Bye, Abu.’

Not sure whether to feel guilt or more anger, I got up and left the stinky house as quickly as I could.

Outside, in the car, I sat for a while without moving. I toyed with the idea of going to the mosque to argue with the imam but knew that would be pointless. I

wondered whether I should mention this to Zara, but we were now barely on speaking terms. I had a mad impulse to go and see Catherine, but even though Zara and I now often slept in separate rooms, I knew that she still expected me home. I sat for a long time, looking at my father's house through the shadowy gloom of the streetlamp, invoking mostly painful but some pleasant memories of my childhood, especially the time my father had caught me trying to get back secretly into the house after having sneaked out. I had deserved a beating then and was convinced I would receive one, but my father had never laid a finger on me up to that point, and he hadn't done so then either. I was reminded of the song I had just heard inside and wondered why it was that South-Asian music and culture were so melancholic. I had used to think that it was because of thwarted love, and that was still undoubtedly true, but it now seemed to me that the melancholy had been perpetuated by forced migration. When would the abuse end?

And as for my brother, how could the boy who had played with me and protected me, terrorise his own father? To give credit to my sisters-in-law, I knew that his wife had tried to stop him but to no avail. I wondered whether I should organise the restraining order myself but had no idea how to go about it.

March had been fairly settled for London in terms of weather and I had been looking forward to the upcoming clock-change this weekend; but up north, apparently, the snow had returned with a vengeance, making me now wonder why it was that when troubles came, they came not in single flakes of snow, but several feet deep and of the wrong type.

*

I had lost my son. I had looked everywhere. Or had I? There was only one place left. I raced to the punishment room and burst in. A little boy hung by his arms, suspended from a hook. A man stood next to him, lathi in hand.

'I'm sorry, sir, I'll work harder, I promise,' sobbed Dani.

I rushed at the man, sent him flying against the wall. I paused to lift my son off the hook before turning back to the man; I grabbed the lathi, began to beat. Beat until the man was just a mass of bruises and welts, his shalwar-kameez in shreds. He begged for mercy until he could beg no more, indeed lay still on the floor, but still I continued, my arm aching.

Only when my son came in front of me to shield the man, did I desist. 'Please stop, Dad, he's had enough.'

*

I awoke, sweating and breathing hard from the exertion. I sat up, once again struggling with the Jekyll and Hyde dilemma of approaching my wife in the other room. I managed to resist both options and lay back down, heart thumping, staring up into the darkness.

Monday 28th March 2011

It was the following Monday evening, five days later. The clocks had indeed changed but had brought no lightness to my spirits as the event normally did. Not even the prospect of the kids coming home for Easter made me feel much better. I inserted my key but before I could turn it the door opened and Zara stood in front of me, an angry and puzzled look on her face.

‘What’s going on?’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘What do you mean, “What do I mean?”?’ she shouted, pointing with her finger.

‘Why is there a *For Sale* sign outside our house?’

‘I’ve decided to sell it.’

‘*You’ve* decided?’

‘Yes, I’ve decided.’

‘Without consulting me?’

‘*You* don’t pay the mortgage. I can’t afford it. I want to leave this job; I’ve always told you that you should never mix business and family. Anyway, do you mind if I come into my own house and we don’t scream and shout in front of the neighbours?’ I reflected that one of the good things about this area was that the houses were further apart and there was less chance of our arguments being heard. ‘We don’t *need* this huge house. We’re a tiny family. I never wanted it.’

Zara had tears in her eyes. ‘We do you a favour, give you a job, and this is how you repay us?’ she said as she stepped aside.

I whirled around; for a moment we were almost stuck in the doorway. ‘Who’s we?’

‘My family.’

‘When I met you, you were living in a council house on social security! They *begged* me to marry you!’

‘Who’s shouting now?’ She went in and turned to face me. ‘Always the same old story. They’re not living in a council house now, are they?’

I closed the door behind me, making an effort to be calm. I put down my briefcase and held up a hand. ‘The point I’m making is, I didn’t marry you for your money: you didn’t have any then. And I wouldn’t have needed this favour if you hadn’t nagged me into buying a huge house that we don’t need. And besides, your father didn’t just do *me* a favour: he got two-in-one from me, and don’t forget I *lent* your father money to set up this company.’ By “two-in-one” I meant my IT as well as management skills.

‘I’m not moving.’

‘Fine. You pay the mortgage then. Your father can pay the mortgage.’

‘They gave us that beautiful rug, carpeted the whole of upstairs...’

‘I don’t want that carpet or that rug!’ I shouted. ‘I wouldn’t have needed them if you hadn’t nagged me. Do you have any idea how that rug was produced? Throw it away! Throw it away!’

She pursed her lips and walked grimly upstairs. I heard a door bang. I noticed that the house did not smell of food as it normally did when I returned from work. When I went to the kitchen my suspicions were confirmed: there were no hot pots bubbling away, waiting to be served. Along with lack of sleep, it now looked as though lack of food was to be added to my list of woes. I felt too tired to even go upstairs; instead I went and lay down on the sofa and closed my eyes.

Monday 4th April 2011

It was Easter, a week later. The children were home for the holidays, filling the house with friends and welcome noise, with music and chatter, and forcing me to retreat from the open-plan lounge to my den at the back of the house. Their presence also seemed to have driven away my nightmares, so that I was now getting some reasonable sleep. Zara had insisted that the rug be replaced and the *For Sale* sign be removed, at least temporarily. I had acceded to this request, not wanting to upset the children at this stage of their studies; why was there always *something*?! In any case there had been no real interest in the house and the estate agent had recommended a drop in price; I was only asking for what we had paid for it but he had insisted to no great surprise on my part, given the credit crunch, that it was a “slow” market. Dan’s birthday usually coincided with Easter and this year it was a major one, twenty-one; Zara and I had always planned to have a big party for this occasion but for some reason Dan did not seem particularly bothered, and what with all that was going on, I wasn’t much in the mood either. Instead

we had just gone out for a family dinner at *The Clay Oven* on the evening of the day itself, rather than on the day before, Sunday, if it had been a family do. Ayesha's present to Dan had been an Armani checked shirt, and ours had been an Emporio Armani watch.

On the general kids' front, there seemed to be mixed news: Dan had great news on his project but Ayesha seemed less happy. I remembered our conversation over Christmas and tackled her about it, early on the following Saturday morning, before the others were up. We had had a few similar chats over the Christmas holidays and I had come to regard this as Daddy/Daughter time.

Saturday 9th April 2011

'Is everything all right, Ayesha?'

She shrugged.

'Are you having fun yet? Made friends?'

'I'm more worried about my exams. The week after we get back, they start.'

I nodded. 'Fair enough. Confident?'

Another shrug.

'Ayesha, I can't help you if all you do is shrug.'

'You can't help me anyway.'

It was true. Ayesha was studying Chemistry and I had been unable to help her even for GCSE. It was the one subject I had always hated. She, on the other hand, had been a wiz at it from an early age, always conjuring up mixes and potions, and once almost blowing up our kitchen; mind you, the kitchen we had had at the time, with its plain white walls and cheap white units, would probably have benefitted from being blown up but that was beside the point. Nevertheless, her choice of phrase made me take some deep breaths – which was now my speciality, with no need for yoga – before replying. She was an independent adult now, shouting would do no good at all.

'I can't help you with your specific subject, no. But I do have a lot of experience. I might be able to give you some general advice and guidance. Maybe some revision techniques or I can test you, whatever.'

She too softened. 'It's fine, Dad. Thanks for the offer. How are things with you?'

I shrugged in my turn and picked up my book. I had often thought that as the kids got older I would be able to rely on them to plug the conversational gap I suffered from with my wife, but there seemed to be no sign of that yet. 'Fine.'

*

Later that evening I went to Dan's room to talk about his "good" news. Dan was at his new Apple Mac computer; a 3-D model of a human figure was rotating on the screen as I came in, after having knocked and waited for assent – Dan went berserk if anybody came in without waiting for permission. He turned in his swivel chair to face me.

After some preliminaries, I said, 'So, let me just get this straight. You'll do the designs here on computer; you'll send them to Pakistan. They'll make samples and send them to you, and if the buyers like them you'll order them.'

'That's right.'

I chose my words carefully. 'You know, on my recent visit, I found out about a few things.'

'About what?'

'About the terrible working conditions there. They even use children.'

Dan spread his hands. 'That's none of my business, Dad. As far as I'm concerned I'll be creating jobs there. I'll be helping.'

'It's not as simple as that. You can't just wash your hands off it.'

'Why not?'

'Because there are morals and principles involved. You can't just go blindly through life.'

'I'm not.'

'What I'm saying is that you will have to be actively involved in the Pakistani side of things. You'll have to go there regularly and make sure the workers are not being exploited.'

'That's really not my job, Dad.'

'So whose job is it then?'

Dan spread his hands. 'I don't know. The Pakistanis? Their government?'

'I agree. But they are never going to accept it, so it's up to us on the outside to do it instead.'

'Dad, I really haven't thought that far ahead yet.'

'Fine. I'm just making you aware, that's all; just giving you some advance notice.'

‘It’s not just me involved here: I have a business partner.’

‘Exactly. You’ll need to talk to him about it as well.’

‘Fine.’

There was a pause as I looked around at the posters on the wall. ‘How’s Mimi?’

‘Fine.’

Another pause. ‘Actually, going back to the main point. There’s a problem.’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘Pakistan is a very dangerous country. I really don’t want you to have to go there.’

‘I don’t need to go there very often: Zia lives there.’

‘But you can’t trust... Pakistanis. I don’t mean Zia; I just mean generally.’

‘That’s so racist, Dad!’

‘How can it be racist? I *am* Pakistani.’

‘It’s still racist.’

I sighed. ‘Look, Dan, you don’t know what I know. I don’t mean to be condescending but you haven’t got the experience I’ve got.’

Dan made no reply, swinging in his chair; he turned back to his computer, presumably to indicate that the conversation was over as far as he was concerned.

I said, speaking to his immaculate and expensive new *Toni & Guy* haircut, ‘Have you considered other options?’

Dan whirled around, losing his usual cool demeanour. ‘*Dad, you’ve always moaned about me doing fashion design, and now when I could be on the brink of something big, you say have you considered other options!*’

‘There’s no need to shout,’ I said, as various sounds indicated that Zara and Ayesha had heard. I was standing in the open doorway; I turned my head to see Zara come out of our room and walk the fifteen feet across the landing. She squeezed past me, went into the room and positioned herself sideways between us with arms folded. Ayesha joined her from downstairs a few minutes later. If I had been unhappy with my relationship with the children this morning, things were now going from bad to worse.

‘What’s going on?’ said Zara.

‘Nothing; I’m just having a chat with Dani.’

‘It doesn’t sound like a chat?’

‘He wants me to give up my business idea! I think he’s jealous of me!’

‘For God’s sake, Dani, how could I possibly be jealous of you? You’re my son.’

‘It happens, Dad, it happens. Especially with *Pakistanis*, I hear.’

‘Look, maybe you two should just take a timeout.’

‘Please don’t talk to me like that in front of the children, Zara.’

‘You’ve both told me so many times how you’ve tried to start up your own business but you couldn’t do it. And now *I’m* going to do it, and you’re jealous.’

‘I’m just asking you to think through the moral implications.’

Silence descended. After a few seconds, Ayesha left the room shaking her head, squeezing past without looking at me. Dan turned back to his computer. I too left the room, leaving Zara alone with Dan.

Back in my room, I tried to think further about Dan’s business but suddenly it was all too much, my mind went blank, and a lethargy came over me. The thought of Catherine came to my mind and I seriously considered texting her to see if she was free. But no, not with the kids around. Besides, I reminded myself once again, having told her not to text, I could not break the rule myself, surely, especially not after what had happened yesterday. The children being home I had told Catherine that I had to get back; neither of us had been happy about it and I wondered if I was just in a bad mood because of my lack of Friday night oats.

It was only ten o’clock but I went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, came back, switched off the light and went to bed. I was aware of Zara coming in later; whilst the children were home we had no choice but to sleep in the same room, though with the good old six inch gap between us. The gap was torture, but on the plus side I did find that her presence did at least ward off the nightmares.

Saturday 16th April 2011

It was a week later. Zara and Ayesha had returned from a shopping expedition to Southall, in preparation for the Royal Wedding and to buy more clothes for Ayesha’s return to university for the new term. I had half teasingly, half seriously asked Ayesha if she shouldn’t be thinking more about her exams than clothes or the Royal Wedding but she had refused to rise to the bait. Anybody would have thought that they, Zara and Ayesha, were the ones getting married, but then I knew that any excuse would do for clothes-shopping. I did not normally mind, indeed liked it, and they were doing their customary fashion parade for me in the lounge; with the children around even Zara usually became more friendly towards me.

But for once I was finding it hard to feel the spousal and paternal pleasure I normally felt on such occasions. Dan too had used to be part of the audience for this, and might have been expected to have a professional concern, but was strangely no longer interested.

I nodded and smiled, but my heart was not in it, wondering how much children's sweat had gone into the making of the clothes. I now saw children's sweat in everything and wondered how I had been so blind before. How was it possible to spend almost half a century in this world and see absolutely nothing? When our children had been young, and when I was still struggling with my first mortgage, we would sometimes buy clothes for them from *Primark*, although only clothes for home-use, not going-out clothes. Even then I recalled often remarking about how a t-shirt or a pair of jeans could be sold for a few pounds.

'What's the matter, Dad?' asked Ayesha, clearly noticing that my mind was wandering.

I could not control myself. 'Those clothes have probably been made by child labour.'

Zara exploded. 'Oh, for God's sake! This is the problem with you. You get obsessed with things. According to you, everything is made by child labour now. What shall we do, go around naked?!'

I made no reply. Ayesha ran upstairs.

Zara came and stood in front of me, tearful. 'I've had enough of this. I can't take it anymore!' she half shouted.

Dan came running downstairs, just as music blasted from Ayesha's room, defiantly at full volume. 'You're doing it again! Can you two stop fighting? You're upsetting Ayesha. And then you wonder why we want to live away from home!'

'It's your dad: talk to him.'

'It's not just him, Mum, it's both of you.'

Zara turned to Dan. '*Don't you dare talk to me like that!* I'm your mother. *I will not stand for it.*'

'Maybe you won't have to for much longer.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm thinking of staying where I am, with my friends in King's Cross.'

Zara started to wail. She whirled on me. 'This is all your fault!'

‘It’s *not* his fault,’ said Dan. ‘It’s *my* decision. It’s what *I* want.’ He stood looking at us, a mixture of anger, sadness and contempt on his round face. ‘Why didn’t you two just divorce each other a long time ago!’

Zara stopped wailing temporarily and whirled on Dan instead; she was doing a lot of whirling. ‘What do you mean? Why are you talking about divorce? All families fight; that doesn’t mean you start talking about divorce.’ She had clearly forgotten her comments to her mother on the phone after our fight over the rug three months ago.

‘That’s *not* true, Mum. All families *don’t* fight. I know loads who don’t: Zia’s family never fights.’

Zara looked as though she had just been told that two plus two was *not* four. ‘That’s ridiculous. They’re lying. They probably just don’t fight in front of you, that’s all. We don’t fight in front of people, do we?’ She went and sat down on the sofa and started to cry, head in her hands.

Dan went back upstairs, shaking his head. I looked at Zara, feeling sorry for her, wondering if I was being rather foolish after all, ruining my family life for the sake of faraway children whom the rest of the world seemed not to care about in the least, apart from worthless platitudes. I went over, sat down next to her and tried to put an arm around her. She moved away as though from an electric shock. ‘Don’t you dare touch me! You’re such a selfish –’ She didn’t finish the sentence.

I got up and went to my den, my mind, as always after such arguments, full of fantasies about divorce, now officially sanctioned by Dan. But what about Ashi? Poor little Ashi, my little baby girl. I could never do that to her. It was true that even Zara expected Ayesha to leave home when she got married, but for me she would always live in my house, in my mind at least, her room ever-ready. I could never do that to her.

Sunday 24th April 2011

It was a week later, Sunday night. The children had returned to university that afternoon, clearly with relief. I had tried to stop myself from thinking about the child workers and possible solutions, to avoid further arguments, but it had been difficult. And now, with the house gone quiet again as though a switch had been turned off, the thoughts had re-invaded like the NATO attacks on Libya. Royal Wedding Fever was full-pitch, but it was the last thing that I was interested in.

I was in bed, thinking long and hard. Zara was in our en suite bathroom, taking a bath, whence I could hear the occasional splash. Thankfully, the departure of the

children had not resulted in her sleeping in the other room again, although sex had still not been on offer; I sometimes felt she was made of iron. If I could not mess with the wages, perhaps it would be enough to improve the conditions: better food, air-conditioning, strict regulation of the hours to nine. Surely, those three things alone would make a huge difference. The ideal of course would be a school but I simply did not have either the funds or the authority for that. Apart from the moral argument, it really could not be justified on business grounds.

But the air-conditioning I felt was a good idea. I was tempted to phone Sharif straight away but managed to control myself; I would sleep on it and besides, what time would it be in Pakistan now? It seemed to me that I had gone in too hard with the changes: I really should have started small and built up gradually. Perhaps a five or ten-year plan rather than trying to do everything in one day. Ten years seemed like a lifetime but then nothing had changed in hundreds of years in Pakistan, was ten really that long? If we were to increase wages by say ten percent per year for the next few years we could more gradually reach our target. At the same time decrease the working hours which, in the case of the children, would be replaced by schooling instead.

It all kept coming back to the school.

Tuesday 26th April 2011

‘Sir, one of the workers was asking if you can help: his son needs an operation. Only one *lakh* rupees. He says for *Angrez* people, a *lakh* is nothing.’ A “lakh” meant one hundred thousand; about a thousand pounds.

It was two days later. I was about to ask what was wrong with the boy but a warning bell rang in my mind as I remembered Uncle’s story.

I said wearily, ‘No.’ I was about to add “I’m sorry” but was able to control even that impulse. ‘And don’t tell me stories like that again; I only want to hear about things related to work.’

There was a pause. ‘Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.’

I put down the phone. The call reminded me of the child workers which in turn reminded me of my own children and my concerns over Ayesha’s exams; even though she had not said it in so many words I had got the impression that she had made the cardinal mistake that I had specifically told her not to make, which was to not work hard enough in the first year. I had warned her that although it was true what they said about A Levels being the hardest thing you would ever do, in terms of quantity university

work built up so quickly that if you even fell behind by a week you would be in serious trouble.

And as for Dan, well, what could I say about him. In my conversations with Mimi she had told me how talented he was, almost a genius apparently; indeed, not only was he now predicted to graduate with first-class-honours, but was quite likely to come top of his class. Dan had told me that one of the reasons he liked Mimi was that apparently the Japanese had a very clean and minimalistic aesthetic which I myself liked, and clearly opposite to the Pakistani aesthetic, which was for loud and brash. Dan's designs in a way were actually more a fusion of Japanese and Pakistani which, rather strangely, had translated into something perfect for the Western market.

Dan had phoned the previous day. My pleasure at receiving a rare phone call had been curtailed by the "good" news: M&S had indeed placed a small order, "small" for them meaning huge for the likes of me, as a trial, and if things went well there would be more orders to follow. Dan had said that he might be needing the garage to store the samples from Karachi. I had replied that I could not allow my house to be used for exploitation.

Later that evening I had relayed the conversation to Zara, wiping out, half way through, her smile and look of pleasure at her son's budding business empire and her worries about her lack of a pension and who would look after her in her old age; *especially if she had to divorce her husband – or was that just in my mind?* She had walked off grimly to her part of the house, arms folded.

Back in my office, I looked through the doorway at Catherine's profile. It was now almost May, spring was in the air, and the thought of a full, no-secrets relationship was the only thing that modulated somewhat my worries for my children and thoughts of brick kilns and carpet factories and of Farina and her baby. I had visions of walks in parks, Catherine in flimsy summer dresses instead of her *shalwar-kameez* perhaps, of holidays in the sun, followed by nights of unlimited tequila and sex, no more counting of drinks, no more secret life, of licking salt off her backside...

Susan came in, interrupting my reverie.

Thursday 28th April 2011

It was two days later and I was in my office, early morning.

'There has been another attack, sir.'

'What?'

‘There has been an attack, sir. Hafeez has been injured.’

I rose to my feet. ‘What happened?’

‘They were going to burn down the factory, sir, but Hafeez managed to stop them. He was very brave. They even drenched him in petrol and threatened to set him alight, but still he refused to back down. They said, this is the final warning. Some of the families and children have also been threatened. Sir, they have said they don’t need air-conditioning; they have managed without it all these years, what use have they for it? They just want to work in peace.’

I took a deep, shuddering breath, the horror of the situation Hafeez had faced numbing my safe Western mind. I hated having to back down, giving in to these *goondas*, but then it was easy for me, here in my safe London office, as I had said to Catherine. It would be immoral of me to expose Hafeez any longer to such dangers. I had a schoolboy urge to go over to Pakistan myself and take on the mafia, single-handed, like Sylvester Stallone in *First Blood*. I remembered once in school a big skinhead, virtually twice my size, had insisted on bullying me. I had taken it for a while but then eventually the Pakistani *goonda*, deep inside me, had emerged. ‘Come on, then!’ I had said. It had not been the most artistic of fights, both of us heads down and arms flailing. But *he* had been the one to back down first, with a yelp and a cut lip. My right ear had sung for a week but apart from that I had emerged reasonably unscathed. He had never bothered me again. I also recalled having braved the New York of the nineteen-eighties for three months as a young man before Giuliani had cleaned it up; some incidents on the subway, late at night, still made me sweat and wonder how on earth I had emerged unscathed from *that*. Oh the sublime follies of youth!

But this was not the school playground, and the carpet mafia were not schoolboy bullies or even New York hoodlums. The carpet mafia did not fight fair and they did not fight in the open. They were bullies and cowards, gunning down twelve-year old boys on bicycles; but then Catherine had taught me that the Western powers, whom I had used to admire so much, were even bigger bullies and cowards, dropping their bombs from great heights to kill men, women and children, without any risk to themselves. *Collateral damage. Shock and awe.*

‘Sir?’ said Sharif, his tone indicating that he was wondering if I was still here.

I shook my head vigorously to clear my thoughts. ‘Okay, cancel the air-conditioning for now.’ Luckily no order had actually been placed; clearly, mere word reaching the mafia boys had been enough. ‘Are the injuries serious?’

‘No, sir.’

Thank God. I had been standing this whole time; I sat back down. ‘Okay, but make sure he sees a doctor, no matter what he says. Pay the bill and give him the usual bonus.’ I suspected that a Pathan would regard seeing a doctor as a rather sissy thing to do, unless a limb was actually hanging off or an eyeball had popped out – and even then there was no guarantee.

‘Yes, sir.’

I put down the phone and stared into space. I thought about Catherine and my job hunt, which was going well; I even had two second interviews lined up. The salaries were lower but then, if Catherine and I were together, our combined salary would be at least equal to my own pre-recession one. This was the problem with being a Muslim man: with the woman refusing to work, the man was always fighting with one hand held behind his back by his wife.

But could it really work with Catherine? I recalled seeing such couples, including that night which now seemed so long ago, and how silly it always looked. How long would it last? But maybe it *would* last. After all, the age gap was not *ridiculous*, was it? It wasn’t like she was twenty or twenty-two. She was *twenty-nine*; thirty next year. Age was just a number they said, and they also said you couldn’t choose who you fell in love with, although the real problem with her now was not age but my change of mind over having more children. *And my own children?* But they were no longer children, were they? How long was I supposed to keep putting them first? I sometimes wished I had not attended their births, had not changed their nappies, had not been the “modern” father, had not left myself open to my wife’s emotional blackmail over the years. And *as* for my wife, her threat had been “If we ever get divorced, you’ll never see your children again” even though I knew that divorce was exactly what she wanted, so she might even thank me; only her parents had prevented her from seeking one herself. But it had been years since she had last made that threat about the children so perhaps it was no longer in force. I sighed, not sure whether to feel angry at her or sad for her. I turned my thoughts back to Catherine, all of this too much for my brain to process.

She was unhappy with me at the moment because we had not had our Friday night together for almost four weeks now due to the children being at home for the Easter holidays; to be fair the first of the four weeks had been because the office had gone out and she had gone with them to pre-empt any hint of suspicion. But I had to

admit that *this* sort of unhappiness made *me* happy: to be wanted and desired – perhaps the most basic human need of all. I had bought her a nice present to make up, a gold-plated DKNY watch, saying that every time she looked at it she would remember me. I had stopped buying spontaneous presents for my wife years ago, even though I enjoyed giving them; “official” presents – birthdays, anniversaries – were still expected. Catherine had been pleased and reasonably mollified.

She had been in a better mood this week because this coming Friday, tomorrow, would see a return to our normal routine, indeed more than that. Tomorrow was the Royal Wedding; I had no real interest and Zara had said that perhaps she would go home to her family to watch it, maybe even go to Hyde Park for the atmosphere and the big screen, and that perhaps she would stay the night. I had had a brainwave and had almost encouraged the idea, not too eagerly I hoped. My heart thudding faster than when I had done my paragliding, a thought had occurred to me: to spend the whole night with Catherine! She had lit up at the news and my own mouth watered at the prospect... a whole night! Think of all the possibilities. Two weeks ago she had told me that she had got herself “fixed”, there was no need for condoms anymore, and we were both clearly clean. For some reason I had not availed myself of this as yet but perhaps this might be the right time. She had also recently confessed that she was into bondage; I had started to get excited, thinking that she wanted me to tie her up and spank her, but then she had explained that what she meant was that she wanted to tie *me* up and whip me! I had laughed out loud and told her she must be joking – *nobody* whipped a Pakistani man and remained alive to tell the tale! I might not be a *goonda* but there were some things even I would not tolerate. She had given that scary, female smile and nod that indicated that she was willing to bide her time until I came round to her point of view.

But this had encouraged me to think that I might suggest the possibility of the love that dared not speak its name, possibly trade fantasies. I had not brought up this subject so far, more than happy with what I was getting, but I was hoping that modern woman that she was, brought up in the age of free Internet pornography, watching which an alien anthropologist might assume that actually this was the normal mode of sexual congress, she would not be horrified by the idea. She had also promised to buy a new lingerie-set for the occasion; I had told her to get an expensive set and that I would pay for it, my present for the night, seeing as I would be the one to benefit, it seemed only fair. I almost groaned aloud at the visions that came to my mind.

With a herculean effort I brought my mind back to reality, to more important matters and more long-term possibilities with Catherine. If I were to go back to my “normal” job, what guarantee was there that that would be any less tainted? I had used to work for banks in the city, and look at the unbelievable mess they had caused. I could kid myself that I had only written the software, I wasn’t an actual trader, but surely the good salary and bonuses I had received had been indirectly a result of the borderline criminal activities of the banks? And what guarantee was there that any job I took wasn’t part of that other world-wide-web of deceit and corruption, no better than I was coming up against in Pakistan with the carpet mafia? They said that the only difference in corruption between East and West was that in the East a hundred rupees did the job, but in the West you needed a million. I had used to work for Sky and still had contacts there; I had thought about approaching them but now, with my new-found knowledge about the mafia, and having realised the fact that Murdoch, indirectly my ex-boss, was one of the biggest mafia bosses of all, that avenue too was closed.

But then, what to do? How to live?

Part 4: Showdown

Monday 2nd May 2011

I sat in my office the following Monday morning distracted for two reasons. The first reason was the news that had shocked and stunned the world – the killing of bin Laden – which I was reading up about on the Internet. I watched the photos and YouTube videos of Obama and his cohort playing their very own video games live, in real-time and with breathing human beings, thinking that Obama looked like the whitest person in the room. The second reason was because of my dilemma with Catherine. In the open-plan part of the office the atmosphere was subdued as people straggled in Monday-morning-faced, and Catherine was at her desk, also looking distracted, presumably for the same reason as me. Outside, it was typical May weather: pretending to be summer but failing heroically like an English batsman.

In contrast to the grim bin Laden news were my memories of the ecstasy of Friday night, which presumably we had shared with William and Kate. Catherine had reminded me that Kate was short for Katherine so I delighted in imagining I had my very own princess in bed with me. I also remembered something my wife had once said after returning home from a wedding: that married couples liked weddings because it reminded them of their own wedding night and that they would go home and recreate theirs. In my case, of course, it was the last thing I wanted to be reminded of.

The fact that it was an official bank holiday saved us from the suspicion of taking a day off together. I had booked a cosy B&B just outside of London, in Chesham, away from even the prying eyes of the Ahmadiyya community; despite the fact that it was tiny, they seemed to be everywhere if there was any suspicion of fun being had. It had been a veritable weekend in Arcadia, full of sex and walks in the woods, and a romantic candle-lit dinner on the Friday evening; to my amazement, at Catherine's suggestion, the dinner had included champagne and oysters! A classic case of how unpleasant things could be made attractive by simply slapping a high price on them, I had thought. I had used to think I was getting too old for seconds and thirds in the sex department but Catherine had proved me wrong. And then, on the Saturday morning, my favourite type of lovemaking: morning sex or, more poetically, in the words of Homer, "rose-fingered dawn" sex, despite the complications of bad breath and

smelly bodies; the bad breath I did not like, but the smelly bodies, strangely enough, was an attraction, as opposed to the modern, hygienic, natural-body-odour-cleansing perfumes and unguents. Zara was not a great fan of morning sex but Catherine seemed as hungry in the sex department as I was.

I was all dressed and ready by nine and asked Catherine to get up. She looked at her watch, still bleary-eyed and tousled-haired, covering up her small breasts. I had told her several times to stop doing that but it was obviously an ingrained habit; she didn't seem to understand that the upside of small breasts was just that – the pertness. In contrast to her bosom-covering and to Zara, Catherine was rather more abandoned during our actual love-making; indeed, her explicit and specific requests were rather demanding and exhausting, compared to the *implicit*, brief and silent lovemaking I was used to with my wife. I wondered if Catherine's head was aching as much as mine. I was pretty sure her *jaw* was *not* aching as much as mine!

'But it's only nine, darling.'

'I know; half the day is over. Let's go, let's have breakfast, let's go for a walk. It's a nice day. We need to get going by about twelve.'

The Saturday morning had continued in the same successful vein: leisurely breakfast, the crunch of leaves, the fresh air tinged with the smells of mud and nature, the singing of the birds, the still and peaceful country ambience. We walked hand in hand, stopping frequently for long, lingering, wet kisses, and to gaze into each other's eyes.

It was after one of these lingering kisses that my dilemma had started in earnest. 'When are you going to tell your wife about us?' Her tone and use of words made it clear that it was no longer a question of "if" but "when".

I looked at her helplessly. 'Trust me, my darling, you don't want me to do that.' I relished the beautiful word "darling" on my tongue, the "rrr" sound trilling in my mind rather like the bell that the Prophet had apparently used to hear when conversing with *his* Beloved. 'I'm only thinking of you – well, both of us, I suppose. If my wife finds out she'll go berserk. And you don't know my in-laws. They're quite tribal. They could do anything. They'll sack you for a start and maybe even make up some allegations.'

She looked at me with wide and wondering eyes. She whispered, '*But my darling, what about last night?*'

Memories of what she was referring to went through my mind. We were lying in bed; so far, to my pleasant and exhausted surprise, everything we had done had been at

*her request, including something that had seemed to go on for hours until my jaw ached and I begged for mercy; she had almost broken my nose twice, proving that Zara was not the only woman who loved this particular activity. Catherine had laughed and given me permission to stop; she had then returned the favour. We were now resting in the double-decker spooning position, fingers entwined, nuzzling and kissing, and making “mm” sounds; she seemed to enjoy my weight on her and even in the missionary position she had told me not to use my elbows so much. The two bedside lamps provided a low, romantic glow to the room; it was quiet, save for the noise of the plumbing and the occasional sounds from the other guests. Now I whispered in her ear, ‘Can I put it in the other place?’ She went still and her “mm”s ceased. She paused for a moment, then lifted her head and turned it to look at me, her expression changing from playfulness and blissful satisfaction to slightly tearful. The lamps made her shadow dance on the bed as she moved. She too whispered as she said, ‘Do you **love** me, Imran? Do you **really really** love me?’ I nodded and said, ‘More than anything.’ She looked at me long and searchingly. ‘Say it to me in Urdu.’ ‘Meh tumse bohot pyaar karta hunh. I love you very much.’ She turned her head back to the pillow. ‘Then yes, my darling, you can do anything you want to me. Just make sure you use lots of lube and go gently.’ The final few words were slightly echoed by the pillow.*

Back in the woods, I took a slow deep breath. I put my arms around her and hugged her tight, nuzzled her neck. ‘I really do love you but I still can’t help thinking that you would be better off with someone else, long term.’

‘So then why did you do what you did? *You came inside every part of me last night, Imran, without a condom.* I could feel your stuff splashing inside me all night. Why did you say what you said?’

I sighed. ‘I *meant* what I said. And I thought you didn’t mind what I did. I *did* ask, didn’t I?’

‘I *don’t* mind, Imran, I don’t mind, that’s not the problem. I’m willing to do anything for you if it makes you happy. But you obviously don’t feel the same way about me.’

‘But I *do*, though.’

She stepped back from my embrace and crossed her arms. ‘So what would you do for me, then?’ she asked, going into “prove it” mode.

‘I would do anything for you.’

‘Really?’ she said, with a cynical raise of her eyebrows.

I nodded.

She gave a disbelieving, testing smile. *'Would you die for me?'* She tried to say it playfully, as though to make me aware that she knew this might be a bit too much but she couldn't think of anything else. But there was also a clear note of longing in her voice, which it seemed to me she tried to control but couldn't quite, nor also her lower lip trembling a little.

I nodded without hesitation. 'Yes.'

And I meant it. I was not being foolish or naive. I was not a love-struck teenager. I knew that she, like me, was a fallible human being with weaknesses, that there was every possibility that, under the right circumstances, if it suited her purpose, she too could reject me at a moment's notice. But this was not about her, it was about me. I had always wanted to love someone unreservedly. I wasn't sure whether or not this was because I had grown up on a secret diet of Bollywood films, in particular *Kabhie Kabhie*, the most romantic film of all time, with its haunting music and theme of thwarted love. I would have loved my wife like that if she had allowed me to. If Catherine wanted me to love her in that way, no matter what faults she might have, I was more than happy to do so. What mattered was not whether the person you loved was perfect or not, all that mattered was that they *wanted* to be loved and were prepared to return that love, even if human frailty meant that they might turn around one day and stab you in the back. Conversely, I also knew that it was possible that at some point in the future, rather than dying for her, I might want to kill her.

But right now, at this moment, with the secluded brown woods around us and the lonely grey sky above, as though we were the only two people in the world, I loved her, and that was enough.

'Who else would you die for?' She was still in testing mode, but she now lowered her arms.

'My children.' I gave a small laugh. 'Even though they never contact me.'

She smiled briefly. 'Who else?'

'No one.'

'What about your wife?'

'I would do, but she doesn't want me to.'

Another silence.

'How do I know you mean it?'

I thought for a moment and then smiled at a recollection, deriving from the fact that our hotel room had prints of van Gogh's *Sunflowers* on the wall. 'I obviously can't *prove* it to you but I *can* give you a token.'

'What?'

'I'll hold my hand over a burning candle until you tell me to stop. If I take my hand away, I fail.'

'Van Gogh,' she said.

I smiled with delight. 'You *see, that's* why I would die for you! Because you *get* the reference!'

She sighed, stepped back into my embrace and put her head on my shoulder and nuzzled, her breath hot on my neck. 'I believe you, my darling. What are we going to do? And anyway, why do I have to be scared of Mr Chaudhary, knowing what I know?'

I sighed also. 'I don't think that will help you much. I've been doing some research of my own. Apparently, everybody knows about this child labour business and nobody gives a shit, including our own wonderfully principled and humane British Government. And that's because basically the whole of the world's economy is based on it.'

She only gave a small, perfunctory nod of agreement, presumably indicating that this did not come to her as the revelation it had come to me. 'So what are we going to do?' she repeated.

Capriciously, even though her normal mode of dress was what I found intriguing and attractive about her, I had asked her to wear a short summer dress and she had done so; she looked girlish and heart-stoppingly alluring, reminding me of how lucky I was and making me almost pinch myself to check that she was real. I myself was wearing jeans and a t-shirt as opposed to my usual business attire.

I sighed. 'I don't know. I'm sorry, I've changed my mind about having more kids because of my experiences in Pakistan, and that's why I just think it would be so unfair on you to continue with this. You'll hate me for it sooner or later. Not to mention that if I tell my wife, we'll both be out of a job; I have no money, it's all tied up in the house, we'll both be out on the streets. I love you, I really do. I've never felt like this with anyone before and there's nothing I'd like better than to spend every minute with you, but that's why I don't want to hurt you.'

Her face had registered a series of emotions at my mini-speech: anger at the bit about the kids, frustration at the bit about the problems, and love at the bit about

wanting to spend every minute with her. We returned to the hotel to pick up our luggage. The journey home was spent mostly in sombre silence.

Back in my office the phone rang, jarring me back to reality. I dealt with the phone call, which was mercifully not about the mafia – always my fear now whenever the phone rang. Then I tried to focus on my work, in between sending my CV for more job applications, sending emails to the estate agent saying that I was willing to drop my asking price further, and puzzling over my dilemma with Catherine. The irony was that I had returned home in a rush for nothing. My wife had phoned later in the day to ask if I minded her staying over for the whole weekend. I had said no, I did not mind, wondering why on earth I was staying with someone who clearly wasn't too bothered, when I could be with someone who actually wanted me.

Saturday 7th May 2011

Like everyone, I knew that a phone call in the middle of the night could only mean bad news. It was the Saturday of that week, and my first thought was that it was the kids; either that or the mafia even though I had stopped stirring up that particular Pakistani nest. But when I managed to struggle awake and look at my mobile it said "Private number". When I answered, it was a mature female voice with a West Indian accent that I did not recognise.

'Good maarning, is that Mr Sheikh?'

'Yes.'

'This is Ealing haspitaal.' The words sent a chill through my heart. Again, my first sleep-garbled thought was for the children, but then realised that if something had happened to either of them, they would not have been taken to Ealing Hospital.

'Yes?'

'We have an adult male of around eighty years of age. We believe it may be your farder.'

I was now sitting up and fully awake. 'Is he...'

'His condishaan is serious, sir. You should get here right away.'

Someone had once told me that if the hospital described somebody's condition as serious, they really meant it.

Zara was awake, sensing that something was wrong. 'What's the matter? Is it the children?' The moonlight through the open curtains danced on her face. Even our whispers seemed loud in the quiet of the night. There were no sounds from outside.

I shook my head.

‘My Dad?’ she asked.

I shook my head again. ‘My Dad. He’s in the hospital.’

‘Shall I come with you?’

‘Let me go and find out first; it might not be serious.’

Zara thought for a moment and then got up without the usual reluctance she normally displayed on getting out of bed in the morning. ‘It must be serious if they’re ringing you in the middle of the night. I should come with you. I’ll stay outside; he doesn’t have to see me.’

I was glad of the company. I stubbed my toe on something as I went to switch on the light and yelped in pain.

*

I sat in the hospital, thinking over my father’s life. He had left his whole family, his country, his culture. Had come over, worked double-shifts, spent six years of his life all by himself, and for what? To die alone and unloved. I had phoned my siblings and they had turned up, half with partners, half without. But when they had all left after a “respectable” half-hour, I knew that it was understood that I would take care of the formalities. The worst part would be having to deal with the mosque. Thank God, at least, that my father had not carried out his threat to give the house away to them. I felt a moment of shame at the thought but dismissed it; no, I had nothing to be ashamed of there. Those leeches deserved the money even less than me and my careless siblings, that was for sure.

I turned my head to look at Zara who was sitting next to me. She gave me a sympathetic smile and nod. Her parents had arrived and were sitting outside; she must have phoned them at some point, though I had not noticed when.

I said, whispering even though there was probably no need to in the deathly silence of the large holding room, which was empty except for steel hospital beds and equipment, ‘Would you mind just leaving me alone for a bit, I’ll be out in a minute?’

She nodded. ‘Sure.’

When she had gone I stood up, the orange plastic chair scraping away beneath me, and leant over my father’s dead body, which I now noticed was tiny and emaciated. I was glad of the antiseptic smell of the hospital which masked the death-smell of my father. He had used to be rather heavy-set in his heyday and still loomed like a giant in my mind, a remnant of my childhood impressions, I assumed. I now realised that I truly

was an orphan. I had not seen my father as much as I should have done even when he was alive, but at the back of my mind he had still been present, still ahead of me in the queue, shielding me on the conveyor belt of death. My only consolation was that they had assured me that he had died peacefully in his sleep; I had never quite understood what that meant, and when I asked was told that it literally just meant what it said: they died without waking up and with minimal pain. (*'But how can you tell?' 'There are no signs of struggle.'*) My father had been discovered by his downstairs lodger when he had tried to wake him for *tahajjud*, voluntary night-time prayer, which, apparently and surprisingly, he had only started doing recently. The same lodger also had my phone number for emergencies.

I kissed my father on the forehead; the last time I could recall kissing him was when I had been perhaps ten years old. Then, my voice shaking, I said to him the words I had always longed to say in life. 'I love you, Abu. Thank you for your sacrifice. I'm sorry I couldn't be a better son.'

*

On the way home, in the ghostly air of 5am, I said, 'Do you think we should tell the children?' I was feeling rather grotty, having only rinsed my mouth out when we had left in such a hurry instead of brushing my teeth properly; I also suffered a little from dry eyes, especially first thing in the morning, but had forgotten to put in my eye-drops. Luckily, Zara had insisted on driving. Traffic was starting to flow. I had switched off the car radio when we had come out from the house; somehow *Buzz Asia* had not seemed appropriate.

'Of course we have to tell the children.'

'But they're in the middle of their exams and Ayesha's already panicked.'

Zara shook her head in disbelief at the difference in thinking between us, her attitude already almost reverting to normal and away from the soft and respectful one she had assumed because of my father's death; I wasn't sure who was right or wrong. 'We *have* to tell them. The lucky – ' she paused and repeated the word "lucky" in an ironic tone, '*lucky* thing is that it's the weekend. They can say goodbye at least. Who'll go to Pakistan?'

I shook my head, all of this too much right now. She took a hand off the steering wheel, reached out and patted my thigh, a rare affectionate gesture. She said, 'Never mind, we'll talk about it in the morning.'

Her parents had asked whether they should come back with us but I had said no, please come the next day. Back home in our bed, I wondered if my father's death would merit a cuddle from my wife. I waited for it, aching, hugging myself in the meantime, but it did not come. I was fairly sure that if I were to cuddle her instead she would not object, but I felt unable to do so, as though I would be taking advantage of my father's demise.

Sunday 15th May 2011

It was a week later and I had returned from a lightning visit to bury my father. No visit for ten years and now two within the space of a year. PIA had been helpful and had managed to get me one seat; under certain circumstances even Pakistani inefficiency could be transformed. The mosque too was good at certain things: they apparently had well-oiled procedures and had taken care of things at this end, and the hospital also had been only too happy to expedite matters. My father had died on a Saturday and the Hazur had carried out the funeral prayers the very next day. We had phoned the children on Saturday afternoon and they had arrived promptly a few hours later.

Uncle had contacts and had spoken to somebody at PIA; I had found myself flying out on Monday night with my father's body, and flying straight back again on Thursday.

I had taken the week off work. Catherine had expressed her condolences and had told me not to worry: she would take care of everything.

On returning I had stayed in bed for two whole days but on Sunday I could not put off my final duty any longer: I was in my father's house going through his things. He was the most disorganised person in the world, his room a complete mess, but he *had* been organised in one thing: he had a large, A4 size, leather wallet, which I had bought for him, in which he kept all his important papers. I had already opened it earlier for his passport but now went through it more methodically: the deeds to the house, his will, in which he left all his worldly goods to his (ungrateful) children, various other bits and pieces. I also found the form from the mosque for people who wanted to bequeath their property to them. I looked at the piece of paper, my heart starting to thud.

My father had signed it.

It was not dated, it was not witnessed, and the signature had the hallmark shakiness that my father's writing had acquired over recent years. In a court of law it would probably not even stand up, but the fact remained that he had signed it.

I sat on the bed and breathed deeply, now glad that my wife had not offered to accompany me; I had been feeling a bit upset about that. My mind was in a daze and I could not think. What to do? Did I have a moral obligation to respect my father's wishes? But then, I had been relying on this money to dig myself out, at least partially, of the financial hole I had got myself into. I felt anger at my wife for getting me into that hole in the first place.

I had left the door ajar. I heard one of the lodgers coming down the stairs; I took the few steps to go and close the door. We had not yet decided what to do about the lodgers: get rid of them or sell the house as a going concern. I went and stood at the patio door, gazing out at the May drizzle and concreted garden, occasionally resting my forehead against the cool glass, flashes of my childhood memories in this house passing through my mind – mostly incoherent feelings rather than fully-formed incidents.

Should I discuss it with somebody or should I just keep quiet? My siblings would be no problem: they would laugh at the mere suggestion of any moral conundrum. My wife? She really had nothing to do with it. Who else? The mosque? If they got even a hint of this there was no doubt they would try to get their claws in.

I tore the form into tiny pieces and put them into my pocket to be thrown away in the first public bin I saw.

Friday 20th May 2011

It was the following Friday and I was sitting at work. Catherine had, for the time being at least, stopped pursuing the question of our relationship status; whether sympathy and respect for my father's death, in addition to my reassurances about my love for her, was part of the reason I was not sure. It was four o'clock, about the time when I would normally have been looking forward to my time alone with Catherine; but the excitement of that was in temporary abeyance because of the constant thoughts of my father and *that form*. My mobile rang. To my surprise it was Ayesha. I felt a moment of pleasure tinged with some anxiety: she *never* rang; the occasional text, yes, but never a phone call.

I answered it. 'Hello?'

There was silence.

'Hello? Ayesha?'

I heard sounds that sounded suspiciously like sobs. 'Ayesha!' I said, alarmed, getting to my feet.

Finally, she spoke. ‘Dad?’ Her voice was shaky.

‘What is it, sweetheart?’

‘Dad, I need to see you.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I can’t tell you over the phone. Can you please come here?’

I started to pace; I went over to the open door and closed it. ‘But, sweetheart, that won’t be very convenient. Besides, it’s Friday, why don’t you just come home? Are your exams over?’

‘That’s what I want to speak to you about. I had a panic attack in my last exam. They had to pull me out. I think I’ve failed my exams, Dad.’

Stay calm, stay calm. ‘It can’t be that bad, my darling. You only have to *pass* the first year, right? You don’t have to get A’s, do you? I know you’re used to them but never mind.’

‘But what about the one I’ve just missed?’

‘Don’t worry, you can get mitigating circumstances. What’s this all about? Is it because of Dada-Abu?’

There was no reply.

‘Ayesha?’

‘Please, Dad, please come here. There’s something else I have to tell you.’ She was starting to become hysterical, her tone reminding me of a prank a female friend had played on me at university, phoning me late at night and insisting that I come and pick her up from Leicester Square. As it turned out she had just been on the girls’ side of the halls.

‘Okay, fine.’ *What was it with some women and their hysterics?* ‘I’ll come straight away, but it’ll take me a few hours. I’ll have to go home, get the car... There’s gonna be so much traffic... Are you sure you can’t just come home?’

‘Dad, just take the train. It’s so much easier. AND DON’T TELL MUM.’

I halted my pacing. ‘I have to tell her, she’s your mother.’

‘Please, Dad, please don’t tell Mum, I beg you.’

Perhaps now was not the time to argue. ‘Okay, fine. I’ll be there as soon as possible.’

I went over to the door, opened it, went over to Catherine’s desk and explained the situation. Her initial look of concern changed to frustration. She looked around the office, saw that people were engrossed, unusually busy for a Friday afternoon, only Suki

away from her desk at the water-cooler whence came the sound of gurgling; further cover was provided by a print job that somebody had set running on the printer nearby. She whispered, ‘Okay, but is there any way I can see you over the weekend, then, just for a few hours?’ She lowered her voice even further and, with a small smile of embarrassment, said apologetically, ‘I’m on my period at the moment so we won’t be able to, you know, but –’

I interrupted, ‘That’s not the only reason I enjoy being with you, my darling – not even the main reason.’ She was rather insatiable, and she was not to know that with all that was going on in my life at the moment, news of her monthly cycle even came as a slight relief; a weekend session of kissing and cuddling and *conversing* would go down nicely, I thought, rather than the gymnastics sessions she preferred, as though she was preparing for the London 2012 Olympics. In my case, the *jinn* was willing but the clay was weak. ‘I’ll try my best; there’s nothing I’d like better.’

I returned to my cubicle, cleared my desk, and within five minutes was out of the office.

*

Two hours, two trains and a taxi ride later, I sat in my daughter’s compact uni room, feeling rather nostalgic. It was a self-contained unit with built-in mini shower-room, reminding me of one of those modern Japanese hotels. It was neutral smelling, with no evidence of alcohol or smoking, neither tobacco nor the *ganja* I myself had only tried once at university, or anything else. It was a slightly nerdy room, with posters of the Periodic Table and such-like on the walls instead of male models or rock-stars. Mind you, I myself had used to have two lots of posters for my room, one set for myself and one for family visitors. I had left my briefcase at work, not wanting to lug it around; I had taken off my suit jacket which lay next to me on the tiny, almost camp-like, bed.

Ayesha sat as far away from me as possible, refusing to meet my eye; she sat on a colourful bean bag in one corner of the room whilst I perched on the bed. She was wearing jeans and a long t-shirt. I sometimes wondered whether she wore these long t-shirts or jumpers, depending on the weather, only to cover her figure or to hide her slight plumpness. I had not yet managed to coax her into telling me what this was all about but I could feel that the confession, whatever it was, was on the verge. The good thing was that she clearly wanted to tell me but wasn’t sure how.

‘Look, sweetheart, whatever it is, you know you can talk to me about it.’

‘I think I’m going to fail my exams.’

I had the feeling that that was not the main problem; that she was using this, serious though it was, to prepare me for something even worse. I could think of only one thing worse apart from the fact that she might be dying: I hoped and prayed, prayed and hoped, that she was not pregnant.

‘I’m sure you won’t fail. You might not get A’s but at least you can learn your lesson for next year. What happened? Was it Dada-Abu? Or did you not work hard enough?’

Her lips trembled and then she finally burst forth: ‘It’s all your fault!’

I was taken aback. ‘How could it possibly be my fault? I’ve tried to help you in every way I can.’

‘Forcing me to find a boyfriend!’

‘What?!’

She started to cry again, her face crumpling up. ‘This boy’s abused me.’

My father’s heart went cold with anger. I got involuntarily to my feet, my fists clenching. ‘What boy? What has he done? I’ll kill him.’

Slowly, between sobs, using coded language, the story came out. To cut it short and using all my interpreting skills, I understood that the boy had been charming to start with but that as soon as he had had his way had told her that any Muslim girl who was willing to do “*that*”, whatever “*that*” was, must be a slut and if she seriously thought he was going to marry her she had another think coming; besides, he was already engaged to his cousin in Pakistan. My main worry and only connected intervention had been, in a roundabout way, and assuming that “*that*” meant sex, was to ask if she had taken precautions. To my relief she had given a tiny, cringing nod in embarrassed reply, tiny enough to indicate yes, but not so emphatic as to admit what she had actually done.

‘But he didn’t actually *force* you did he, I mean he didn’t actually...’ She shook her head. ‘So you don’t want to make an official complaint?’ Another shake. ‘When was this?’ ‘A few weeks ago; he said that it would mean we could concentrate on our exams.’ That would not look convincing on any kind of a charge-sheet, I thought.

I had sat down whilst she was talking. I now got up and made to go towards her, to comfort her. She shrank from me, held up a hand. ‘*Don’t touch me!*’

I stopped, held up my hands in surrender, sat back down. ‘Okay, fine. I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I wanted you to have a good time at uni, to enjoy your life, become independent. I didn’t mean for this to happen to you, and maybe I should have spoken to

you more openly about these things. I'm sorry this bastard did this to you, but it doesn't have to ruin your life. And there *are* nice boys out there, I promise.'

'But how can you tell?'

'It's actually quite easy, but you need experience. That's why good parents are so important. Next time, if you like a boy, bring him home: that's always a good way of weeding out the rogues.'

'But what about Mum... Nano?'

I looked away, sighing deeply. Yes indeed, what about Mum and Nano?

A few moments of silence followed.

'What are you thinking, Papa?' She had suddenly reverted to what she had used to call me as a child.

I wasn't really thinking, at least not coherently, but her query did trigger the distillation of some distinguishable strands of thought. I was wondering when the gods would stop hurling their thunderbolts at me. I was thinking that I had to put an end to my unfair treatment of Catherine, otherwise how was I any different to this bastard who had ruined my daughter? I had to stop stringing Catherine along and make a decision, one way or the other; make a clean break or leave my wife; re-change my mind about having children or end the relationship once and for all. Either way, the chances were I would lose everything: my house, my job – because the only realistic way to end the relationship would be for me to leave it – and possibly my children. My tummy started to ache at the permutations.

I was also thinking that I had been looking back that morning at the history of my nightmares over the past year or so: my dreams of the floods had been replaced by those of the sweat-children, followed by the mafia, and finally of being crushed by the conveyor belt of death, with my father no longer in front of me to protect me. I wondered if the latest instalment would be to do with my daughter.

But most immediately I was dreading telling Zara about this. She would go berserk and rest her case that this confirmed that I was an unfit father, and that she had been right about me all along. There was no way I could avoid telling her, was there?

'Who is this boy? Is he in your year?'

She nodded. 'Yes. But he's older: he's a mature student.'

'How old?'

She looked embarrassed. 'He's quite old. Twenty-five.'

'But why didn't you go for someone your own age?'

The familiar “Dad, you don’t know anything” look came over her face, which was in fact mildly comforting. ‘They’re so immature, Dad.’ She hesitated, her expression reverting to normal. ‘Actually, there is this one boy?’

‘Oh?’

‘The only problem is, he’s white.’

‘So what’s the problem? Why didn’t you go for him instead?’

‘I just thought it would be easier if I found a Muslim boy, like you said. Easier for Mum and her family and all that. Especially with the drinking and stuff.’

‘Do you drink?’

‘Of course not!’

Despite her comments last Christmas when I had felt she was being genuine, this time I knew she was lying. ‘Tell me the truth.’

She looked away. ‘I’ve had a few sips of Bacardi and coke.’

Of course: she was an South-Asian girl at uni; what else would she drink?

She was looking at me anxiously. ‘You won’t tell Mum, will you? I don’t actually *drink*. It’s just sometimes, you know, a few sips; it’s impossible to socialise otherwise.’

Yes, indeed it was. As indeed how to live in this society, under this constant tug of war. Maybe I was an unfit father, had no idea how to live in this culture; maybe my wife and in-laws were right, after all; maybe I should just stop fighting them, go home, tell her the truth, tell her that she was in charge from now on, that I had had enough. Perhaps make a new start with Catherine, but who was to say that that too wouldn’t end in disaster once the honeymoon period was over, probably for different reasons? One never stopped making mistakes, one simply made different ones. But then, wasn’t that life?

‘Does he know about this boy?’

She nodded. ‘He even warned me; said there was something dodgy about him. I just thought he was jealous.’

‘Is he still interested in you, do you think?’

She nodded. ‘I know he is.’

Thank God for English boys: always a good backup plan for soiled South-Asian girls, or those past their use-by dates; a small payback for colonialism.

‘And – ’ she looked up hopefully. ‘He only drinks *wine!*’ She pulled a face. ‘I think his grandmother’s *French*.’

I was grateful that she was at least starting to cheer up slightly; perhaps she was relieved that I had not gone berserk. ‘Is he a nice boy?’

She nodded and started to cry again. ‘If it wasn’t for him I might not be here right now. I was going to kill myself but he helped me.’

I ignored the dramatics. ‘Is he in your class?’

She shook her head. ‘No, he’s just in the halls.’

‘What’s he studying?’

‘Creative writing and games design.’

I shook my head in bafflement at the degrees one could study these days.

‘And his family?’

She shrugged. ‘I have no idea. They live in Bristol, that’s all I know.’

As she had calmed down somewhat, I took the opportunity to go and stand at the window, to stretch my body and to try and clear my mind. It was now past seven and a group of female students, four white and one brown, dressed in schoolgirl uniforms with the shortest mini-skirts they could get away with were presumably heading for the uni bar, some end-of-term function perhaps; they were giggling and bantering. Had it not been for the shock of my daughter’s revelations I would have laughed out loud: What *was* it with the young? At *school* they objected to wearing uniforms, and *here* they were back in them.

I turned back to Ayesha. ‘I think I’d better take you home. Your mum’ll kill me if I leave you here after this.’

She turned hysterical again. ‘*No!* I’m not going home!’ She got up and ran from the room, banging the door behind her.

For a millisecond I debated in my mind running after her but decided against it. Instead, I took the opportunity to use the bathroom, giving her time to get away, and then left the room, closing the door carefully behind me.

It was time to face the *band, baja, baraat*: the drum, the trumpet and the wedding procession.

*

It was only on my way back, as I sat on the train, that I experienced the delayed shock of my daughter’s revelations. The world had acquired the intensity, strangeness and fragility of a van Gogh painting; I expected at any moment for the fabric of space and time to unravel and the world to be exposed for the *Matrix*-like artificial creation that it was. How much longer could I cling on, like Raskolnikov on the ledge? My daughter

despoiled – raped in all but the legal definition of the word; me, the human being put on earth to protect her, helpless. I looked over at the connecting door, imagined opening it, allowing myself to fall through. Would it hurt or would it be reasonably instantaneous? I visualised my mangled body, the screams of the passengers, the announcements that would follow: *We regret the delay which is due to an earlier incident.* But how would that help my daughter?

Or was I being melodramatic? I could not quite work out if I had over- or under-reacted to my daughter's account. I remembered when she had got her first tooth, her first period: her body at the mercy of relentless biological forces, her mind under pressure from equally relentless cultural ones. I looked around at my fellow passengers, taking some comfort from their apparent normality and calmness; comfort also from the pleasant swaying of the train which I rarely experienced, being mostly a tube-user, though the swaying was much less than in the old days, I noticed. I received a text message from Catherine asking if everything was all right, breaking our agreement about text messages; but then perhaps her reasoning was that this was a legitimate occasion. I texted back to say that everything was fine. The idea of sharing my daughter's troubles with Catherine seemed inappropriate and unfair, seeing as she was only ten years older.

My thoughts turned to possible solutions. I felt almost envious of my family and in-laws who would go to the Hazur – with his direct line to God – on such occasions to ask for guidance; but then, since his advice was always invariably the same – prayer – why bother? Still, they must get something out of it. I suddenly had the idea of going to see my wife at the mosque; at least in public there would be less chance of a huge argument that might possibly lead to fisticuffs.

By the time I got home it was ten to nine. Actually, this particular class was not in the mosque but in someone's house, not far from where we lived. Sometimes she took the car, sometimes she walked; this time she had walked. Despite feeling exhausted and as though I had been halfway round the world, I picked up the car and drove the mile or so to the house where the class was held. Even as I approached I could see I was too late: people were emerging. My wife appeared at the front door and, after final farewells to the hostess whilst putting on her shoes in the porch, she came out. She was laughing and bubbly in a way that she normally was not at home. But instead of turning in the direction that she should have done she turned in the other. I was about to rush out of the car but paused; that direction was rather quiet and would negate the

motivation for coming here to see her. I was suddenly puzzled as to why she was going that way: darkness was falling and surely she should have taken the main route. I waited a few minutes, pondering, then drove slowly to the end of the road, turned and stopped at the corner; I switched off the car, my heart thumping at the sight that met my eyes. About a hundred feet away they stood, mouths locked, she and a man who looked rather like a namesake of mine – Imran Khan, the former Pakistani cricket captain. I knew the man vaguely: he was the local head of the community, divorced with one teenage daughter, whom I had seen earlier departing with her mother. He was about the same age as me but taller and better looking. I was reminded of her dig back in the day that she had always wanted to marry someone over six feet. The rest of the class had now dispersed.

I did not feel anger, was not tempted to rush out and argue with her about her hypocrisy or challenge the man to a fight, despite my black belt in Judo. I felt an intense sadness, thoughts of my father, of my daughter, of my unhappy marriage, of the sweat-children all condensing into a singularity of the pain of life, the realisation that in the end, when it really came down to it, you were on your own. And now my whole being *became* that singularity, wanted to explode with the force of the original Big Bang. I closed my eyes, took deep breaths to manage the pain, my body involuntarily half-curling itself into the foetal position. The pain diverted itself into the urge to cry but I managed to control it, using the opportunity instead to try hardening my heart just one more notch; after forty-five years, I felt I was almost there. Indeed, my urge to cry *did* now turn to anger: anger at the fact that I had been dreading telling my wife about our daughter doing something that most young people did, making the mistakes they needed to make, learning how to play the game of life, the game that ultimately had no rules and no referee.

After about five minutes, during which I was vaguely aware of several cars passing, as well as the odd pedestrian, they broke apart. She was laughingly trying to get away. He was clearly trying to persuade her to do something, tugging at her hand, and she was shaking her head, laughing, pointing at her watch, saying something until reluctantly he accepted and they said goodbye with final parting gestures; I was no lip reader and it was too gloomy to really see her face. She headed off towards home, away from me with that slow, slightly rolling gait of hers, whilst the man came towards me, presumably heading back to where his car was parked. He was wearing crisp white *shalwar-kameez* and a black Pakistani waistcoat, even though I knew he had lived in

Britain for many years, and increasing the resemblance with the former cricketer/playboy even more. I wondered if the man was aware of the similarity and deliberately cultivated it to a certain extent.

I looked down as the man went past, covering my face with my hand, pretending to scratch. When I looked up, Zara, who was wearing a blue and white *shalwar-kameez*, was a dot in the distance. I sat there until my mobile rang. It was my wife, asking if I had come home and taken the car; she sounded slightly worried.

*

When I got home, the house smelt of food. I assumed that she must have cooked it before going out and was now merely heating it up. Before restarting the car, I had wiped my eyes and cheeks, opened the car door and blown my nose out into the street with my thumb and forefinger, as though I were back in Pakistan; even though I had managed to stop myself from full-blown crying, some tears had managed to force themselves out of my eyes despite my best efforts. I assumed I looked like shit but was beyond caring. Now, I hung up my jacket and looked at myself in the porch mirror; to my surprise I did not actually look as bad as I felt. I stared at myself, noting the slight day-long stubble, narrowed my eyes, set my mouth firmly and clenched my fists. After three deep breaths – in through the nose, out through the mouth – I went into the open-plan area. I walked the thirty feet to the kitchen-end, my footsteps ringing on the wooden floor.

‘Hello,’ she said, from behind the island, looking up from the pots as I came near. She must have noticed something in my look. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘I don’t know where to start.’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked in alarm.

‘I saw you.’

Her mouth opened, her whole face filled with horror and her hands went up automatically in surrender, her expression indicating that she feared for her life.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You know what I mean.’

Her body crumpled but her face strengthened. ‘What are you going to do?’ There was a resigned, combative tone to her voice that indicated that she was perhaps not exactly devastated at being caught out, indeed perhaps even slightly relieved; it would certainly explain her rather risky choice of time and location, possibly

unconscious, for her shenanigans. Her eyes strayed to the set of knives in their wooden block just to her left.

I shrugged. ‘Nothing. That’s not the point. The point is what are *you* going to do?’

She said nothing, continuing to look at me warily, her hands on the island, poised as though to run in the opposite direction if I tried coming round after her. Behind her I noticed the shiny, expensive designer units that suddenly seemed worthless in the grand scheme of things. We were about ten feet away from each other.

‘I want to ask you a question: were you a virgin when we got married?’

Her eyes shifted. ‘Of course I was. You know I was.’

I shook my head. ‘No, I don’t know that. You didn’t seem to be in pain when we did it and there was no blood. One of my aunts told me to look out for that. She even asked me about it afterwards.’

‘*Fucking bitch!*’ said Zara, shocking me. Strangely enough, in contrast to her religion and culture, she *had* used to swear a lot in the early days, but had learnt to control herself over the years because of the children.

I held up a hand. ‘I know. It’s disgusting. I told her to mind her own business. But I want to know the truth. I won’t be upset or angry: it was before we were married. I wouldn’t hold it against you.’

She hesitated, which was clearly an admission in itself. ‘I *was* a virgin,’ she insisted.

‘I don’t believe you. Why did you hesitate? Is that why your parents were in such a hurry to get you married? You were barely eighteen. You should have been going to university.’

‘What difference does it make now? You’ve just said it doesn’t bother you.’

‘But I need to know. I’ve had enough secrecy. Why didn’t you bleed?’

‘Sometimes it breaks before. You know that.’

‘Yes I do. But I don’t think that was the case with you. You’re not much into sports.’

She crumpled again. ‘You’re not going to give up until I say yes anyway, so fine, it’s true, whatever you say. I had a boyfriend. That’s why they rushed everything. If that’s what you want to hear. Do whatever you want.’

‘What was his name?’

‘I don’t want to talk about him. Assuming there even was one.’

She was still bluffing, still obfuscating. I decided to let that go for the time being. ‘And what about this guy I saw you with? The *quaid*.’ “Quaid” meant community leader; I had said the word sarcastically.

‘What about him?’

‘What else have you been doing with him?’

‘*Nothing! I swear. It was just kissing.*’

‘Why should I believe you? And anyway, kissing is the worst thing of all. It’s worse than sex: sex can be without emotion, kissing can’t.’

She said nothing, looked down at the worktable, with only a small glance over to the set of knives again. I hadn’t moved in all this time, as though frozen to the spot.

‘So that’s what you lot get up to in the mosque, is it? That’s what you’ve learnt about how to protect your children from the “evils of the West”, is it? If I’d known it was a swingers’ class you couldn’t have kept me away.’

She didn’t laugh; I wasn’t sure if she even knew what the word meant.

‘But do you at least admit that you and your parents lied to me back then, that you’ve basically lied to me all these years by making me assume that you were a virgin? I mean, I’m not a village Muslim, but it does make a difference, right?’

‘Assuming what you say is true.’

I felt anger at her continued refusal to admit it fully, which galvanised me to take my revenge.

‘I’ve got a confession as well: I’ve had an affair.’

She furrowed her brow and then, to my surprise, laughed briefly and shook her head.

‘What?’ I said.

‘I don’t believe you.’

I felt offended. ‘What do you mean, you don’t believe me?’

‘You’re just saying it to hurt me.’

I stood speechless, confused and almost hurt by her unexpected refusal to believe me. For a moment I almost wondered if she was right and Catherine had been a fantasy all along.

She furrowed her brow again. ‘Are you serious?’

I nodded.

‘And is it still going on?’

‘No,’ I said, lying to protect Catherine.

‘So who was she?’ Zara asked, as though trying to catch me out, as though playing along with the game. She shifted her weight, seemed to relax a little, now that the focus was on me.

‘Just some random woman I met near my work. But it’s over now. She doesn’t even work there anymore and I don’t know where she’s gone.’

‘What did she look like? How old was she?’

I shrugged. ‘What difference does it make?’

She studied me. ‘You know, I’m starting to believe you. It’s always the quiet ones, isn’t it? For all I know, you’ve had a whole string of them over the years.’

‘Really? And when would I have had the time to do that? You, on the other hand, have had plenty of time. What do you *do* all day?’

‘So when did you have time for this one?’ she asked, ignoring my question.

‘When you were at your *holy mosque* class.’

She stared at me for a while. ‘And... did you... did you... have *sex* with her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where?’

‘In a hotel.’

*Her face turned ugly, the sort of face that made me think I had spent the last twenty years with a stranger. She came round the island, flew at me and started to kick and punch. I was initially thrown back by her momentum and banged my head against the underside of our open, designer-staircase, but luckily not too seriously; I gave an involuntary ‘Ow!’ I recovered my balance and held her wrists. She bit my hand, this time eliciting a more serious and elongated ‘Aaah!’ I weathered the storm, for the first time **not** hitting her back, unlike most of the previous times when she had attacked me. Eventually she tired and backed away, breathing hard and looking murderous, but this time with her back to the island rather than retreating behind it.*

‘I thought you didn’t believe me.’ I too was breathing hard, my clothes rumpled, my shirt hanging out of my trousers. She could kick like a donkey and fight like a mountain woman, which I had forgotten as it had been years since we had last fought like this. I was also reminded that my black belt in Judo had never been of any use in a fight against her.

‘I *still* don’t believe you! You’re too *boring*! You have no friends, you don’t talk to my family, you don’t even talk to *your* family! That was just for saying it, for

thinking it. And I *have* had an affair. And no, I wasn't a virgin when I got married. But God punished me enough for that: he got me married to *you!*' She was shouting.

The veneer of civility had come off; it had already come off between me and Uncle, it was now his daughter's turn. She was set to hurt me as much as she possibly could, but I was beyond hurting. I waited for her to calm down a bit before I said, 'There's one other thing.'

She looked at me as though to say, What could possibly be left? But before I could say anything I smelled something burning; she smelled it at the same time and rushed over to the cooker in the centre of the island, turning knobs, moving pots, filling the kitchen with clanging noises. She turned back and leant against part of the worktop.

'But before I tell you that, I want to say this: if you ever hit me again, I will *not* hit you back, but I *will* leave you and you will never see me again.'

She laughed sarcastically. 'I'm *so* scared.'

Then I told her about Ayesha.

I ended with: 'She told me not to tell you but I think you have a right to know. Don't you dare behave badly towards her over this or I'll tell her all about you.'

Zara had been listening to my story with increasing horror on her face, her jaw opening slowly like the hull door of a ship. Her only interjection in the middle of my account had been to say, 'Did you just make up your affair thing to protect Ayesha?' I had shaken my head emphatically. Zara now went into hysterics, wailing, alternately beating her chest and pulling her hair, reminding me of her mother. Zara had used to do this in the early days until I had realised that it was usually acting, and started to ignore her; the hysterics had miraculously disappeared. They were back now with the renewed vigour of the MRSA superbug, and this time perhaps even genuine.

*

It was an hour later and I sat in my father's house, wondering how on earth it had come to this: back to where I had started. The house was silent, save only for the faint sounds of melancholic old Indian songs from the next room; the man seemed to do nothing else. I had left my wife, never to return; from Zara's point of view been thrown out, never to be allowed back. I had paused only to pack a few things and take my toothbrush. And now, my final dilemma: to fall apart or be strong? To go running to Catherine, or take stock and learn to live on my own? There was only one way to salvage something from the disaster of the past twenty years with my wife: I would be *strong*, I would *not* take Catherine down with me. But somehow I had to convince her, using all my knowledge

of her character, that *she* was the one coming to the decision that our relationship was not a tenable one in the long term and not in her best interest. The second question was easier: whether to resign or not. Just as I could not continue to abuse Catherine – whether she saw it as such or not – I could no longer live off the sweat of children. I had received a job offer, less than what I was on, but that was irrelevant. I would make two phone calls on Monday morning: one to resign, one to accept.

But I needed some support to be strong. I saw my father's prayer mat in the corner. I could not remember the last time I had prayed, even my wife only ever did so when she wanted to ask the Almighty for something specific, as though he was some kind of Father Christmas in the sky. I no longer believed in God, would despise myself if I were to pray to him now, but I believed in science and evolution and the laws of physics. I believed in the Universe: it was there, right before my very eyes, undeniable, and surely not a jot less mysterious and sublime than God himself. I stood – I refused to bow – on the bare carpet, in the *opposite* direction to Mecca, and closed my eyes. I allowed myself to feel at one with creation, tried to release my individual self, my identity to dissolve, my pain to melt, to hopefully dilute down to homeopathic – hence scientifically ineffectual – proportions in the vastness of all being.

Thursday 26th May 2011

John Banville had written in his Booker prize-winning novel, *The Sea*, that all of life was perhaps just a long preparation for the leaving of it. And Billy Joel had sung that life was a series of hellos and goodbyes – the two sides of life, the agony and the ecstasy – the goodbyes being the agony of course: goodbye to youth, goodbye to desire and then eventually goodbye to life itself.

It had taken me a few days to process my thoughts and sort a few things out, but I was now finally ready to face Catherine. I had already said goodbye to the staff, and Catherine and I were now both seated in the MD cubicle, but with our positions reversed. I was wondering how to start but she too was looking distracted; indeed, she seemed to have undergone a transformation of calmness and maturity that was hard to explain since it had only been a week since I had last seen her.

‘Is everything all right, sweetie?’ I asked.

She nodded. ‘It’s just that a lot of things have happened recently.’

‘Like?’

‘Well, for a start, Mr Chaudhary has told me that you’ve resigned, and he’s offered me the MD position.’ She looked at me enquiringly, eyebrows raised.

I nodded. ‘I never wanted to work for my in-laws, and certainly not if it involved living off the sweat of children. And yes, I know about the MD thing. I recommended you.’

‘Really? Oh thank you so much!’

It’s the least I can do for you, I thought, to thank you for making me feel young again; except that I had learnt you could only be young once, just like you could only step into the same river once.

But she looked as though this was not the end of her news. ‘You said lots of things have happened?’

She nodded distractedly.

‘What else?’

‘I’ve had some news about my father.’

I jack-knifed forward in my chair. *This* I had not expected. ‘How come? Where from? Why now?’

She paused, as though gathering herself. ‘When Mr Chaudhary rang me on Monday to promote me, I rang Mum.’ She looked at me apologetically. ‘Sorry, I just wanted to share the news, you know, and I couldn’t think of anyone else. I thought she’d be pleased.’

‘You don’t have to apologise, sweetheart. And was she pleased?’

Catherine shook her head, her face almost crumpling into tears. ‘She said that nothing good would come of it, that all Pakis are the same and I’d soon learn my lesson. The usual crap, you know. I ignored her, let her rant for a bit. Then I told her that because of my new position I would probably get the chance to travel to Pakistan more often. Could she give me any clues about him.’ Catherine paused. ‘And that’s when she told me that he’s dead. I think she only told me to spite me. To ruin my good news.’

I let out a slow deep breath. I felt the urge to cry on her behalf at the needless cruelty of human beings. ‘I’m so sorry, sweetheart. When did he die?’

‘About a year ago. I think that was when she went through her last crazy patch. She kept saying that she had news about my father but she’d just cried wolf so many times I didn’t listen. If only I had. At least I might have been able to go to his funeral.’

There was a long silence.

‘So how do you feel now?’

‘It’s funny: I feel relieved. I mean, I feel sad of course, but for me the real problem has always been not knowing.’

‘Are you sure she’s telling you the truth?’

She laughed. ‘That’s what I asked her. She gave me the contact details. She said that apparently I had loads of little brown Paki half brothers and sisters and good luck with them. I could feel her struggle: on the one hand to prove that she was telling the truth, and on the other hand not wanting me to know about my new family.’

I said. ‘Do you have any idea why your mother’s like this?’

Catherine nodded. ‘I think so. She’s Catholic. She was sent off to boarding school when she was seven and they used to get abused by the nuns. Beaten, I mean, not sexually. Well, probably that too. I don’t know.’

I took a deep breath. ‘I’m so sorry, sweetheart, I’m so sorry. And have you contacted them?’

She nodded and smiled unexpectedly. ‘They *knew* about me! They want to see me! They even sent me this.’ She reached for her handbag, took out a printout and handed it to me. It was a photo of a young girl in school uniform holding hands with a handsome Pakistani man. ‘That’s me! On my first day of school, when I last saw him.’

I looked at it for a few moments, smiling, and handed it back. She left it on the desk.

‘That’s amazing,’ I said. ‘Whatever else you might think about Pakistani families, they’re always happy to see you. Just be careful, though.’

‘About what?’

I hesitated. ‘That they don’t take advantage of you.’

‘In what way?’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Money, British passport?’

She laughed. ‘I don’t think there’s any danger of that. They’re all quite rich, apparently. In fact, they’ve got a very successful business, which my father started with his new wife. There’s just one problem.’

‘What?’

‘It’s a sporting goods company. Footballs and so on.’

‘So what’s the problem? That must be where you get your business acumen from.’

She took a deep breath. ‘Sporting goods companies are notorious for using child labour. You must remember the scandal with the football world cup last year?’

I nodded, unsure of how to respond. I even vaguely recalled some office conversation about the topic; it had been shortly after I had joined. ‘But it’s not your fault, sweetie, you can’t change the world overnight.’ I was now echoing some of Uncle’s words. ‘And you don’t know for sure yet.’

She continued after a long pause. ‘Anyway, what about us? Where does all this leave us?’

‘Where would you like it to leave us? I’ve left my wife and I’ve told her about you.’

Catherine’s jaw dropped, clearly even her father’s news temporarily taking second stage to my own revelation.

I held up a hand. ‘Don’t worry, I only told her that I had met someone else. I didn’t say who it was.’

‘And if you had?’

‘You would have been out like a shot.’

She thought long and hard. ‘We could start our own business together?’

‘That would take years to build up.’

‘I don’t care. We’ll think of something. Start fresh.’

There was no such thing as starting fresh, I thought: you were born into a mess, and the law of human entropy ensured that things only got worse from there. I was not planning to tell her the gory details of the last few days. To my relief Zara had calmed down somewhat a few days later and we had had a reasonably civilised phone conversation about how to proceed with the divorce. To my further relief she had made no mention of cutting off the children from me. Indeed, I had seen them, talked to them and explained the situation; they had reacted better than I had expected, even Ayesha, but I had to give Zara equal credit for that. Perhaps she too was relieved and was looking forward to building a new life with her Imran Khan lookalike.

‘If that’s what you want,’ I said.

‘But it’s not what you want?’

‘I want you more than anything but I just don’t think it would be right for you. I know how much you want kids.’

‘And you definitely still don’t?’

‘No, but I’m even willing to do that for you, if that’s what you want.’

‘Just imagine: a tiny little baby, all ours. I think we’d make beautiful babies together. You don’t want that?’ She was half-entreating, half mystified.

I shook my head, wondering when that primal image had lost its power for me, and whether I was the richer or poorer for it.

‘But if it’s what *you* want,’ I repeated.

She looked away. ‘I can’t force you to have a baby you don’t want. I know what it’s like to be unwanted.’

‘I’m sure you were wanted, sweetheart. I’m sure your father loved you very much. There’s no end to a father’s love.’

‘Yeah, right, that’s why he fucked off to Pakistan and left me.’

There was a long silence but then she continued, ‘Actually, apparently he talked about me every single day. Kept saying that he was convinced I would turn up one day on his doorstep. My name was the last thing he said before he died: “Cattie.” That’s what he used to call me because that’s how I used to say my name when I was young.’

Then she looked at me and her eyes filmed over. ‘So that’s it then? You used me and abused me, you fucked me up the arse. And now you’re going to leave me, just like my dad.’

My hand shot up. ‘Please, sweetheart, don’t talk like that! And don’t you think that’s what this all about? Trying to replace your father with me?’

‘Don’t give me that sick Freudian mumbo-jumbo. The reason why women like older men is because they’re more mature. And because patriarchal capitalism makes it impossible for women to reproduce without the support of men. It’s got nothing to do with wanting to sleep with their fathers.’

My mind had glazed over at her comment about patriarchal capitalism, but her view of Freud seemed more reasonable.

‘Like I said, I’m willing to do whatever you say.’

‘Stop being so passive-aggressive! Just say yes or no!’

‘I think it would be a mistake, sweetheart. And I’m sorry I abused you.’

She shook her head slowly. ‘You didn’t abuse me. In fact... in fact...’ she stopped.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

I knew what she had intended to say but did not pursue it.

Instead I said, ‘So what about Mr Chaudhary. What have you agreed? What about the child labour thing?’

She smiled excitedly, for a moment even all the recent momentous developments cast aside. ‘I’ve got ideas about that and I did tell Mr Chaudhary that I did have some conditions before I accepted.’

‘Oh?’

‘The main thing is that we’re going to build a new factory and he’s agreed that a school will be an integral part of it. Jamil’s going to join us soon as my assistant; Mr Chaudhary’s asked me to train him up.’

‘What about the carpet mafia pieces of shit? *The Pakistan Carpet Manufacturers and Exporters Association?*’ I enunciated the long, laborious and impressive title in an ironic tone.

A knowing and resigned “I agree with you” look crossed her face at my tone and use of language. ‘They *are* pieces of shit but they only get away with it because even bigger pieces of shit in the West let them, and because all of us pieces of shit collude with it all. But don’t worry, I’ve got plans for dealing with all that: not taking them head on, just using the school to change things. Violence is never the answer, it just delays the question.’

‘You see? That’s why you can’t leave this job. This is a great opportunity for you to do what you’ve always wanted. It’s what you joined the company for. It would be criminal of me to take you away from all that. Those children need you.’ I smiled. ‘And it’ll be nice for you to be able to see your new brothers and sisters so often. And maybe they’ll even find you a nice Pakistani husband whilst you’re there.’

She sighed. ‘Oh that would be wonderful.’ She looked slightly guilty, as though realising the implication of her statement: that she was starting to accept the end of us. Luckily, her phone rang just then, saving us both some embarrassment. She waited for it to stop ringing; I counted six rings.

There was a moment of silence as we looked at each other, not quite sure how to continue. It seemed to me that this would be a good moment to give her the present I had got for her. ‘I’ve brought you something: something to remember me by.’

I handed over, across the desk, a gift bag containing a hardback copy of *Van Gogh, A Life in Letters & Art*. It had my favourite painting, *Starry Night*, on the cover. I had had to go to the similarly entitled exhibition on my own last year because my wife had not been interested.

‘It’s a book. I’ll be honest with you, it’s not new, it’s my own copy and it’s got my name on it. I wanted you to have it. I’ve also written something inside it for you.’

She accepted the bag, took out the book and gave a smile that hopefully acknowledged the appropriateness of the gift; she placed the bag on the desk. ‘Oh that’s lovely, Imran. Thank you so much.’ She opened it to find the inscription I had written, after much practice and crossing out in rough, before copying it out neatly into the book; I had used a ruler for the underlinings. Her lower lip trembled as she read it and her eyes filmed over again. She squeezed her eyes and two tears emerged and ran down her face, one on each cheek. She quickly wiped them away with her right hand.

To my darling Catherine,

I cannot describe in words what you mean to me. All I can say is that the way I feel about you is the way I feel when I look at the painting on the cover of this book. I hope you understand what that means and that it is enough for you. In fact, I know that you will understand what that means, which is why I love you so much and why I am so happy that you came into my life. And I want you to know that I have never felt like this about anyone else before.

*Love,
Imran.
xxx*

Without looking up at me, she flicked through the book for a while, which it seemed to me was more to give her time to compose herself than interest in the contents. Then she put it back in the bag and put the bag in a draw.

She folded her arms in front of her on the desk, her face suddenly oddly calm. ‘But my darling, what about you? What are *you* going to do?’ Her reversion to “darling” was like balm to my aching soul.

‘Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. I’ve found a new job in the education sector; it’s less well paid but more than enough for me, now that the children will be off my hands soon. And my wife’s agreed to sell the house.’

She nodded with relief, but her look indicated that this was not all she had meant. I knew what she had meant but I was trying to avoid the issue. I tried to inject strength and confidence, a blasé note, into my voice that I did not feel. I was dreading being on my own, with an existential angst that, to me, made van Gogh’s angst-inspired ear-cutting seem like a mosque-class prank – not that pranks were allowed in mosque class. But I had decided that I had to be strong and that it was a skill I finally had to learn, perhaps even to appreciate and enjoy. I wondered why there wasn’t a martial art for learning to live alone; I had tried meditation over the years but it hadn’t worked.

Even my latest attempt on Friday night had only been briefly successful. I had spent an agonising and sleepless night in my father's house, even going out into the garden to gaze up at the stars for comfort. But this had only made things worse by reminding me of that night in Pakistan and intensifying my memory of Javed, Arif and Farina. I had been mystified by the fact that the same beautiful stars were looking down with such indifference to the agony of the East and the ecstasy of the West.

I continued, 'Will you do me a favour? I want you to look after these three children in particular, if you don't mind.' I took out a piece of paper from my pocket, which had the details of Javed, Farina and Arif on it, and gave it to her. 'I'd like to make a regular endowment in my father's name for that purpose. This little boy works in the brick kiln; please ask Sharif to give him a job in the factory, the wages to come from the endowment.' I sat back. 'Oh, and I hope you're not going to stop your PhD?'

She shook her head, looking at the piece of paper as she did so, before putting it away in a draw. 'No; in fact I should be able to use my work experience as part of it.'

'My son's also agreed to build a school alongside, which I've said I'm going to pay for. He said I didn't have to pay for it but I insisted. I was about to ask him to name it after my father but he offered before I even had to say it: "*The Mubarak Sheikh Memorial School for Workers' Children*".'

'That's nice. And how's Ayesha?'

I was glad of the change to more neutral matters.

'She's fine now.'

'And Mimi?' (I had told her the stories.)

'She's dumped him. Told him she prefers Scandinavians after all; apparently he was just an experiment to see if she could widen her taste but no luck.'

Catherine laughed. 'Is he upset?'

I shook my head enviously. 'No. Nothing seems to upset him. Just washes over him like greed charges over bankers. Wonder where he gets it from?'

She smiled and shook her head. Another pause.

It was time to say goodbye. I stood up and went around the desk; she rose to meet me. I was reminded of a similar but reversed situation about two months ago. I had always thought that she didn't wear makeup during the day but I now realised from her smudged green eyes that she did, but obviously minimal and carefully applied. I tenderly wiped the tear smudges from her cheeks with my thumbs and fingers, kissed her briefly on the lips and then enveloped her in my arms. Her unusual perfume (*Issey*

Miyake, she had told me) and her warm body through her *shalwar-kameez* filled me with unbearable longing: the desire to be touched, to be known – the desire that even God was not immune to. According to Sufism, this was indeed His reason for creating the universe: “I was a hidden treasure and wanted to be known.”

‘*Mehn tumhe kabhie nehi boolu gah,*’ I said to this flawed, air-breathing *hour* lent to me from heaven. ‘I will never forget you.’ Her hair fluttered from my breath as I spoke.

I heard her breath constrict. ‘*Mehn bhi.* Me too.’

Then, without looking back, I turned to go. As I opened the door I heard stifled sounds to indicate that she had started to sob. I paused for a moment, feeling as though my pulsating heart was being ripped out of my living body, like an Aztec sacrifice. I wondered if I was making a terrible mistake, the second great mistake of my life but in the opposite sense. But it was only for a moment; the phrase “cruel to be kind” came to mind, not to mention all the other reasons. I also felt that the tone of the sobs indicated a *needy* love – rather like mine for her – not mature, not equal. Just before closing the door I looked back briefly, reminded of a similar situation in a bar long ago when our lips had first met. Despite all my self-reasoning, I was still half hoping that she would be looking after me longingly and would say or do something to make me change my mind at the last moment. But I saw instead that her gaze was riveted to her baby-photo with her father.

The pain in my heart was unbearable but I clutched it to me like a precious gift, as a memento of the emotional hurricane and impossible fantasy that had been Catherine.

END

Cheap Labour = Child Labour

An academic thesis on child labour

ROHAIL AHMAD

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Abstract

This thesis argues that child labour is an inevitable consequence of cheap labour generally. It further argues that child labour in the East is a continuation of slavery and that child labour was not eradicated in the West but was “exported” to the East instead.¹ The thesis suggests that this exportation came about as a result of the following chain: rise of modern capitalism in the sixteenth century in Britain and Europe; this leading to slave labour, which finances the British Industrial Revolution, which in turn spawns the modern notion of child labour; the next step is colonialism and the first international division of labour; the second such division occurs in the 1970s and 1980s. The thesis finally argues that Western policies on child labour abroad are at best naive, and at worst hypocritical; conversely, that Eastern countries like Pakistan actively collude in the child labour and cannot be relied upon to tackle the problem either. Only a wider awareness by the general public and consumer in the West, combined with self-interest arguments, can help to address this issue.

¹ The terms East/West are imprecise but are used for the sake of convenience to symbolise rich and poor areas of the world, as connoted by the argument of this thesis; in fact, the focus here is on Britain and Pakistan/India.

Preface

The problem of child labour in the East is really just one aspect of the vexed question of how the global imbalance – more precisely the “structural inequality of capital and labour”² – between East and West arose; the other aspects are terrorism, uneven migration, pollution, climate change, financial instability etc. This larger question has been studied by many, including Immanuel Wallerstein, C.A. Bayly, David Landes and Niall Ferguson. But this is such a complex subject that it would be impossible to address in a mini thesis such as this. All of the authors mentioned have written thick volumes on the subject, indeed Wallerstein has written four. This thesis cannot do more than refer in passing at various times to that immense question and to those authors, and it will do so as it goes through its argument.

Part 1 traces the main thread of the thesis, as outlined in the abstract above.

Part 2 is a more detailed look at child labour: a brief history; a comparison of child labour during the Industrial Revolution in Britain, and in Pakistan today; a comparison between child labour and slave labour. It should be emphasised that these comparisons are not only interesting in their own right, but show similarities which themselves form an essential part of the argument of this thesis. The thesis also looks at social norms such as “conception of childhood” and attitude to education, which have been used by some to “justify” child labour in the sense of arguing that the West has no right to impose its cultural values on countries that use child labour.

Part 3 shows the use of force and collusion between East and West, similar to slavery and colonialism, and that there is no serious will to end child labour.

It should be noted that this idea that child labour was “exported” to the East has been mentioned by previous researchers but has not been explored in detail, or at least not in the way described in this thesis.³ Similarly, the contentions that cheap labour or poverty leads to child labour, or even that capitalism leads to child labour, are not entirely new – but then very few things are – but the chain of events, the various comparisons and the specific articulations of these things in this thesis brings together and spells out what other people have mostly only vaguely hinted at.

² I would like to thank Dr Anshuman Mondal for this clarification on terminology.

³ Kaushik Basu, “Child Labor: Cause, Consequence, and Cure,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, XXXVII, September 1999, p.1089. Basu looks at how child labour was eradicated in Britain, i.e. legal acts, compulsory schooling etc., and suggests that it was exported but does not actually explain the mechanism or chain of events of how this might have happened, in the way that this thesis attempts to do.

Part 1: Tracing the exportation of child labour to the East

A brief history of capitalism

What is capitalism and when did it begin? Defining capitalism is not an easy thing to do since it is the overarching socio-economic system of the modern age and pervades every aspect of life. If it means simply using capital to make more capital it can be said to have its origins for thousands of years, since the idea of interest (or usury) is mentioned in the Bible and the Quran. But modern capitalism, in the sense of the *intense* use of capital to make capital can be said to have started in the sixteenth century, and “late capital” from 1945 onwards.⁴

A more precise definition might be as follows: “In capitalism proper the whole economy becomes dependent on the investment of capital and this occurs when it is not just trade that is financed in this way but production as well.”⁵ Wallerstein’s definition is “Capitalism is a system in which the endless accumulation of capital is the *raison d’être*.”⁶

But capitalism is usually taken to mean more than this. It is not just an economic system but has political implications. The two cannot really be separated; for example, Wallerstein says that “economic and political decisions cannot be meaningfully dissociated”.⁷ Rosa Luxemburg goes further: “In reality, political power is nothing but a vehicle for the economic process.”⁸ So it can also be said that capitalism usually implies free enterprise, individual effort, democracy etc., although it should be noted that capitalism can also work in non-democratic states, e.g. China in recent years.

A detailed explanation of when and how exactly capitalism arose is beyond the scope of this thesis but Wallerstein, for example, says that it arose as a result of a “crisis of feudalism” resulting from many causes such as land erosion and climate, which forced the worker to sell his land in return for a subsistence wage.⁹

⁴ James Fulcher, *Capitalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004). (And in recent years countries like Britain almost seem to depend on the banking industry as a major part of their economy, with rather disastrous consequences as witnessed by the current economic crisis [2007 onwards]).

⁵ Fulcher, *Capitalism*, p.14.

⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System, vol. IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789–1914* (California: University of California Press, 2011) p.xvii.

⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century Vol 1* (London: Academic Press, 1976), p.67.

⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (Oxford: Routledge, 1913), p.433.

⁹ Wallerstein, *World-System Vol 1*, pp.33,37.

One of the main features of capitalism that *is* most pertinent to this thesis is the use of wage-labour or, as it can be phrased for the present purpose, capitalism's overriding need for, and relentless search for, *cheap* labour. It is this quest for cheap labour that has led to slavery and child labour. (Here perhaps a caveat can be added that it is not only capitalism that requires cheap labour: this has been around since the dawn of civilisation, as has slavery and child labour.¹⁰ Perhaps it is not just capitalism that requires cheap labour but the fact that people have always sought to exploit others, although in capitalism it is *integral* to the system because its fundamental motive is to maximise profit.) But what is really different about capitalism is that it is self-perpetuating: there comes a point where the capitalist has enough money to no longer have to do any work himself, and can purely live off the interest and investment of his capital. And if she has enough capital and spends less than the interest she earns, the money literally grows by itself. This is why the accumulation of capital is important and why it is bound to lead to inequality if, on the other side of the equation, the worker receives only subsistence wages and has no means of getting out of that cycle by accumulating capital himself. Not only that, but the excess capital is most often invested in things, critically property – the crucial basis of wealth and power – which leads to the inflation of property, putting this even further beyond the worker's reach.¹¹

So, true capitalism requires an accumulation of capital. Where did this initial capital come from in the modern age? This is known as the problem of “primitive accumulation” to use Marx's phrase or “previous accumulation” to use Adam Smith's phrase; Marx also uses the term “original sin”.¹² Marx discusses this topic in Part VIII of *Capital*, where he says that initial accumulation of capital is accomplished by theft.

This theft can be small scale, e.g. overtime without pay – say an extra half hour at the end of each day – or a “working lunch”¹³ [quotation marks added] to outright violence and appropriation of vast areas of land,¹⁴ for example the “enclosure” movement which coincided with the beginnings of capitalism in the sixteenth century,

¹⁰ Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire: From Africa to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Dan Roberts, “Global recession - where did all the money go?” *The Guardian*, January 29, 2009, accessed May 16, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/dan-roberts-on-business-blog/interactive/2009/jan/29/financial-pyramid>

¹² C.J. Arthur, ed., *Marx's Capital: A Student Edition* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1992), chapter 26.

¹³ Arthur, *Marx's Capital*, p.164.

¹⁴ Arthur, *Marx's Capital*, p.505.

when large areas of public land were literally fenced off (enclosed) and put into private hands.¹⁵

But how exactly does this accumulation of capital occur? The essential concept here is Marx's idea of "surplus labour" or "surplus value". According to Marx, surplus value works like this. In the past, people mostly lived subsistence lives: they worked just enough to survive. They might have a piece of land to grow their food and to live on. People who did not grow their own food would have some other skill, making shoes say, which they would sell for food. The fruits of your labour were yours alone. But if someone wants more than this they must employ other people, since an individual can only work so much. But clearly, for the employer to benefit, the fruit of the employee's work can not only go the employee; from an employer's point of view, that would make no sense. Part of the fruit of that labour must come to the employer. *This is surplus value*. So the employer pays the worker as little as possible and keeps the rest. This is the origin of the need for the cheapest possible labour, in order to enhance the surplus value as much as possible, which links back to the point about maximum profit being the overriding motive of capitalism.

According to Rosa Luxemburg, Marx's reasoning on how accumulation of capital works and why capitalism will eventually collapse was flawed. In *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913) she set out to show that it is not possible for a self-contained capitalist society to accumulate capital, and that external or overseas markets are required; and indeed that they must be *non-capitalist*. This is clearly relevant to the present argument about how child labour was exported to the East. It is a well-accepted feature of Marxian analysis that capitalism must constantly expand, and it does this partly by expanding into newer areas, in the present thesis what has been called the East. But clearly, this must have an end because the world is finite. This is the origin of the idea that capitalism will eventually collapse from its own internal contradictions. Conversely, for capitalists who crow that Marxists are wrong and that capitalism shows no sign of collapse, the answer may lie in the fact that not only are these Eastern markets not exhausted yet but also in population growth. Rosa Luxemburg says: "Perhaps the answer is that the natural increase of the population creates this growing demand."¹⁶ What she was not aware of in 1913 was the rapid world population growth

¹⁵ Titus Alexander, *Unravelling Global Apartheid* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1996), p.187. & Fulcher, *Capitalism*, p.24.

¹⁶ Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, pp.105-6.

that was to occur generally, but more specifically the *imbalance* in population growth between East and West from about 1950 onwards,¹⁷ as the divergence between East and West intensified. So it may be that the huge, disproportionate population growth in Eastern countries as a result of the need for child labour, has simultaneously but accidentally solved the problem of capitalism's never-ending need for new markets, thus *masking* this point. Rosa Luxemburg uses the phrase "natural population growth" but there is nothing particularly natural about population growth. The "natural" thing might be for people to have two children to replace themselves and hence result in a stable population.

Returning to the original question of this section: where did the initial accumulation of capital come from? One argument is that it came, at least partly, from the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism. Although Marx mentions slavery and colonialism, it was Luxemburg who emphasised this. People like Wallerstein and Eric Williams would agree with this view; others, like Niall Ferguson and David Landes would be less favourable.

The next few sections attempt to look at the facts and try to evaluate the arguments.

The transatlantic slave trade

Slavery has existed since the dawn of civilisation.¹⁸ Slave labour was almost certainly used to build the Great Pyramids, it was common in Greece and was even justified by Aristotle.¹⁹ It was common in Rome and was legal. It has been condoned by most religions including Christianity and Islam. This section will focus on the transatlantic slave trade in which Britain was the forerunner (because this thesis focuses on Britain and Pakistan) but it should be noted that it was initiated by the Portuguese and Spanish and practiced by most of the major European powers.²⁰

Slavery already existed in Africa, and the Africans colluded in the slave trade: they supplied the slaves who were either existing slaves, prisoners of war or were specifically acquired by kidnapping and war in order to supply the European traders.

¹⁷ See graph at the end of Part 1.

¹⁸ Morgan, *Slavery*, p.1.

¹⁹ C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), p.402.

²⁰ E.g. Morgan, *Slavery*, p.5: "The first African slaves taken to Spanish America arrived on a Portuguese vessel in 1502." & p.21: "The first shipment of blacks to British America arrived in Virginia in 1619."

For example: “They [the English traders] had to establish and maintain good relations with African middlemen, who supplied slaves from the interior ... and they needed the acquiescence of local rulers.²¹ And “[there was already a] flourishing internal market for slaves”.²²

The slaves were transported in chains and in spaces that were not much bigger than a coffin.²³ They were allowed one or two hours of exercise per day but other than that were kept chained. They suffered horribly from disease and malnutrition and many millions are estimated to have died en route or shortly after arrival.²⁴ The crew also suffered although obviously not as much as the slaves. On one occasion one hundred and thirty-seven enchained slaves were thrown overboard because of a water shortage and the trader later tried to claim compensation for the loss of his cargo.²⁵

The British slave trade was abolished in 1807 and slavery itself, in the British Empire, abolished in 1837. This is often presented as a humanitarian act by the British government but was in fact the result of intense campaigning by independent humanitarians, some of whom were indeed British, helped by former slaves and others. Eric Williams has argued that in the end the government only acted because its economic interests coincided with the humanitarian concerns of campaigners.²⁶ The reason why Britain wanted to end slavery, according to him, was that others were now catching up with Britain and so it no longer gave Britain an advantage. Indeed, Britain now wanted to maintain its advantage by using the Industrial Revolution, for which slavery was a direct competitor.²⁷

²¹ Morgan, *Slavery*, p.69.

²² Morgan, *Slavery*, p.14.

²³ Morgan, *Slavery*, p.35.

²⁴ BBC website, *Quick guide: The slave trade*: “More than a million people are thought to have died while in transit across the so-called 'middle passage' of the Atlantic due to the inhuman conditions aboard the slave ships and brutal suppression of any resistance.”

²⁵ Morgan, *Slavery*, p.131.

See also Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (London: Granta Books, 2011). This also shows how human beings were commodified as ‘human capital’ in a very literal sense. This differentiates capitalism from previous slave systems like Islam, for example, where bonds between master and slaver were encouraged. (I am indebted to Dr Anshuman Mondal for this point.)

²⁶ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1944).

²⁷ This is similar to the case of the American Civil War which is often seen partly as a moral crusade against slavery but was in fact, some argue, more to do with integrating the slavery-based South into the wage-based North. (I am indebted to Dr Anshuman Mondal for this point.) See also Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975). E.g.: “This centres on the nature of the slave society of the Southern states and its possible compatibility with the dynamically expanding capitalism of the North.” (p.141) and “Northern industry was certainly more worried about a nation half-free trading and half-protectionist than about one half-slave and half-free.” (p.142).

After the end of slavery, Britain turned to other forms of cheap labour, such as indentured labour, which was almost as cheap as slavery; indentured or bonded labour is basically a form of slavery except that it is for a fixed period of time.

Apart from the detailed arguments adduced by the aforementioned writers, some evidence to show that the ending of slavery was not for humanitarian reasons can be seen from the process of freedom. When the slaves were “freed”, they were initially required to carry on working as “apprentices” for six more years. This meant that they had to work for forty hours per week for free, and only get paid for extra hours on top of this. Children under six were freed immediately, which sounds very humane until we realise that this means that children *over* six were still enslaved. Slave-owners were compensated but the slaves were not. The latter were freed but without any form of compensation, apology or support, which meant that many of them actually had to continue almost as before, with subsistence wages; in fact, they were no longer provided with food, shelter and clothing, so were really no better off, except in their legal status. There was even talk early on that the *slaves* should compensate the slave owners. This after being enchained, transported, and suffering unspeakable punishments such as whippings, cutting off of limbs and castration.²⁸

The route from Africa to the Americas was called the “Middle Passage”, whose horrors are well known and can be understood from the above mentioned facts. The Middle Passage formed one part of the “triangular trade”, which involved (1) Britain taking manufactured goods to Africa; (2) trading these for slaves and transporting them to the Americas; (3) there the slaves were sold for things like sugar and tobacco to be brought back to Britain. Sugar in particular requires intensive labour and there must be no pause between the various stages of the sugar-making process. So to a certain extent the slave-owners were forced to be brutal to maintain the workflow, and the nature of the work explains the need for cheap, abundant labour.²⁹

But what role did slavery – and, later, colonialism – play in giving Britain the advantage it enjoys to this day? Perhaps surprisingly, there is disagreement as to whether Britain benefitted from the slave trade. David Landes in *Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998) has a section on this in his book where he weighs the pros and cons of the argument and his final verdict, although not clear-cut, is that on balance it was

²⁸ Morgan, *Slavery*, p.113.

²⁹ See Bernardine Evaristo, *Blonde Roots* (London: Penguin, 2009) for a recent fictional depiction of this.

advantageous. He writes, referring to slavery: “The effect was to stimulate both agriculture and industry, increase wages and incomes in Britain, promote the division of labour, and encourage the invention of labor-saving devices.”³⁰ Kenneth Morgan is more clear: “The overriding motive ... was economic ... [because it] generated lucrative returns ... Merchants often graduated, with the accumulation of profits, to the status of planters.”³¹

The disagreement is perhaps to do with definition of terms. When people like Landes say that the slave trade was not as advantageous as others contend, what they are usually referring to is just the slave trade part of the triangular trade. This may well be true if one considers all the costs and work involved. But there is virtually no disagreement that the triangular trade, taken as a whole, was hugely profitable. So it is perhaps rather disingenuous to speak of just the slave trade part in isolation from the triangular trade. It can also be said, on a qualitative level and leaving aside profit and loss figures, that slavery would not have been practised, had it not been profitable. One could possibly argue that colonialism and empire (discussed below and about which there is a similar dispute) might be indulged in purely for reasons of adventure, power and grandiosity alone – but not slavery. Even though slavery was legal, it was generally abhorred but looked upon as a necessary economic evil (“that slavery is an evil no man will deny”³²). It would *not* have been indulged in had it not been economically profitable. Also, if a person embarks on a business venture, he may well be willing to sustain losses for a few years in the hope and expectation that profits will eventually come; the British slave trade continued for *two hundred years*. Surely, nobody in their right minds would continue an operation for this length time if it was not profitable, and it is also a fact that many of the banks that exist to this day, or did until recently, including Barclays and Barings, were built on the back of slavery and date from that period.³³ The profits of banking then led to imperialism (see the footnote on chronology in the next section).

It is clear therefore that the overall profits of slavery resulted in a huge accumulation of capital, but what was it used for? The answer, some say, was the

³⁰ David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (London: Abacus, 1998), p.120.

³¹ Morgan, *Slavery*, p.34.

³² Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p.369; also: “No evil more monstrous has existed upon earth” said Coleridge (p.5). “an extensive evil” said John Atkins (p.41). “It chills one’s blood” said Horace Walpole (p.44).

³³ Williams, *Slavery*, pp.43,101; See also: BBC website, *Slavery and the building of Britain*.

Industrial Revolution, which gave Britain and Europe a huge advantage and head-start over the rest of the world.

The British Industrial Revolution

The British Industrial Revolution (henceforth simply “Industrial Revolution”) was a period between roughly 1750-1850, when Britain industrialised, i.e. moved from a primarily agricultural economy and society to an urban- and factory-based economy and society. This period was accompanied by much human misery both of adults and of children, although some would argue that the misery already existed.

The Industrial Revolution was one of the most significant events in human history. For people living now the world it created is taken for granted but the change was truly revolutionary and its effects are being felt to this day. (Some people think that a similar process is perhaps occurring now with “globalisation” but it is difficult to say whether this is as profound as that, or even perhaps a continuing *effect* of it.³⁴)

There were many factors that led to industrialisation. Scientific and technological innovation, which perhaps derived from the scientific revolution in Europe; entrepreneurial skill and enterprise were required, which arguably came from Britain’s existing seafaring tradition and mercantile acumen. And it required capital which came, at least partly, from the profits of slavery. By this time the colonisation of India had already started and profits were flowing from there also; that will be examined in the next section. (The Industrial Revolution overlaps the transition period from slavery to colonialism so a neat chronology is difficult.³⁵)

The machines used in the Industrial Revolution were not totally automatic. They required some manual intervention, for example reloading a cotton reel. These are extremely simple tasks, requiring no skill, and from an employer’s point of view not meriting too much pay. This initiated the intense use of children as workers as an ideal form of cheap labour. Children have always worked, as Part 2 will show, but the

³⁴ See Hobsbawm, *Age of Capital*, eg: “For the historian the great boom of the 1850s marks the foundation of a global industrial economy and a single world history.” (p.69)

³⁵ Dr Anshuman Mondal says that actually a chronology is probably valid but is difficult to prove and would require much more work. See also Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967) in which she argues that imperialism first appeared as a solution to the problem of excess capital in Europe, e.g.: “expansion appeared first as the outlet for excess capital production and offered a remedy, capital export” (p.147).

Industrial Revolution was the starting point of the *intense*, mechanised, division-of-labor-based use of child labour in the sense that it is understood today.

The above is a summary from *Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (2010) by Jane Humphries and from Arnold Toynbee's *Lectures on The Industrial Revolution in England* (1884); the latter, as well as giving an overview of the Industrial Revolution, also looks at general questions of economics, of wealth distribution, of the benefits of competition versus state regulation. Toynbee also notes that the Industrial Revolution was accompanied by a parallel agrarian revolution. This is probably not coincidental because clearly if people were moving from the countryside to the cities and factories, almost by definition the two had to go hand in hand.

In chapter 8 he outlines the main features of the Industrial Revolution. He notes firstly a rapid increase in population. He continues:

Four great inventions altered the character of the cotton manufacture; the spinning-jenny, patented by Hargreaves in 1770; the waterframe, invented by Arkwright the year before; Crompton's mule introduced in 1779, and the self-acting mule, first invented by Kelly in 1792, but not brought into use till Roberts improved it in 1825. None of these by themselves would have revolutionised the industry. But in 1769-the year in which Napoleon and Wellington were born-James Watt took out his patent for the steam-engine. Sixteen years later it was applied to the cotton manufacture. In 1785 Boulton and Watt made an engine for a cotton-mill at Papplewick in Notts, and in the same year Arkwright's patent expired. These two facts taken together mark the introduction of the factory system.

The following question can now be posed: are there specific examples of how the Industrial Revolution was financed by slavery? According to Eric Williams, one specific example – backed by evidence – is that the profits of slavery directly financed James Watt and the steam engine³⁶ (note that Watt is mentioned in the above extract). Another central figure mentioned in the extract is Richard Arkwright who not only invented many things but is indeed described as “the father of the modern industrial factory system and his inventions were a catalyst for the Industrial Revolution.”³⁷ He was also the first to use Watt's engine. But Arkwright was born into poverty; where did he get his finance from? If he got it from a bank then this would certainly provide the link to slavery; and he did indeed get it from a bank, a large amount in fact:

³⁶ Williams, *Slavery*, p.102.

³⁷ BBC website, *Sir Richard Arkwright (1732 - 1792)*.

... Arkwright sought assistance from Ichabod and John Wright, the Nottingham bankers, who agreed to support him provided that ‘if his plan should succeed, they were to share in its profits’ ... they, ‘finding the amount of their advances swell to a larger sum than they had expected ... ’ turned Arkwright over to Samuel Need, a wealthy Nottingham hosier ...³⁸

Actually, most people acknowledge that slavery was profitable but contend that its contribution was “below 5 per cent of British income in an early year in the Industrial Revolution”.³⁹ Even if this conservative estimate is accepted, Eric William’s argument that the profits of slavery – i.e. the accumulation of capital to use the term of this thesis – financed the Industrial Revolution remains valid: if today’s figures are used, 5% of GDP works out to £100bn. Imagine that amount of money being invested in a given technology; as a comparison, the UK is investing half a billion in green technology: “The government has missed a big opportunity to kick-start a green *industrial revolution* with its £3bn fiscal stimulus.”⁴⁰ The original Industrial Revolution, even according to conservative estimates, had a £100bn “fiscal stimulus”. To be even more conservative, a *BBC History* summary mentions a figure of £8bn in today’s money, still 2.7 times the £3bn figure mentioned in the report.⁴¹

Going to the other side of the equation now, what to do with all these manufactured goods being churned out by the Industrial Revolution? They needed a market. There was continental Europe of course, but by this time another, more effective, market was being shaped – a monopoly market, in fact: India and the rest of the growing British Empire.⁴²

³⁸ R.S. Fitton, *The Arkwrights: Spinners of Fortune* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p.27.

³⁹ Stanley Engerman, “The Slave Trade and British Capital Formation in the Eighteenth Century,” *Business History Review*, 46.4, 1972.

⁴⁰ Alok Jha, “UK must invest in green technologies,” *The Guardian*, December 16, 2009, accessed May 16, 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/dec/16/uk-green-technologies> [italics added]

⁴¹ BBC website, *Enslavement and Industrialisation*.

⁴² E.g.: Williams, *Slavery*, p.210: “The commercial capitalism of the eighteenth century developed the wealth of Europe by means of slavery and *monopoly*.” [italics added]

Colonialism and Empire

Colonialism and imperialism,⁴³ like slavery, have been around for thousands of years: Alexander the Great, the Roman Empire, the Islamic Empire, the various European empires including Britain's, the current American Empire which may be on the decline as we write. Again, this thesis will focus on Britain, although it should be borne in mind that, like slavery, it was actually the Dutch, the Portuguese and the Spanish who were the initiators in this regard.⁴⁴

The British Empire began as a trading venture with the East India Company in the sixteenth century. Only later did it become military and colonial in nature, culminating with the crowning of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1876, by which time Britain had embarked on a fully-fledged imperial policy. But the two world wars left Britain severely weakened and it was forced to gradually give up its empire, starting with India (incorporating Pakistan) in 1947.⁴⁵

The Indians colluded in their own subjugation by a combination of weakness, stupidity and venality. Local leaders and the elite colluded in subjugating their own people in return for money, land and power. But when they did not collude they were forced to do so by the military might of the British. For example, "the Raj relied upon the collaboration of the ruled with the rulers just as much as upon military strength"⁴⁶ and "the complexity and diversity of Indian society meant that ... the English could attempt to play off one sect or region against another".⁴⁷

Britain also used protective measures, for example: "British protectionism and productivity had devastated India's traditional hand-produced textile industry."⁴⁸ Rosa Luxemburg has two whole, separate chapters (31&32) in her book, on the use of protectionism and violence in the accumulation of capital:

Militarism fulfils a quite definite function in the history of capital, accompanying as it does every historical phase of accumulation. It plays a decisive part in the first stages of European capitalism, in the period of the so-

⁴³ These are similar but different terms. Perhaps the simplest way to understand the difference is to think of colonialism as merely one form of imperialism. See John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp.7-8.

⁴⁴ Dennis Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Niall Ferguson, *Civilization* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

⁴⁵ All of this is a summary from Denis Judd's *The Lion and the Tiger*.

⁴⁶ Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger*, p.16.

⁴⁷ Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger*, p.11.

⁴⁸ Ferguson, *Civilization*, p.224.

called ‘primitive accumulation’, as a means of conquering the New World and the spice-producing countries of India. Later, it is employed to subject the modern colonies, to destroy the social organisations of primitive societies so that their means of production may be appropriated, forcibly to introduce commodity trade in countries where the social structure had been unfavourable to it, and to turn the natives into a proletariat by compelling them to work for wages in the colonies. It is responsible for the creation and expansion of spheres of interest for European capital in non-European regions, for extorting railway concessions in backward countries, and for enforcing the claims of European capital as international lender. Finally, militarism is a weapon in the competitive struggle between capitalist countries for areas of non-capitalist civilisation.⁴⁹

But, just to show that the British did not have a monopoly on violence, Hindus and Muslims, former friends and neighbours, during Partition killed each other in an orgy of meaningless slaughter, to the tune of an estimated one million, and many hundreds of thousands more displaced and cut off from their families. To a certain extent the British were responsible for the botched operation, but this was no excuse for the killings.

Why were the British able to subjugate the Indians, indeed why were they in India in the first place, rather than the other way round? It depends on one’s point of view. Historians such as Landes and Ferguson would imply an innate sense of superiority and adventure. People like Bayly emphasise the use of violence (“efficiency at killing other human beings”⁵⁰). In summary, the most likely explanation is that the British had to be there: the logic of capitalism, as described by Luxemburg, requires continuous expansion.⁵¹ Further, if Marx’s view that people are conditioned by their environment – in fact primarily by the economic system and means of production – is correct then a corollary follows: that it was not a case of the Europeans of that time being “evil”; rather, that they were made to do evil things by the economic system that was arising at that time, i.e. capitalism.

⁴⁹ Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, p.434.

⁵⁰ Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, p.469.

⁵¹ Leaving aside the logic of capitalism, we can also note that the colder climate of Britain is unable to produce the various spices and foods that are required to live a decent life. The word “spice” is an innocuous sounding word but Denis Judd, in *The Lion and the Tiger*, says that pepper alone was worth the trading and later colonising efforts of the British (p.9). Spice not only enhances flavour – which is more important than it sounds – but was required as a preservative for meat and also to cover the odour of bad meat. Every winter the British had to slaughter their entire livestock which was lost without the preserving effect of spices (p.6). And, even today, if one thinks about the cold and misery of the British climate and the longing for warmer climes, it is easy to imagine why the British ventured out, not only for raw materials but also for the hot and exotic nature of the East. This idea of the exoticness of the East is extensively explored by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978).

There is much debate about whether Empire was good or bad, well-intentioned or always exploitation-intended. Attackers of Empire would argue that there is *no* doubt of the ill-intentions and that the debate is merely a post-facto obfuscation by defenders of Empire, a claim that clearly the latter would deny. A full discussion of this question is beyond the scope of this thesis but it can be said that there was no “grand plan”. The main goal was trade, either by cooperation or force. No armada set sail, no vast army went marching. But if, as they say, business is war, than clearly it *was* war, albeit not by weapons to start with. And the willingness to use force for trade perhaps demonstrates the ill-intentions: an analogy might be to tell a mugging victim to hand over their wallet willingly or be beaten first.

Defenders of Empire adduce that the British built roads and railways. But these were mainly to enforce control and to transport goods.⁵² Rosa Luxemburg has a scathing passage on this: “The (East India) Company which ruled India until 1858 did not make a single spring accessible, did not sink a single well, nor build a bridge for the benefit of the Indian.”⁵³ (This in contrast to previous rulers like the Moghuls.) She also says that the roads and railways were built to spread the “commodity economy”.⁵⁴ But the British also abolished *sati* (the Hindu tradition of burning the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband); it is hard to see what they would have gained economically from this; but it can also be said that they *lost* nothing economically from doing so. There are always people with morals campaigning for change, but it usually also requires the additional incentive of the economic benefit – or at the very least no economic *loss* – to energise the governing powers to actually do something about it.

But the overall conclusion must surely be this. Any benefits accruing to subject peoples was wholly incidental and a side-effect, and only if it had no economic impact on the colonisers. The idea that any country would travel halfway across the world on a “civilizing mission”, endure misery and heartache for hundreds of years (the men and women who went out to India, for example, were often very lonely and unhappy⁵⁵), for

⁵² Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger*, p.75.

⁵³ Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, p.355.

⁵⁴ Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, p.366. (Scholars also note that there have been no famines in post-independence India. This point is debated by pro- and anti- colonialists, e.g. Niall Ferguson and Amartya Sen. [I am indebted to Dr Anshuman Mondal for this point.]) See also Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). E.g.: “It is certainly true that there has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy.” (p.178) and “Since independence and the installation of multiparty democratic system, there has been no substantial famine [in India].” (p.180).

⁵⁵ Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger*, p.56.

the benefit of the foreign country is a puerile argument. Every single reason, from religion to “civilisation”, was an excuse for domination and exploitation, whilst incidental benefits were used as a mitigating facade.

But nor were the British hell-bent on conquest for its own sake; primarily, what they wanted was trade. For importation they wanted spices and other raw materials, and for export they wanted the huge market of India with its large population; the equation is surely very simple. But in order to trade, force sometimes becomes necessary. Britain first had to fight the Portuguese who were already in India; fortunately for the British, the Indians disliked the Dutch.⁵⁶ After a series of Anglo-Dutch wars the British gained the ascendancy from about 1650 onwards.⁵⁷ Another example of the use of force was during the Opium Wars with China:

The West’s ascendancy was confirmed in June 1842, when Royal Naval gunboats sailed up the Yangzi to the Grand Canal in retaliation for the destruction of opium stocks by a zealous Chinese official. China had to pay indemnity of 21 million silver dollars, open five ports to British trade and cede the island of Hong Kong.⁵⁸

But, having given a brief overview of the history, and pros and cons of the British Empire, the important question for the present purpose is: how did trade with India help Britain with its accumulation of capital and to intensify the international division of labour? There can be no doubt that Britain’s monopolistic trade with India was hugely profitable for Britain, and its later colonial position gave it the power to suppress India’s industrialisation to the advantage of its own. India was forced to be the supplier of raw materials and to be the market for Britain’s manufactured goods. For example, one writer maintains that India was not poor pre-colonialism; it had one quarter of world manufacturing output in 1750 but that “at the end of the colonisation process, India was a very poor country”.⁵⁹ Early theories, in the late nineteenth century, of how colonialism was making India poor were put forward by people like Romesh Chunder Dutt and Dadabhai Naoroji who coined the “Drain Theory” of economic (under)development, i.e. that Britain was draining the wealth of India,⁶⁰ and Titus Alexander has detailed the

⁵⁶ Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger*, p.8.

⁵⁷ Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger*, p.18.

⁵⁸ Ferguson, *Civilization*, p.48; see also Amitav Ghosh, *River of Smoke* (London: John Murray, 2011) for a fictional depiction of this.

⁵⁹ Hugh Hindman, ed., *The World of Child Labour* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2009), p.778.

⁶⁰ I am indebted to Dr Anshuman Mondal for this point.

protectionist measures enforced by Britain in order to support its textile industry, which destroyed India's own.⁶¹

A point needs to be made about the textile industry. Like the spice trade it sounds quite innocuous. One might think that surely, even if Britain did destroy India's textile industry, just one industry should not make so much difference. But the textile industry is extremely significant: clothes are one of the primary requirements of human beings. Indeed Ferguson notes that "the Industrial Revolution ... had its origins in the manufacture of textiles".⁶² So, the textile industry is of *huge* significance.

How profitable was colonialism? Rather surprisingly perhaps, some people still maintain that colonialism was not advantageous to Britain, for example David Landes; indeed he goes so far as to say that empire actually costs money. But Niall Ferguson in *Civilization* says quite openly and without any hesitation or doubt: "Britain was able to run a current-account surplus in invisible earnings from shipping, insurance and overseas investments, *plus the profits of empire (earnings from the slave trade and from the taxation of Indians by the East India Company)*".⁶³ There is also this from Denis Judd, referring to trade with India: "three or four voyages assured any man a very handsome fortune".⁶⁴

Perhaps the answer to David Landes is that initially this sort of trade is always profitable but later, as empire expands and requires a lot of administrative expenditure, as well as military expenditure to quell opposition, it no longer remains profitable. But there can be no doubt, as the two above quotes show, that the early and middle stages of colonialism resulted in a huge accumulation of capital which allowed further investment in the Industrial Revolution as well as imposing by force the first major turning point in the international division of labour.

The first major stage of the international division of labour

This occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even if it is accepted that slavery and colonialism gave no financial advantage to Britain – and even most defenders of this position do not go quite that far – what cannot be denied is that they

⁶¹ Alexander, *Unravelling Global Apartheid*, p.21.

⁶² Ferguson, *Civilization*, p.198.

⁶³ Ferguson, *Civilization*, p.161. [italics added]

⁶⁴ Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger*, p.37.

both led to the international division of labour existing today, which is the absolute basis of the imbalance between East and West and hence of child labour.

So now division of labour must be discussed in more detail. It is *not* the argument of this thesis that division of labour is a bad thing in and of itself. Up to a point it is almost certainly a *good* thing: most people can only do one or two things well and are usually happy to do those things. But like all things it is good or bad depending on how it is manifested in actual economies. Driven to an extreme it becomes almost an *evil* thing, as human beings become machines. Take for example software. It is one thing to specialise in software, to have a career ladder whereby one can progress from coder, to programmer, to designer, team leader, manager etc. But to be consigned to write code blindly and without thought from a specification for the rest of your life, without hope of advancement, would surely be tantamount to mental torture.

Or take the carpet industry, which is one of the main export industries of Pakistan and which is notorious for using child labour. Again, it is one thing to specialise in the carpet business, perhaps *start off* weaving carpets but then later progress to designing them, becoming a manager etc. But to be consigned to knot carpets for your whole life, starting in childhood, at subsistence wages is surely an evil thing, if one accepts the argument that human beings are not just machines to be used for wealth creation.

Now taking this argument to the international level, it certainly makes sense that various countries, because of their climate, geography, history, traditions, culture etc. would specialise in different things; but to consign the cheapest, lowest-skilled, manual, repetitive work to certain countries, whilst others do all the exciting, high-paid work is surely similarly evil, if one accepts that morality has any part to play in economics. And this connection between economics and morality surely must be accepted otherwise people would not bother even paying lip service to it; there may well be some people who privately do not believe this, but certainly no one says so publicly, which clearly demonstrates that they are at least aware that they are in the minority.

Here the idea of “comparative advantage” must be brought in. This concept derives from David Ricardo (1772-1823) and is related to the concept of division of labour. Ricardo maintains that people and countries should do what they are good at; (actually, Ricardo was referring to internal specialisation within a country but we can

extrapolate his argument globally⁶⁵). No argument with that. The problem is that for Eastern countries, according to this theory, their main comparative advantage is supposed to be cheap labour, which has been constructed by the global capitalist economy itself as an effect of slavery, colonialism and imperialism. As a result, cheap labour is *not* a comparative advantage; it is the worst *disadvantage* you can possible have and inevitably leads to child labour. But not just to child labour. When cheap labour is your main skill and there is no lower limit to the wage paid, it will inevitably fall to subsistence levels, according to the logic of capitalism and the doctrine of surplus value. In Marx's words, "The average price of wage-labour is the minimum wage, i.e., that quantum of the means of subsistence, which is absolutely requisite in bare existence as a labourer."⁶⁶ But here is another innocuous sounding word: "subsistence". What this means is that a person will work for just enough money to not starve, and they will be forced to have enough children so that the family as a whole does not starve.

This starvation wage, by definition, does not cover education, health care, holidays, life insurance, pension, or any kind of luxury. People in the West are often surprised at how cheap things are in the East; the preceding sentence gives the explanation. Most things the world over cost the same, whether it be commodities, gold, shares etc; the system of international arbitrage ensures that.⁶⁷ The low prices in the East are a result of a subsistence standard of living and also the cause of having many children: children are not only a source of income but also replace pensions; and a large family is a source of security, in that hopefully if one person falls on hard times, another will be able to make up.⁶⁸

Therefore subsistence wages cause not only child labour but also over-population and an increasing world population, in a world fast running out of resources.

⁶⁵ John Gray, *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (London: Granta Books, 2009), p.82.

⁶⁶ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Public Domain Books, 2005), kindle edition, section 2.

⁶⁷ Ha-Joon Chang, *23 Things they don't tell you about capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2011), chapter 10. E.g.: "Such differences exist basically because market exchange rates are largely determined by the supply and demand for internationally traded goods and services ... while what a sum of money can buy in a particular country is determined by the prices of all goods and services, and not just those that are internationally traded." (p.105) Also: "Trade in such services [labour intensive] requires international migration, but that is severely limited by immigration control, so the prices of such labour services end up being hugely different across countries ... When it comes to internationally traded things such as TVs or mobile phones, their prices are basically the same in all countries, rich or poor." (p.106).

⁶⁸ This paragraph is common knowledge but see Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics* (London: Penguin, 2012), chapter 5 for a detailed discussion.

For example, a recent report warns of food shortages as the world population reaches 9 billion by 2050.⁶⁹

So, colonialism did two things at once: it resulted in a further huge accumulation of capital *and* imposed the initial international division of labour. But perhaps the real turning point as far as child labour (in contrast to the general imbalance) is concerned, happened more recently.

The second major stage of the international division of labour

The next great stage of the international division of labour occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, when manufacturing of cheap goods was shifted to the East, whilst the West concentrated on services such as banking, and high-end manufacturing and technology such as pharmaceuticals and aircraft – all of which require huge accumulations of capital. All of these things can have huge added-values attached to them, enabling much higher wages and standards of living in the West.

If one looks at two graphs, one the decline of manufacturing jobs in Britain, and one showing the rise of carpet weaving income in Pakistan (the carpet industry is looked at in more detail in Part 2, and is notorious for using child labour), one finds an almost mirror symmetry, one showing a decline, the other an increase.⁷⁰ It should also be noted that up until about 1950 population growth rates were similar all over the world⁷¹ but after 1950 rates diverged as the imbalance gathered pace from the post-war boom, as seen in the third graph. This graph is not only part of the present argument but also provides a major general motivation to tackle the global imbalance, because of the resulting pressure on finite global resources.

⁶⁹ John Vidal, “Food shortages could force world into vegetarianism, warn scientists,” *The Guardian*, August 26, 2012, accessed May 16, 2013.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2012/aug/26/food-shortages-world-vegetarianism>

⁷⁰ <http://pclu.ciwce.org.pk/product/child-labour-in-carpet-weaving-industry-in-punjab>
& <http://duncanseconomicblog.wordpress.com/2011/01/06/uk-manufacturing-is-booming-or-is-it/>
(The Pakistan graph is from 1971 onwards; the British one from 1978 onwards.)

⁷¹ http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/beyond/beyondco/beg_03.pdf

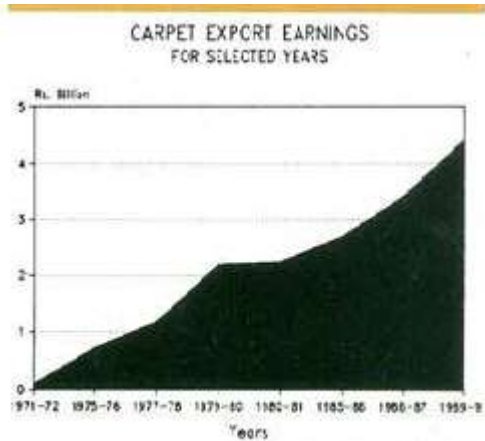
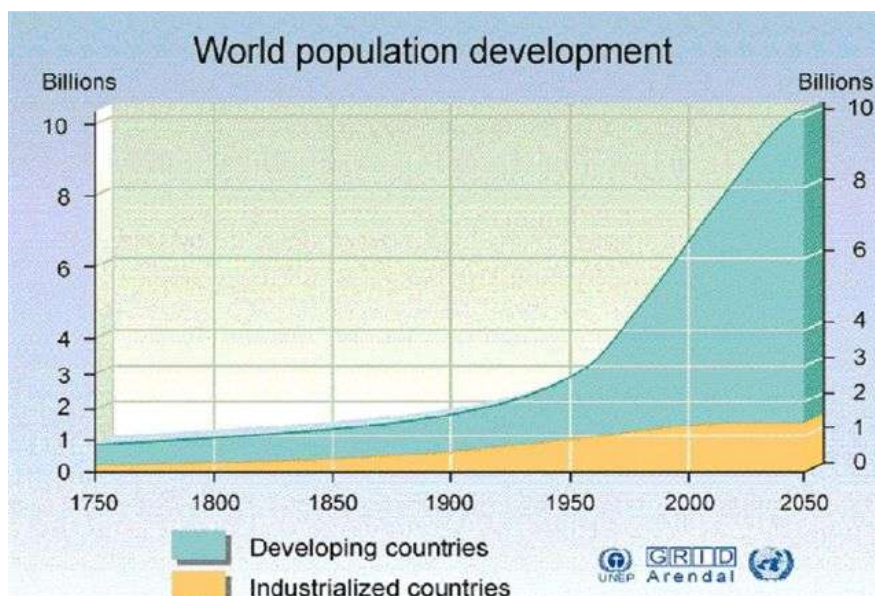
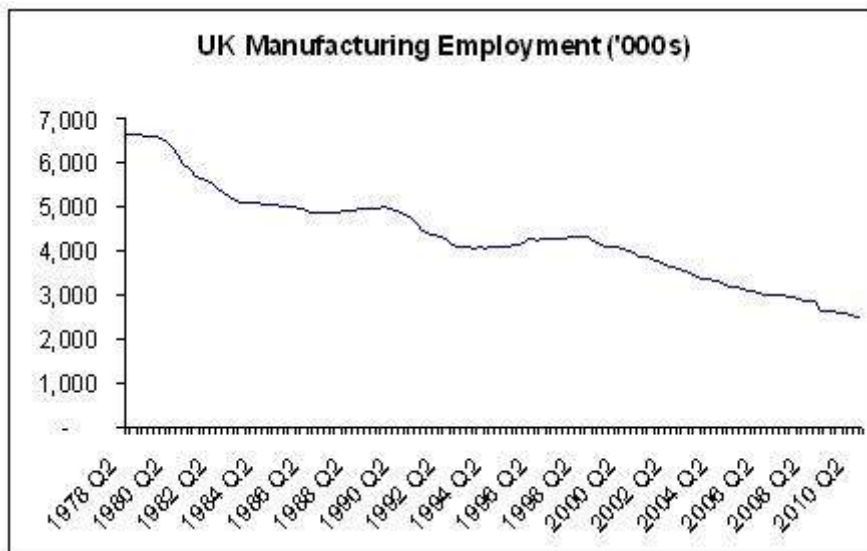


Fig. 1.1 (Source: The News 26 Feb. 1992)



Part 2: Child labour in more detail

A brief history of child labour in Britain

“It seems that children have worked throughout history.”⁷² So says *Child Labour: A World History Companion*. It continues:

However, in earlier times it was so much taken for granted that there are few records of child labour and few comments upon it. It is with the beginnings of the industrial revolution, which started in England in the eighteenth century, that child labour became a matter of public debate.

Discussion of child labour is complicated by many factors: definition of childhood, type of work and cultural norms to name a few. Some people even say that the rosy conception of childhood today was an invention of Romanticism.⁷³ People distinguish between light work, heavy and dangerous work – these last two often termed the “worst forms” of child labour.⁷⁴ People differentiate between child *work* and child *labour*, the former being acceptable, the latter not.⁷⁵ Some people say that child work is ingrained in some cultures and that the West has no right to interfere, this last in relation to child labour in poor countries, which is the main area of concern nowadays and of this thesis.⁷⁶

Firstly, to define some terms, starting with the definition of childhood. The fact that this question of “What is childhood?” arose at the same time as the issue of child labour became prevalent may not be coincidental. Some people say that Romanticism itself was partly a reaction to the dehumanising aspects of the Industrial Revolution, which is interesting because it ties in with the above comment that childhood too was a Romantic invention; Ferber identifies the period of Romanticism as 1760-1860, which certainly ties in with the period of the Industrial Revolution.⁷⁷ It was referred to in poetry, for example the “dark, satanic mills” in Blake’s poem now known as *Jerusalem*.

⁷² Sandy Hobbs *et al*, *Child labour: A World History Companion* (Oxford: ABC-CLIO Ltd, 1999), p.xiii.

⁷³ Hugh Cunningham & Pier Viazzo, *Child Labour in Historical Perspective* (UNICEF, 1996), p.12. http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/hisper_childlabour.pdf

⁷⁴ Hobbs, *Child Labour*, p.xiii.

⁷⁵ Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁷⁶ Hobbs, *Child Labour*.

⁷⁷ Michael Ferber, *Romanticism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.98-101; also Duncan Wu, ed., *Romanticism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p.xxxiv: “It [Romanticism] coincides with the moment at which Britain industrialized itself.”

It would seem that up until the Industrial Revolution it could be said that life was more holistic (which is *not* intended to imply idyllic) but that the lifestyle was mostly agrarian and family-based. In such an environment it would make complete sense for everybody to “pile in”, children included.

But without the mechanisation, increasing division of labour and increasing competition starting from the eighteenth century, children and adults would naturally have borne their share of work according to their abilities. They would not have been sold into bonded labour, or sent away from their families, as happened in the Industrial Revolution and still happens today in Pakistan.⁷⁸

In terms of types of work, the difference between child *work* and child *labour* is as follows. Child work is considered to be light, occasional or limited work that does not interfere with school, is not unduly tiring or physically exhausting. Such work might be a paper-round, some domestic chores etc. Heavy work would include full-time work to the exclusion of school – carpet weaving, brick making etc. Very heavy or dangerous work, or what is termed “worst forms” of child labour, include child prostitution, child soldiers, mining etc.

Perhaps the most surprising thing one learns from researching child labour is that the conception we have of it today had a very specific origin in time and space: The British Industrial Revolution – with child labour peaking around 1790-1830.⁷⁹ One also learns some surprising things about the Industrial Revolution, if one has not studied it in depth previously: that its huge impact was not confined to the economy alone, but may well have been partly responsible (in conjunction with the creation of empire) with the family system in England, especially the notion of the “distant father”: “The division of labour between mothers and fathers also structured relationships within families. Early breadwinning fathers became distant figures away from home for long hours.”⁸⁰ This point is relevant to the present argument because this estrangement also happens in Pakistan; indeed it is often the abandonment by the father – usually for economic reasons rather than heartlessness – or drug-use that results in the children having to work.⁸¹ The Industrial Revolution required huge amounts of labour power, and division of labour also accompanied it; both of these factors contrived to compel children into

⁷⁸ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* & CIWCE, *Child Labour in Carpet Weaving Industry in Punjab* (CIWCE & UNICEF, 1992): <http://pclu.ciwce.org.pk/product/child-labour-in-carpet-weaving-industry-in-punjab>

⁷⁹ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.366.

⁸⁰ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.368.

⁸¹ CIWCE, *Child Labour*, p.7; pp.19-20.

labour. Previously, they would have worked, as mentioned above, but the specific nature, concentration and intensity caused by the Industrial Revolution was on a totally different level compared to what had been the case to that point. For example, “[the] classic era of industrialisation, 1790-1850, saw an upsurge in child labour ... cheap child labour went hand in hand with an expanded division of labour and deskilling ... In Adam Smith’s own example ‘pin making, the division of labour was accompanied by the introduction of child labour.’ ”⁸²

A question that is often asked is, Why did parents send their children to work? Did they not love them, were they heartless and cruel? The theory of child labour has developed its own terminology. There is the “luxury axiom” and the “substitution axiom”. The luxury axiom asserts that households send their children to work only when driven to do so by poverty.⁸³ The substitution axiom is more sinister: it claims that employers deliberately geared processes and machines towards child labour.

Reading Jane Humphries’ book, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (2010), based on working-class autobiographies of former child labourers, leaves no doubt that parents were driven by necessity to send their children to work and that to claim otherwise, then in Britain and now in the East, is hypocrisy and obfuscation on the part of those who want to maintain the status quo. Parents went to extraordinary lengths to support their children; indeed even uncles and aunts often pitched in.⁸⁴

According to Humphries “child labour declined from the mid-nineteenth century”.⁸⁵ How did Britain manage to end child labour? What were the specific measures used to combat it? These were a combination of factory acts and legislation on schooling.⁸⁶ It should be borne in mind however that most of the early legislation was aimed at regulating rather than eliminating child labour.⁸⁷ The first act was in 1802 and was targeted at apprentices in the cotton and woollen mills. The act stipulated that the children must receive some schooling as part of their apprenticeship. The 1833 act established criteria for a normal working day in one industry, textile manufacturing. The 1844 act reduced the working day to six and half hours. Further acts followed and child labour did reduce but critics are divided as to whether it was actually the acts that

⁸² Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.366.

⁸³ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.26.

⁸⁴ E.g. Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, pp.137,139,148,150,157.

⁸⁵ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.310.

⁸⁶ Hobbs, *Child Labour*, p.85.

⁸⁷ Hobbs, *Child Labour*, p.85.

caused the reduction.⁸⁸ Compulsory education was established in the late nineteenth century but “it did not lead to the abolishment of child labour ... children were expected to fit their work around their school attendance”.⁸⁹ A 1933 law allowed children to work during school holidays and for limited periods of time on school days. By the mid twentieth century child labour was no longer a real issue in Britain.

So, schooling helped, and respectability because child labour came to be increasingly seen as reprehensible. Legislation also helped but often this merely shifted child labour to the “unregulated economy”.⁹⁰ Could it be that actually, child labour was not ended but merely shifted, long-term, to the “unregulated economy” of the East, along with manufacturing? Is it a coincidence that the British Empire was peaking at just about this time and Britain was able to export its child labour to the East because it had the money to replace it with higher wages for its own adult labour force? Part 1 has already examined the chain of events that may explain how this happened. The next section but one looks at this on a qualitative level by making some comparisons to show the similarities between the Industrial Revolution then and Pakistan now; but before doing that the important topics of conception of childhood and attitude to education need to be discussed.

Social norms: conception of childhood and attitude to education

One of the arguments that has entered the discourse regarding child labour is that different cultures have varying conceptions of childhood and that the West should not interfere in other cultures if they wish to make their children work. Indeed, there is even a theory that childhood is an invented concept. This theory comes from a book called *Centuries of Childhood* by Philippe Aries, first published in French in 1960.

Aries argues that childhood as a concept was “invented”; this invention had its first stirrings in the thirteen century, took firmer roots in the sixteenth century, peaked in the seventeenth century, and then in the eighteenth century the idea of the family took centre stage in portraits (Aries bases much of his argument by examining paintings). Aries explains that this does not mean that children were not around, that people did not notice that little people existed. What he means is that children were mostly ignored, the

⁸⁸ Hobbs, *Child Labour*, p.86.

⁸⁹ Hobbs, *Child Labour*, pp.236-7.

⁹⁰ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.370.

reason being that infant mortality being very high, parents did not allow themselves to become too attached to their children since they had no way of knowing if those children would survive or not. Aries suggests that as infant mortality decreased so the conception of childhood took hold, cementing at the point of Jenner's discovery of vaccination in the eighteenth century. But here the argument runs into a problem which Aries himself acknowledges: "conditions were still so unfavourable to it [child mortality] ... this idea should have appeared much later".⁹¹ Aries does not really answer his own objection very clearly but perhaps this section can attempt to answer it for him, partly from inferring from his own book.

At first glance the argument that childhood is an invented concept seems ridiculous. But on further examination perhaps it is not so strange. Most academic discourse nowadays accepts that human beings, minds and identities, are constructed; indeed this is the meaning of Marx's base/superstructure model, that the economic base "constructs" and defines the rest of society. Marx says, "Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?"⁹² In the same way that the concept of the "teenager" was constructed in the twentieth century, it can fairly easily be accepted that the concept of the child may well have been similarly constructed (by "child" Aries mostly means the age from birth to about seven, although this then became extended to the notion of the "long childhood" to the age of perhaps fifteen as education became more important). What about the objection he himself mentions? Although it is true that it was vaccination that led to a huge decrease in infant mortality, it surely must also be the case that from the scientific revolution onwards there must have been a more general improvement in living conditions, hygiene etc., as well as a more general awareness of the world that could also have contributed to the increased awareness of children by adults. Very rarely is it the case that only one thing or even a few things are sufficient to explain something; this is a reductionist and essentialist trap that should be avoided if at all possible; it is sometimes possible to identify various factors but it always remains possible that other factors are simply not available.

But now how does all this apply to the present thesis? Many child labour texts use the idea of childhood in general or Aries' conception of childhood in particular to

⁹¹ Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* (London: Pimlico, 1996), p.38.

⁹² Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, section 2.

“defend” child labour, in the sense that the West should not impose its view of childhood on others.⁹³ But this may be putting the cart before the horse. Surely, it makes more sense to say that the conception of childhood that Aries describes is a *result* of the very forces that “exported” child labour to the East? In other words, the profits of slavery and colonialism, which enabled the Industrial Revolution and international division of labour, also allowed investment in health and education, leading to a decrease in infant mortality, and resulted in the conception of childhood that he talks about. Aries himself does not really “explain” why this came about, other than referring to things like vaccination and improving living standards but without the economic or historical reasons. He merely traces the fact that it happened.

Aries wrote his book simply as a historian interested in the history of the family; his book has nothing to do with child labour. It would seem therefore that his idea has perhaps been “hijacked” – whether intentionally or not is difficult to say – for a purpose for which it was never intended. The overwhelming evidence is that child labour exists in the East because it serves an economic purpose, just as it did during the Industrial Revolution. If Eastern countries were able to raise their living standards, the conception of childhood would surely arise in those countries also. This is actually very easy to prove: the conception of childhood, as defined by Aries, already exists in the East, in *well-off* families. No well-off families send their children to work in Pakistan, and very few such families have more than two or three children, just like in Britain. Indeed, not only do they educate their children, they often send them to the West for very expensive educations.

Comparing child labour in Britain and Pakistan

This section compares *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (based on working class autobiographies, as mentioned above) by Jane Humphries, and *Child Labour in Carpet Weaving Industry In Punjab*, a 1992 Pakistani research document produced by the CIWCE (Centre for the Improvement of Working Condition and Environment) in association with UNICEF; the two sources are uncanny in their

⁹³ E.g.: Roland Pierick and Mijke Houwerzijl, “Western Policies on Child Labor Abroad,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, 20.2, June 2006; & Cunningham & Viazzo, *Child Labour in Historical Perspective*.

similarities despite being two centuries and two continents apart in their subject matter.⁹⁴

As well as conception of childhood, some people argue that the West should not interfere in other countries because of the claim that families in the East do not value education.⁹⁵ The following comparisons find that these two issues go together and that the evidence would seem to indicate that both of these claims are invalid and therefore may be a distraction. The fact that these children were then, and are still now, regarded as children and that it was/is not social norms that makes parents send them to work instead of school can be clearly seen in these two sources. Among the many examples cited by Humphries, the following illustrate the point: “At nine years of age I was taken from school and put to work in the fields” and “When I was six years ... old I was sent off to work ... Fancy that! I do not think I shall ever forget those long and hungry days in the fields.”⁹⁶ The emotive tone and emphasis on age would seem to indicate that these children saw themselves then and later in life as children. Many quotes allude to being taken out of school.

Now compare this with the CIWCE document:⁹⁷ “Arshad started weaving carpets at the age of six ... Arshad is fascinated by school going children. He says he becomes sad when he sees these children going to school ... in school uniforms, while he has to ... sit on the hard wooden board and do knotting all day.” And this: “Nazir is 11 years old. He works from 6am to 6pm. Nazir used to go to school till he was eight. Then his father got into debt and he was withdrawn from school.”

Note the uncanny similarities in circumstances and tone, mention of school and age. In terms of social norms and school, it would be expected that if this was the norm, why mention it and why would the children be sad? Humphries states clearly, after examining the evidence in a rigorous and statistical way, that “child labour was no anachronism inherited from a more brutal past”.⁹⁸ She says, “the industrial revolution ... may well have both unleashed a boom in children’s work and itself been fed by children’s work”.⁹⁹ She also says of the charge that this was mere social norm that these comments were by:

⁹⁴ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour* & CIWCE, *Child labour*.

⁹⁵ E.g.: Pierick and Houwerzijl, “Western Policies” & Basu, “Child Labor”.

⁹⁶ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.173.

⁹⁷ CIWCE, *Child labour*, pp.19-20.

⁹⁸ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.177.

⁹⁹ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.172.

... middle- and upper-class commentators, many of whom employed children or were sympathetic to employers of children. In projecting these views, they sought to exculpate themselves and their peers by shifting the blame for what was increasingly seen as a reprehensible practice on to avaricious parents.¹⁰⁰

The above could possibly be changed to this in a putative document written in the future:

... Western commentators, many of whom indirectly employed children or were sympathetic to employers of children. In projecting these views, they sought to exculpate themselves and their peers by shifting the blame for what was increasingly seen as a reprehensible practice on to the cultural norms of the East.

There are some points that can be made specifically about school, and the claim by some commentators that Eastern parents do not value education. Regarding the respondents (i.e. the parents of the child workers) in the survey in Pakistan: “all of them said they would like to see their children go to school”¹⁰¹ It is also the case that most of the children started school but were pulled out when financial circumstances declined. All the children long for school. When people talk about social attitudes there is a misleading impression that some parents approve of their children working or that the children do not like school. Both of these arguments are categorically misleading. True, the parents do say that if their children did not work they might become vagrants, and in a very narrow sense one could agree with that; but that does not mean that they specifically want their children to work in preference to school.

The other point often made is that children in Pakistan drop out of school because of the teachers. This is true.¹⁰² Teachers in Pakistan can be very sarcastic, often violent and the learning is rote, perhaps as boring as carpet weaving, but that is surely an argument to look at improving teaching, not an argument to put children to work. Besides, many children in the West do not like school, but they are not put to work in the fields or in carpet weaving.¹⁰³

The following comparisons from the two documents are in terms of schooling and teachers. In the CIWCE document parents often said “education is of no use”¹⁰⁴ but this was usually *after* the children had been withdrawn for economic reasons. They said

¹⁰⁰ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.31.

¹⁰¹ CIWCE, *Child labour*, p.24.

¹⁰² E.g. Zubeida Mustafa, “Teachers who cannot teach,” *Dawn.com* (respected Pakistani newspaper), February 1, 2012, accessed May 16, 2013. <http://dawn.com/2012/02/01/teachers-who-cannot-teach/>

¹⁰³ Banerjee & Duflo, *Poor Economics*, chapter 4 makes similar points to the above regarding education and poverty.

¹⁰⁴ CIWCE, *Child labour*, p.30.

that the children “would have become vagrant”¹⁰⁵ if they didn’t work. The “attitude of teachers ... had diverted many children away from education”¹⁰⁶.

In Humphries’ book: “Historians have almost universally condemned the schools” of that time.¹⁰⁷ “They are depicted as places of rote learning and brutal discipline run by incompetent and often sadistic teachers.” There was violence, large classes and untrained teachers.¹⁰⁸ But note that “boys walked incredible distances to school” (5-6 miles), despite everything.¹⁰⁹

Again, note the uncanny similarities. One final point about education. It is not necessarily the case that education is better than work, *per se*. Many people would contend that the education system too is mostly just another a capitalist tool and that a school is a factory to produce “brain workers” rather than labourers. (Or, in Marx’s words, “And your education! Is not that also social, and determined by the social conditions under which you educate, by the intervention, direct or indirect, by means of schools, etc.?”¹¹⁰) But the point is that school produces workers who are able to earn more, and teaching reading and writing allows people, perhaps unwittingly, to increase their human capital, a beneficial side-effect. So there is no real need to argue over social norms or whether people believe in education. When parents in the East say that they do not see any value in education, what they mean is *financially*. If they knew that by education their children would be able to earn more and hence look after themselves and their parents better, there can be no doubt that they would want their children to go to school, not that there can really be any doubt about this, as seen from the quotes above. Bannerjee and Duflo suggest that “They [parents] had discovered that educating girls had economic value, and were happy to invest,” and that “People invest in education ... to make more money – in the form of increased earnings in the future.”¹¹¹ True, there is actually a problem with under-employment in countries like India of *educated* people, for the same reasons, i.e. the international division of labour, but this is not a reason not to be educated. Education – as a minimum the ability to read – at least does provide an

¹⁰⁵ CIWCE, *Child Labour*, p.37.

¹⁰⁶ CIWCE, *Child Labour*, p.44.

¹⁰⁷ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.307.

¹⁰⁸ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.308.

¹⁰⁹ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, p.311.

¹¹⁰ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, section 2. Also note that Louis Althusser in his seminal essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, says that the education system is a state apparatus. (I am indebted to Dr Anshuman Mondal for this point.)

¹¹¹ Banerjee & Duflo, *Poor Economics*, p.77.

outlet for the mind, even if one is unemployed, and the ability to vote and influence events in other ways to the extent of the ability and inclination of the person concerned.

The next comparison highlights further the charge of hypocrisy and the contention of this thesis that if morality and economic interest do not collide, it can be easier to make social changes.

Comparing child labour with child prostitution

Much of Western policy on child labour in the East is based around eliminating the “worst forms” of child labour, and included in this is child prostitution. But there are those who argue that actually child prostitution is in many ways no worse than child manual labour; for this argument one can compare and contrast *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* (2005) by Louise Brown, a book about the famous *Heera Mandi* red-light area of Lahore, where prostitution is a family business and has come down from Mughal times, and *Modern Babylon* (2001) by Heather Montgomery, which is about Thailand.¹¹² For example, Montgomery argues that child labour can often be back-breaking with little monetary reward.¹¹³ The claim that child prostitution may not be worse than child labour may seem surprising at first glance but if looked at objectively, with emotion removed, there is evidence to support this view. The above two books reveal that there are four ways in which child prostitution is a lesser evil than child labour:

1. Child labour is physically exhausting and can involve long hours.
2. It is financially less rewarding.
3. Quite often the child prostitute (referring to young girls) is prized and valued and even has a certain kudos.
4. The child usually lives with the family, indeed may be instrumental in enabling the family to stay together, whereas in child labour quite often the child has to leave their family, or the father has abandoned the family.

¹¹² This research was actually carried out for the present author’s MA dissertation (Rohail Ahmad, Brunel University, 2009/10, unpublished).

¹¹³ Heather Montgomery, *Modern Babylon: Prostituting children in Thailand* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), p.156.

So if this argument is accepted then, it becomes instructive to compare Western policy attitudes towards child prostitution and child labour. Here are some extracts from a BBC news report about child prostitution.¹¹⁴

A spokeswoman for the Serious Organised Crime Agency (Soca) said officers worked "very closely" with their counterparts in sex tourism hotspots including Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia ... We have a duty to protect every child everywhere and we must take an uncompromising approach to travelling child abusers," she told the BBC News website Britons who travel abroad to abuse children in the belief they can evade justice are a UK problem and we offer support for prosecutions to this end ... In February 2005 British police visited Thailand to train local officers in methods of combating sex offending.

Now compare this with child labour:¹¹⁵

In response to the BBC findings in Gujarat, the British government said businesses were encouraged to remain vigilant about the work conditions for products they buy from overseas.

It should be emphasised that the above selections and the imbalance between them are *not* the result of a deliberate selection policy on the part of the present analysis. This is typical of the difference in attitude towards child prostitution and child labour: i.e. outrage and *concrete action* in the first case, dismissal in the second.¹¹⁶

In 2010 the ECGD (Export Credits Guarantees Department) of the British government changed its ethical policy regarding child labour and other things.¹¹⁷

Under the ECGD's new policy, the Department will not assess some projects for their potential environmental and human rights impacts, including their potential use of child and forced labour. Projects requesting short-term (two years) export credits or projects in which the UK exporters' share is worth less than about £10 million will in future be approved without any screening.

¹¹⁴ Liam Allen, "Time to tackle 'sex tourism'," *BBC*, March 3, 2006, accessed May 16, 2013. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4768562.stm>

¹¹⁵ Humphrey Hawksley, "India's exploited child cotton workers," *BBC*, January 19, 2012, accessed May 16, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16639391>

¹¹⁶ The present author has even noticed this difference in general, polite conversation. People are quite happy to discuss child labour at length, the pros and cons etc., and admittedly are usually against it; but discussion of child prostitution, whilst arousing horror, also has an aura of distaste about it, and the conversation quickly moves on as though the wrongness of it is so obvious as to not merit detailed analysis.

¹¹⁷ The Corner House and Samata, "Court action to stop UK government department lifting ban on child and forced labour," *The Corner House*, April 30, 2010, accessed May 16, 2013. <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/court-action-stop-uk-government-department-lifting-ban-child-and-forced-labour>

The “ECGD stated in response [to the court action brought against it] that it does not have to consider whether its support contributes to human rights abuse, because it ‘does not owe obligations to persons outside the jurisdiction of the UK’.”¹¹⁸

It can be seen from the above, therefore, that much of the Western policy and lip-service about child labour is hypocritical and a facade. *The Exploited Child* has no illusions on this score. It states quite categorically:

Beneath a humanitarian facade ... lurks a power that is prepared to go to any lengths to thwart the least action threatening to disturb this vast one-way flow of money ... Anyone trying to tackle child labour ... [crosses] a minefield full of danger ... violent assaults and even murders; such is the fate reserved for the activists and organisations committed to fighting for the rights of child workers.¹¹⁹

Comparing child labour with slavery

Part of the argument of the present thesis is that child labour is a continuation of slavery. So the question must be asked: What is slavery? Is it working for no pay? So if a worker is paid a penny a day, is that no longer slavery? Most people would probably agree that it is still slavery. How about 10p a day? Is that slavery? Possibly. A pound a day? This is obviously one of those philosophical conundrums that seem irresolvable, rather like Zeno’s paradoxes or a straw and camel type scenario, but most people would probably agree that one could not get away from the charge of slavery by simply making a tiny, notional payment; there would have to be some *reasonably significant* level of payment that would differentiate slavery from paid labour.

Most child labourers in the East work for about 10-30 pence a day.¹²⁰ Most adults work for about a pound a day. One of the millennium development goals is to raise people above the poverty line of \$1.25 a day.¹²¹ This is a subsistence wage, as discussed in Part 1 – the amount required for a human being to just about avoid starvation. No shelter, no clothes, no leisure, no luxury, no medical treatment, no sick pay, no pension, no education is taken account of within this figure.

Is it possible to be more precise about the definition of slavery? One general definition might be that *a slave-wage is any wage that does not cover all the basic*

¹¹⁸ The judge refused to consider the case, stating that the case was not arguable in law.

¹¹⁹ Schlemmer, ed., *The Exploited Child*, p.188.

¹²⁰ E.g. Hobbs, *Child Labour*, p.184.

¹²¹ 1 Pakistani rupee is worth about 0.5 Indian rupees, and £1 is worth about US\$1 at the time of writing, but the rhetorical “pound a day” will be used for the present purpose.

necessities of life and the full lifecycle of a human being, including health, education and pension. A more specific definition, relating to the present thesis, might be: any wage that requires a person or couple to have children *for the sole purpose of making them work or be the source of their social security and pension.* This would mean that not only child labour but cheap labour with no minimum wage would also count as slavery. In fact, according to the first definition, even the UK minimum wage of £6.31 per hour is a slave-wage – but this is compensated by social security, medical treatment and state pension.

In 1830, Richard Oestler wrote a letter entitled “Yorkshire Slavery”. It deserves to be quoted in full but lack of space permits only a few extracts:

Let truth speak out, appalling as the statement may appear. Thousands of our fellow creatures ... are this very moment existing in a state of slavery, more horrid than are the victims of that hellish system “Colonial Slavery.” These innocent creatures draw out, unpitied, their short but miserable existence ... Thousands of little children, both male and female ... from seven to fourteen years of age, are daily compelled to labour from six o’clock in the morning to seven in the evening ... Poor Infants! Ye are indeed sacrificed at the shrine of avarice, without even the solace of the negro slave ... No, no! Your soft and delicate limbs are tired and fagged, and jaded ... and when your joints can act no longer, your emaciated frames are instantly supplied with other victims, who ... are *hired* – not sold – as slaves and daily forced to hear that they are free.¹²² [italics in the original]

This was written about Yorkshire in the eighteenth century but could easily be a description of child labour in Pakistan in the present day. Note that with the italicised word “*hired*” Oestler almost seems to be making a similar point to the present thesis – that cheap labour only avoids the charge of slavery by a technicality. The comparison with colonial slavery is problematic but the writer may have been using it as a rhetorical device to maximise the force of his argument.

Part of the nature of capitalism is that it is able to morph itself out of ethical dilemmas as they are unearthed, or as Marx puts it, “the constantly recurring experience that capital, so soon as it finds itself subject to legal control at one point, compensates itself all the more recklessly at other points”.¹²³ It finds new ways of hiding its use of cheap labour. One of the ways it has morphed itself, the one most pertinent to this thesis, is to hide away its child labour in the East, and also by avoiding charges of

¹²² Hobbs, *Child Labour*, p.179.

¹²³ Arthur, *Marx’s Capital*, p.291.

exploitation by technicalities, as well as hiding that exploitation behind a facade of humanitarianism. Slavery, in the form of child labour, seems to have been swept away under the carpet of the East; the public slave market has disappeared to be replaced by the very private sweatshop. Ironically, the change from slavery to cheap labour may even have been beneficial to capitalism because it removed the moral or economic obligation on the employer to provide even minimum care for the worker, such as food, clothing, shelter and medicine. Rosa Luxemburg makes a similar point, quoting Rodbertus: “The abolition of slavery or serfdom, moreover, rescinded the master’s legal or moral obligation to feed them and care for their needs.”¹²⁴

Further evidence for the similarity of child labour and slavery can be found in comparing the abolitionist movement of slavery with the attempt to tackle child labour, both in terms of the terminology and the justifications for them. Slavery was justified on economic grounds and also that the slaves were better off than they had been in Africa. In the same way, people say that working children are better off than starving or ending up in even worse situations. The initial attempts at abolition were geared towards “amelioration” just like in child labour people talk about tackling the “worst forms” of it or alleviating conditions, rather than eradicating it. For example, “the first impulses towards reform were ameliorationist rather than abolitionist or emancipationist, that activists often aimed to make slavery more humane or more Christian, not to liberate the enslaved.”¹²⁵ It was argued that slavery was so entrenched, had existed since the dawn of civilisation, was part of the culture (“social norms”) of certain societies and that there was no point in the British trying to abolish it unilaterally. Note the similarity with the discourse on child labour.

A further similarity between the two is the use of violence to enforce the labour. It is surely obvious that when people are being coerced into labour with insufficient or no compensation, violence is bound to be necessary. The most common punishment in slavery was flogging but extreme cases involved cutting off of noses and ears. Child workers in Pakistan are often beaten by hand, including by their own parents.¹²⁶ But there is worse; *The Exploited Child* has this to say:

¹²⁴ Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, p.219.

¹²⁵ Brown, *Moral Capital*, p.28.

¹²⁶ CIWCE, *Child Labour*, p.13.

When ... we descend into the world of the working child, we are rapidly plunged into an atmosphere of violence ... the child is bombarded with usually screamed orders ... Children are beaten and punished for the slightest error. A bonded child recaptured after running away faces serious battering or mutilation.¹²⁷

Children also suffer from injuries and illnesses because of their small size, lack of attention and the unhealthy working conditions. All of these are also very similar to the descriptions of the Industrial Revolution.

In the end, as Part 1 mentioned, slavery was abolished when economic and moral reasons coincided, which would seem to imply that child labour too will only be eradicated if economic arguments can be adduced to support those who are genuinely horrified by it, rather than those who simply pay lip-service to it.

¹²⁷ Schlemmer, *The Exploited Child*, p.188.

Part 3: Force and collusion: Why there is no will to end child labour

Introduction

This thesis would contend that it is not possible for one country to dominate another without collusion. This was true of slavery and colonialism, and Part 3 attempts to show that that it is also true of child labour, although in the present age force has been replaced with unfair and rigged world-trade policies, such as free flow of capital and goods but *not* of labour, and the unfair international division of labour. Free flow of labour may seem like a pipedream but it was exactly what we had until about 1980. But first, another technique often used to obfuscate issues – in this case that cheap labour is the basic problem – is the argument of complexity; this was used for slavery, and of apartheid in South Africa,¹²⁸ and is also used in the discourse of child labour.

Is child labour a complex problem?

Most of the research on child labour, including the latest PhD theses and articles by both Western and Eastern researchers, seem to agree that child labour is a complex problem and does not have simple solutions. For example, “tackling child labour requires different solutions in each country and in each sector”¹²⁹ says the ILO (International Labour Organisation), whilst the authors of *Western Policies on Child Labor Abroad* say “There is little doubt as to the need for reducing child labor, but it is a huge, heterogeneous, and complex problem that cannot be solved overnight. Moreover, there is no single, simple policy measure that can end all child labor.”¹³⁰ A recent Pakistani study says “Since this is a global dilemma and a complex problem with various aspects and eradicating it needs proper forum, broader strategies, methods and those could not be identified and opted without examining and knowing the scale, nature and root causes of the problem. [*sic*]”¹³¹

¹²⁸ FW de Klerk, “De Klerk hails Thatcher as visionary,” *Mail & Guardian*, April 16, 2013, accessed May 16, 2013: “She had a much better grasp of the complexities and geo-strategic realities of South Africa than many of her contemporaries.” <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-04-16-de-klerk-hails-thatcher-as-visionary>

¹²⁹ ILO, *Towards a world without child labour* (conference report) (Hague: ILO, May 2010), p.2.

¹³⁰ Pierick and Houwerzijl, “Western Policies,” p.217.

¹³¹ Farkhanda Zia, “The effectiveness of trade sanctions and ILO Convention 182 on the eradication of the worst forms of child labour in the United Kingdom and Pakistan” (PhD diss., Hull University, 2006), p.9. (This is a Pakistani PhD thesis.)

It is the contention of the present thesis that child labour is *not* a complex problem.¹³² That it is, in fact, a simple problem, the primary cause of which is poverty – itself stemming from cheap labour – and the international divisions of labour, as the following shows: “There is a general conviction that poverty is the major cause of the child labour problem – the poverty of governments, combined with the destitution of individual families.”¹³³ and “they [the authors of an article entitled *Trade Openness, Foreign Direct Investment and Child Labor*] conclude that trade openness might lower child labor, *but only via its positive effect on per capita income.*”¹³⁴ Or, as the report *Western Policies on Child Labor Abroad* puts it:

The most important reason for the existence of child labor in developing countries is poverty. Even (most) poor parents do not send their children to work if they can prevent it. Indeed, Kaushik Basu argues that in the situations in which child labor occurs as a mass phenomenon, the alternative to child labor is usually very harsh—acute hunger or even starvation.¹³⁵

What is *not* simple is the fact that the whole of the world economy is based on child labour, which means that it is highly entangled in networks of power and interest on a global scale, and this props up the current structure of dominance and subordination. As a result, Western governments do not truly want to end it.

Naivety or hypocrisy?

It is difficult to work out how much of current policy is based on the genuine belief that child labour is a complex problem and how much is based on hypocrisy. But there is evidence to back the hypocrisy argument. For example, Pierik and Houwerzijl suggest that: “Thus, an important reason behind the slow progression in this policy field was the lack of political commitment of the “ruling classes” in Western Europe.”¹³⁶ and the report *Trade Openness, Foreign Direct Investment and Child Labor* notes that “Critics

¹³² In the wake of the USA school shootings of 14th December 2012, gun control law was described as a complex problem. But surely it is not complex, simply the fact that many people do not want it?

¹³³ Zia, “The effectiveness of trade sanctions”, p.12.

¹³⁴ Eric Neumayer and Indra de Soysa, “Trade Openness, Foreign Direct Investment and Child Labor,” *LSE Research Online* (London: LSE, 2004), Section 4. [italics added] (The article does not have page numbers but has section numbers which will be given as references instead.)

¹³⁵ Pierick and Houwerzijl, “Western Policies,” p.207.

¹³⁶ Pierick and Houwerzijl, “Western Policies,” p.206.

also argue that foreign investors not only seek countries with child labor incidence, but actively promote child labor.”¹³⁷ Pierik and Houwerzijl also add:

Pogge argues that the foreign policy of Western societies, and especially their policies that shaped international institutions like the WTO, generates poverty in developing countries ... Formulated in less diplomatic language: it is gratuitous for Western governments to want to fight child labor without accepting their own responsibilities to reduce poverty. If they are truly committed to curbing child labor they ought to support collaborative measures financially. There are many policies available for Western countries to fight global poverty: opening their borders to products that are now shielded off from their markets by protectionist policies, lifting the debt burdens that disable developing countries from providing basic education for children, supporting measures aimed at raising the income of parents so that their children do not have to work, or supporting developing countries to improve governance and providing economic and political stability.¹³⁸

In 2010 there was a global conference at The Hague to eliminate the *worst forms* of child labour by 2016, which issued a roadmap.¹³⁹ How does this document support the charge that Western policies are at best naive, and at worst hypocritical?

Firstly, the goal of 2016, even in 2010, could surely be seen to be totally unrealistic, especially given that the world was then, and still is, in the midst of the worst recession since the 1930s. Secondly, note the phrase “worst forms” which occurs repeatedly throughout the document. This refers to things like slavery, bondage, prostitution and armed conflict. Part 2 has already discussed slavery and prostitution, so the main point to emphasise here is that the repetition of this phrase shows that there is not a serious intention to eradicate “normal” child labour.

The document is full of high-sounding phrases disguised as “practical” measures but all of these are aimed at impoverished governments who simply do not have the resources to implement them: measures such as social nets, education programs etc., measures which even Pakistan would implement if it had the resources but simply does not. But there is no mention of measures that really would help, and in particular no sanctions against Western companies who are complicit in using child labour even though the document does mention “supply chains”, as well as no mention of possible awareness-raising measures for Western consumers, such as ethical labelling of products.

¹³⁷ Neumayer & de Soysa, “Trade Openness,” Section 5.

¹³⁸ Pierick and Houwerzijl, “Western Policies,” p.212.

¹³⁹ ILO, “Towards a world”. [italics added]

Some countries pledged money.¹⁴⁰ Holland offered \$6.8m for education and \$160K for sustainable trade, Germany 1.2m Euros. These are clearly ineffectual sums. Hilary Clinton sent a video message.¹⁴¹ The US representative said that the USA had invested \$680m since 1995.¹⁴² This sounds like a lot but works out to \$45m per year which is 0.00032% per year of its GDP. Compare this with the 800 billion dollars spent to rescue the banks, and the trillion spent on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to perpetuate the imbalance through force.¹⁴³

The Millennium Development Goals (henceforth MDG) are further evidence of hypocrisy. One of the MDGs is to halve the number of people living on less than \$1.25 a day. This is a subsistence wage which can never improve the situation, as shown in Part 2. The goals are full of high-sounding, laudable aims like reducing poverty, improving education and equality etc. but there is no mention of the real problems, which are cheap labour, selective migration, and the international division of labour. There is a mention of more generous development aid but the general consensus seems to be turning against aid as a means of improvement.¹⁴⁴ The document also mentions further development of “an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system”¹⁴⁵ which sounds good but does not include specific measures.

The MDG website has a section entitled “Get Involved”, which includes the following (the exclamation marks are in the original):¹⁴⁶

Join the Millennium Campaign!
“Girl Up!”
Submit a song against poverty!
Listen to the MDG song!
Sign the Petition against Hunger!
Education for All!
United against Malaria!
Support the Swim across the Continents!
Join the Global Call to Action against Poverty!
Play “Free Rice”!

¹⁴⁰ ILO, “Towards a world,” p.25.

¹⁴¹ ILO, “Towards a world,” p.27.

¹⁴² ILO, “Towards a world,” p.28.

¹⁴³ Joseph Stiglitz & Linda Bilmes, “The Economic Costs of the Iraq War,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, February 2006, abstract.

¹⁴⁴ E.g. Dambisa Moya, *Dead Aid* (London: Penguin, 2010); Jonathon Glennie, *The Trouble with Aid* (London: Zed Books, 2008); and Imran Khan (Pakistani cricketer turned politician; LSE lecture, “Pakistan: A Personal History”).

¹⁴⁵ (Goal 8a)

¹⁴⁶ <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/getinvolved.shtml>

It should be clear to anyone that these are ineffectual slogans which will achieve nothing without the tackling the real causes of the problem. They merely give the *impression* of action.

All of the above clearly shows the combination of naivety and hypocrisy of policies regarding child labour. Here is more from the LSE article mentioned earlier:

Busse ... provides evidence that countries with higher incidence of child labor have a comparative advantage in the export of unskilled labor-intensive manufactured products. Critics also argue that foreign investors not only seek countries with child labor incidence, but actively promote child labor.¹⁴⁷

There are two points to be made here about the above two sentences. The first sentence is surely *a complete internal contradiction*, and indeed supports the arguments of this thesis that cheap labour and child labour are inextricably linked; and that cheap labour is *not* a comparative advantage, at least not if one wants to eliminate child labour. The second sentence supports the accusation of hypocrisy. It continues: “Higher per capita income levels and a higher urbanization rate are associated with lower child labor incidence as expected.”¹⁴⁸ This sentence is thrown in almost as an afterthought but surely this is the crux of it?

Neumayer and de Soysa also discuss globalisation and purport to prove that globalisation [of trade and capital] has resulted in *less* child labour, thus opposing most people’s view including, at first glance, that of this section. It is highly technical, analysing extensive data, and begins thus:

The sceptics of globalization argue that increased trade openness and foreign direct investment induce developing countries to keep labor costs low, for example, by letting children work. This article argues that there are good theoretical reasons why globalization might actually have the opposite effect ... We test this ... [and show that] Globalization is associated with less, not more, child labor.¹⁴⁹

It concludes: “Globalization is likely to represent a promise, not a threat, for the eradication of child labor across the globe.”

However, a closer reading reveals a different picture. The article begins: “We will argue that theoretically globalization, defined as increased trade openness and penetration by foreign direct investment, *can have both positive and negative effects* on

¹⁴⁷ Neumayer & de Soysa, “Trade Openness,” Section 5.

¹⁴⁸ Neumayer & de Soysa, “Trade Openness,” Section 6.

¹⁴⁹ Neumayer & de Soysa, “Trade Openness,” abstract.

the incidence of child labor in developing countries.”¹⁵⁰ Note that this is much less categorical than the summary and the conclusion. Also: “Furthermore, as Cigno *et al.* ... observe, this measure of child labor suffers from the fact that in excluding children younger than 10 years old [from the data] ‘it leaves out a large, arguably the most worrisome, part of the phenomenon in question.’”¹⁵¹ Similarly: “Our analysis provides *some evidence* that countries that are more open to trade and are more penetrated by FDI [foreign direct investment] display a lower incidence of child labor.”¹⁵² All of this shows that the “headline” claims mask the reality of the finer detail.

How does Pakistan collude with child labour?

As with violence, the West does not have a monopoly on hypocrisy. How does Pakistan collude with child labour and why can it not be relied upon to tackle the problem? The answer to the second part of the question is common knowledge for those who have any personal experience of Pakistan but here is the academic evidence from *The World of Child Labour*.¹⁵³ Officially there are 3.3 million child labourers in Pakistan but the book says that this is likely to be a huge underestimate and the more likely figure is 8-10 million. The survey on which the official figure is based “is now ten years out of date” and “there has been no follow up survey”. There is no study of the “impact of the interventions taken”. 67% of the child labour is in the unregulated agricultural sector. Pakistan is a “low income” / “large family size” country with an average of eight children per family. Much of the labour is bonded where the debt is never paid off because of the exorbitant interest rates and low wages. The child labour is due to the “widespread poverty and the country’s weak educational system”. The country spends just 2% on education, compared to 10% for the UK. 60% of its GDP goes on defence and debt servicing. There is poor “management”, “inefficiency” and “corruption”.

Pakistan is signatory to all the international laws on child labour and has its own laws as well but these “laws [are] not enforced”. The book recommends that the country should provide free primary education but “this is not foreseeable in the near future”. The education system is divided between rich and poor. “Child labour has widespread social acceptance in Pakistan”. There is a “feudal culture”. The “legislative framework

¹⁵⁰ Neumayer & de Soysa, “Trade Openness,” Section 1. [italics added]

¹⁵¹ Neumayer & de Soysa, “Trade Openness,” Section 1.

¹⁵² Neumayer & de Soysa, “Trade Openness,” Section 7. [italics added]

¹⁵³ Hindman, ed., *The World of Child Labour*, pp.834-838.

... is more regulatory than prohibitive, lacks substance and scale, and is poorly enforced". There are many exemptions including family, agriculture, self-employed children, domestic etc. The "inspection system [is] almost non-existent", "no specialised inspectors [have been] appointed in [the] past sixteen years". "Trends in recent years show an alarming decrease in labour inspections ... In Sindh ... [there has been] not a single inspection since 2004". There is no recent data. In 2003 the inspections stopped and a "self-declaration" system came into effect. A US labour program targeted 11,800 children, out of 10 million.

The chapter continues in much the same vein but the point has surely been made: this is not a country that can be relied upon to solve the problem of child labour on its own. All of this clearly shows that Western governments must know that Pakistan cannot solve this issue. No amount of conventions, of moralising, of marching against child labour, and "child labour days" are going to make any difference.

What evidence is there to show that Pakistan colludes in the child labour? The following extracts are from an article in *The Atlantic* (magazine),¹⁵⁴ and shows how the Pakistani authorities pay lip service but do nothing, indeed proactively look the other way:

Early in this decade the Pakistan National Assembly enacted two labor laws meant to curb such practices ... As progressive as these laws were, the government failed to provide for their implementation and enforcement. It also neglected to inform the millions of working children and indentured servants that they were free and released from their debts. "We prefer to leave enforcement to the discretion of the police," says a Ministry of Labor official. "They understand best the needs of their community. Law is not an absolute. We must expect a certain flexibility on the part of those who enforce it. Could this sometimes mean looking the other way? Absolutely."¹⁵⁵

The following quote is clear evidence of the active collusion between East and West:

"If employers would apply as much ingenuity to their manufacturing processes as they do to evading labor laws, we'd have no child-labor problem," says Najanuddin Najmi, the director general of the Workers Education Program, a government agency. "There's little doubt that inexpensive child labor has fuelled Pakistan's economic growth. Entire industries have relocated to Pakistan because of the abundance of cheap child labor and our lax labor laws. At the same time, child labor has hindered our industrial development, especially in the use of advanced technologies. Why should a manufacturer invest in labor-saving technology when labor-intensive mechanisms are

¹⁵⁴ Jonathan Silvers, "Child Labor in Pakistan," *The Atlantic*, February 1996.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/02/child-labor-in-pakistan/304660/>

¹⁵⁵ Section: "An Inexhaustible Labor Pool". (All of the next few quotes are from the same source, *The Atlantic*, and will give the section title as the reference since there are no pages numbers.)

so much cheaper? We are discovering more and more factories that have been redesigned and retooled so that only children can work there.¹⁵⁶

Note the similarity to the comment about the British Industrial Revolution and how employers geared their machines and practices to suit children. Note also that this refutes the idea put forward by some that countries such as Pakistan may be going through their own industrial revolution and will eventually emerge stronger; this would only happen if technology was being invested in, which it is not.

Here is a quote about the late Benazir Bhutto, regarded by many as a moderate, Westernised Pakistani leader. As a Pakistani woman and as a mother herself she might have been expected to understand the position of minorities and of child workers, but unfortunately not:

Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto seems more interested in outfitting her army than in reforming Pakistani society; her government has embarked on an ambitious military buildup that has already imperilled the region. Its first victims have been Pakistan's lower castes, the working poor who are accustomed to receiving little in the way of social services and must now make do with less. In 1994 military spending was 240 percent as high as spending on health and education combined; the disparity is expected to widen in years to come. Spending on education remains among the world's lowest. Only 37 percent of Pakistan's 25 million school-age children complete primary school—as compared with a world average of 79 percent and a South Asian average of approximately 50 percent. By the year 2000 less than a third of Pakistani children will attend school. The rest will enter the work force or become beggars.¹⁵⁷

Of course the above is slightly out of date, but not by much: Mrs Bhutto's husband is now in charge and is likely to do even less than his wife, as evidenced by the fact that when Pakistan was facing one of its worst crises, the 2010 floods, he refused to return from his tour of Europe to deal with the emergency.¹⁵⁸

Moreover, the authorities' awareness of and connivance in child labour is evident here:

Behind these statistics lurks an unpleasant truth: despite its modern views on warfare and industrialization, Pakistan remains a feudal society, committed to maintaining traditions that over the centuries have served its upper castes well. The lords—factory

¹⁵⁶ Section: "A Mixed Curse".

¹⁵⁷ Section: "A Mixed Curse".

¹⁵⁸ E.g.: Saeed Shah, "Pakistan floods: army steps into breach as anger grows at Zardari," *The Guardian*, August 8, 2010, accessed May 16, 2013.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/08/pakistan-floods-army-popular-zardari-anger>

owners, exporters, financiers—reflexively oppose any reforms that might weaken their authority, lower their profit margins, or enfranchise the workers. “There is room for improvement in any society,” the industrialist Imram Malik says. “But we feel that the present situation is acceptable the way it is. The National Assembly must not rush through reforms without first evaluating their impact on productivity and sales. Our position is that the government must avoid so-called humanitarian measures that harm our competitive advantages.” On those rare occasions when a reform does squeak through, the backlash is fierce. For example, when the legislature last year approved a modest tax on bricks to fund an education program, brick-kiln owners staged a ten-day nationwide protest and threatened to suspend production, crippling construction, until the tax was repealed. Trade associations have used similar strong-arm tactics to fight minimum-wage legislation, occupational-safety regulations, and trade-union activity. With a government that is at best ambivalent about social issues and an industrial sector resistant to workplace reform, the task of abolishing child labor has fallen to the human-rights community. But in a country where corruption is pervasive and education scarce, social activists are everyone’s natural enemy. The ruling class despises them for assaulting its profitable traditions. The lower castes suspect them of ulterior motives. (Laborers are forever asking activists, “Why would an educated man trouble himself with the poor?”) Consequently, activists are frequent targets of slander, police harassment, and lawsuits. They are beaten just as frequently, and on occasion they are killed.¹⁵⁹

The following quote shows the awareness of collusion:

The FIA [Federal Investigation Agency] is a secret police force, and one of its best-kept secrets is whom it works for. Nominally an organ of the state, it is not above accepting freelance assignments from prominent individuals and commercial groups. The extent of its extralegal activities is anyone’s guess, but a highly respected human-rights investigator believes that “there is close cooperation between carpet interests, feudal lords, segments of the police force, and the administration—district commissioners, the courts, and government officials. Financially resourceful drug barons are also a part of the scene.” Whoever the client, the FIA provides an assortment of services straight out of the KGB handbook: wiretaps, tails, searches, arrests, harassment, and varying degrees of corporal punishment.

These services were very much in evidence on a Thursday afternoon in late June, when the FIA raided the BLLF’s [Bonded Labour Liberation Front] Lahore headquarters. The detail consisted of ten men, all in plain clothes, who scrambled up four flights of stairs to the tiny office in no time flat. These were not ordinary policemen; this was not the usual surprise “inspection” (read “intimidation”) to which all nongovernment organizations are periodically subjected. These were professional agents, lithe and expert, commanded by a severe officer in a freshly pressed safari suit. After lining the BLLF workers up against a wall, he ordered his troops to “confiscate anything that may incriminate them.” The agents took a liberal view of “incriminate,” and packed up computers, filing cabinets, fax machines, photocopiers, telephones, stationery, posters, bicycles—and the cashbox containing the monthly payroll. Their

¹⁵⁹ Section: “A Mixed Curse”.

depredations were supervised by a small man who was distinctly not a policeman. He represented, it turned out, the Pakistan Carpet Manufacturers and Exporters Association. His purpose, he said, was “to protect the interests of legitimate businessmen.” Every so often he consulted with the commander.¹⁶⁰

The “Pakistan Carpet Manufacturers and Exporters Association” mentioned in the above quote is colloquially known as the “Carpet Mafia” who killed the child activist and carpet weaver, Iqbal Masih, at the age of twelve as he was riding his bicycle.¹⁶¹

But perhaps the real evidence of collusion is the *lack* of evidence. The author of the present thesis has tried extremely hard to find out what the Pakistani government is doing about child labour and has not been able to find very much. This is echoed in *The Atlantic* article:

“Inaction speaks louder than words,” says I. A. Rehman, the director of the HRCP [Human Rights Commission of Pakistan]. “This government is in continuous violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and has consistently refused to enforce those very laws it enacted to protect its most vulnerable citizens. We have far more in the way of resources and legal remedies than China, India, and Indonesia, and we do far less for our young than they. The problem is lack of political will. The problem is greed.”¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Section: “The Death of Iqbal Masih”.

¹⁶¹ Hobbs, *Child Labour*, p.154 & Hindman, ed., *The World of Child Labour*, p.508.

¹⁶² Section: “An Inexhaustible Labor Pool”.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to prove that child labour is an inevitable consequence of cheap labour, that it is essentially a continuation of slavery, and that it was exported to the East, rather than coming to a natural end in the West. It further argues that Western policies on child labour abroad are at best naive, and at worst hypocritical; conversely, Eastern countries like Pakistan actively collude in the child labour and cannot be relied upon to tackle the problem either.

The wider research done for this thesis shows that child labour is being perpetuated, rather than reduced, due to unfair and rigged policies such as free flow of capital and good, but *not* labour – worse still, *selective* migration; and the totally irrational international division of labour which is not at all based on geography or genuine skills. A recent report from the IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research), entitled *The Third Wave of Globalisation* purports to “be for all countries”¹⁶³ and mentions the need to redress the global imbalance, but careful analysis shows that all of the policies mentioned would exacerbate the problem instead. It discusses the benefits of cheap labour, but these seem mostly one way – beneficial to the West.¹⁶⁴ Although it acknowledges the lack of free flow of labour,¹⁶⁵ it still advocates more selective migration.¹⁶⁶ It does, however, acknowledge some of the problems of the global imbalance, for example: “Increased international trade in goods can also contribute to climate change through increases in shipping and aviation.”¹⁶⁷ and “By contributing to rising global growth, globalisation is contributing to climate change, increasing demand for commodities and *exacerbating resource constraints*”.¹⁶⁸

The alternative to free flow of labour would be a minimum wage that is not a slave-wage as defined in this thesis, but which would have to be *enforced on Western companies by Western laws* to be effective. In fact the LSE article even has data to show what a non slave-wage might be. It notes that child labour decreases sharply when family income reaches \$2600 per year,¹⁶⁹ thus allowing a quick calculation: 2660 / 50 weeks / 40 hours per week = \$1.33. So a minimum wage of roughly £1 per *hour*, rather

¹⁶³ Will Straw and Alex Glennie, *The Third Wave of Globalisation* (London: IPPR, 2012), p.7.

¹⁶⁴ Straw and Glennie, *The Third Wave*, pp.9-11,45.

¹⁶⁵ Straw and Glennie, *The Third Wave*, p.21.

¹⁶⁶ Straw and Glennie, *The Third Wave*, p.7.

¹⁶⁷ Straw and Glennie, *The Third Wave*, p.4.

¹⁶⁸ Straw and Glennie, *The Third Wave*, p.54. [italics added]

¹⁶⁹ Neumayer & de Soysa, “Trade Openness,” Section 6.

than £1 per *day* as is the current norm, would start to solve the problem.¹⁷⁰ Similar figures (\$6 – \$10) per day are found by *Poor Economics*,¹⁷¹ which also notes on the same page that the number of children per family “goes down sharply with income”, which backs the points made in this thesis about population growth. Sadly, even though £1 an hour is surely not too much to ask for, it is unlikely to happen any time soon, since it represents an eightfold increase. However, another possibility – ethical labelling of all imported goods to show how much was paid for the labour – is very practical and realistic and could easily be done: labels are already printed, the information surely already exists in spreadsheets and could easily be added to the label; this not with a view to boycotting child-produced products, since all the evidence shows that boycotting is counter-productive,¹⁷² but just as an awareness-raising exercise. Muhammad Yunus, Bangladeshi Nobel prize-winning economist, has recently outlined similar ideas: his figure for wages is 50 cents per hour, and he also mentions ethical labelling.¹⁷³

Unfortunately, a detailed exposition of the above is beyond the scope of this thesis, since it would require a full critique of capitalist globalization, which reinforces child labour by perpetuating cheap labour and the international division of labour. People like Aex Callinicos in *The Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* and Joseph Stiglitz in *The Price of Inequality* have started to make such critiques. The present author would tend to agree with the philosophy of Stiglitz rather than Callinicos. Capitalism and globalisation, like everything else, are neither good nor bad – it all depends on how you use them. Capitalism, in its energy and association with freedom, is an astonishing thing; the main problem with it is gross inequality and the accumulation of capital. Globalisation too can be wonderful thing, but only if is genuinely free and fair. Some of the ideas mentioned in this conclusion could form the basis of future work.

Based on some of the ideas above, the final contention of this thesis is that child labour *can* be eradicated, but only if the genuine desire and will exists.

¹⁷⁰ If this was applied globally – a sort of international minimum wage – it might also stop the destabilising effect of companies constantly moving around the world in search of cheaper labour. Countries in their turn would then have to compete on quality of labour, rather than just cost of it, hopefully resulting in investment in people and infrastructure.

¹⁷¹ Banerjee & Duflo, *Poor Economics*, p.8.

¹⁷² E.g. The Senator Tom Harkin Bill in the USA which resulted in Bangladeshi child-workers being sacked and ending up in worse situations.

¹⁷³ Jason Burke, “Muhammad Yunus appeals to west to help Bangladesh's garment industry,” *The Guardian*, May 12, 2013, accessed May 16, 2013.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/12/muhammad-yunus-bangladesh-appeal>

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END

Pure Mafia:

A critical commentary

ROHAIL AHMAD

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Overview

Because I chose to write my main thesis on child labour, I think it would be useful to first discuss briefly the role of the critical component in a Creative Writing PhD. In simple terms, I see three possibilities for this component: an account of the creative process; an English Literature thesis, examining influences and tradition of writing; or an essay on some aspect of the novel, most obviously the theme. Most universities seem to expect one or both of the first two, although some are open to the third. I think it is crucial that the third option be allowed, because otherwise it can potentially exclude whole avenues of possible fiction, for example political – a very serious consequence indeed. I would certainly agree that a certain element of the first two can, and perhaps even should, be expected, but not exclusively so. One might argue that the student can do the research on the theme without having to write a whole thesis on it in the way I have done, but I think that there is a world of difference between even deep reading, and the kind of intense thinking and insight resulting from actually writing a thesis based on that reading. *Specifically, in my case, the gap in contemporary British-South-Asian fiction that I have identified – depicting the 2nd/3rd generation, particularly in relation to the ongoing link of force and collusion between East and West – would not have been possible had I not written my main thesis on child labour.*

For the same reason, therefore, i.e. the fact that this commentary is not my main thesis, I think it would be useful to give a brief overview of my initial thoughts regarding what my critical component might have been, and how it evolved. This will also allow me to give a bit more detail of the wider reading done for this Creative Writing PhD, other than just listing the books in the bibliography.

My initial plan for the critical component was to cover the following areas: child labour, the main theme of my novel; British Pakistanis, the second main theme of my novel; an account of my creative process; tradition of writing, i.e. British-South-Asian¹ writers, including a section on “globalisation and literature”. But it soon became clear that to cover all these areas, to the depth required at PhD level, would be impossible. I then thought I would do three sections of 10K words each on child labour, British Pakistanis, and an account of my creative process. But in the end, partly because the

¹ The technical definition of regions such as “South-Asia” is not precise. Some people use the term “Indian sub-continent” for this area. In this commentary, I mostly mean Pakistan and India. But Bangladesh and Afghanistan may also come into it, with the work of Monica Ali and Khaled Hosseini. From Sri Lanka there is Romesh Gunasekera, for example his debut novel, *Reef* (2011), which was shortlisted for the Booker.

British Pakistani theme had mostly come from personal experience, and because I found that even just the child labour theme by itself could not be given justice in 10K words, I decided to only focus on child labour for my main thesis, plus a shorter commentary on creative process and tradition of writing.

Following is a brief overview, therefore, of some of the books read during this period, which might otherwise have been discussed in more detail in a bigger commentary.

For the British Pakistani theme, two highly relevant books are: *Young British Muslim Voices* (2008) by Anshuman Mondal, and *Young, British and Muslim* (2007) by Philip Lewis. I will make some references to these books in the body of the commentary.

On writing, the creative process, and creative writing in the academy I read many books, as listed in the bibliography, but I would particularly recommend the following: *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* (2005) by Rob Pope, which is a masterly survey of the field; *How We Write* (1998) by Mike Sharples; *Writing: Self and Reflexivity* by Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson (2005) is a very intriguing book on the nature of writing, the self etc.; *The Handbook of Creative Writing* (2007) edited by Steven Earnshaw is a large survey of creative writing in the academy; *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (2005) by Paul Dawson gives a history of this subject, including a discussion of the role of the critical component;² *New Writing: The International Journal of Creative Writing*, which includes articles by Fay Weldon on how to assess creative writing,³ and Maggie Butt on creative writing research degrees, in particular talking about the role of the critical component, proved very useful.⁴ There is also the NAWE *Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement* (2008), which again discusses the role of the critical component.⁵

On globalisation and literature, two books are the current “bibles” on the subject: *Globalisation and Literature* (2008) by Suman Gupta, and *Literature and*

² For example, p.194: “The critical essay must have a demonstrated relationship to the creative thesis, so that the submission takes the form of a unified piece.” And, p.195: “[it] acts as a record of the artistic process, explaining the theoretical underpinnings of various artistic strategies and techniques, and thus demonstrating what be called ‘research equivalent’ activity”.

³ Fay Weldon, “On Assessing Creative Writing,” *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 6.3, 2009.

⁴ Maggie Butt, “Creative Writing Research Degrees: Range and Rigour,” *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 6.1, 2009.

⁵ (NAWE = National Association of Writers in Education), p.13. <http://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-at-university/research.html>

Globalization: A Reader (2010), edited by Liam Connell and Nicky Marsh. “Globalisation and Literature” is clearly an emerging field, as people struggle to fit postmodernism and postcolonialism into globalisation. For example Gupta’s book has a specific chapter entitled “Postmodernism and Postcolonialism” where he tries to do just that. Connell and Marsh’s book has chapters like “Theorizing globalization”, “Time-Space Compression and the Postmodern Condition” and “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality”.⁶ It might also be of interest here to mention that there is apparently an emerging category of “the world-system novel”, defined by Dr Sharae Deckard of University College Dublin as one “whose temporal, spatial shuttling between countries consciously exposes the radical unevenness of conditions between core and periphery”.⁷ She brought this to my attention at a conference at Brunel University; she gives Rana Dasgupta and Junot Diaz as examples of this, in particular *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by the latter. I suggested to her that perhaps my novel fell into this category, and when I described my story she said that it certainly sounded like it did, although I should say that I certainly did not set out to consciously write a “world-system novel”.

Oscar Wao is in many ways the Dominican/American equivalent of the British-South-Asian works that I will be discussing in this commentary. *Tokyo Cancelled* (2005) by Rana Dasgupta could be described as a “globalisation version” of Geoffrey Chaucer’s thirteenth century *Canterbury Tales*, told by passengers in an airport. By coincidence, a modern version of the original *Canterbury Tales* was published by Peter Ackroyd in 2009; for readers who find Middle English hard to read, this version is a wonderful rendering.

For globalisation in general, Roland Robertson’s *Globalisation: Social Theory and Global Culture*, first published in 1992, is one of the seminal texts. He defines globalisation as “the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole”.⁸ Newer books on globalisation include: *Globalization and its Discontents* by Joseph Stiglitz; *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of*

⁶ In fact, I myself have been asked to give a lecture on “Writing Global Fiction” to the MA class at Brunel University from 2013.

⁷ Dr. Sharae Deckard (UCD), “Towards a Theory of Peripheral Irrealism: Junot Díaz and the World-System Novel”: <http://vimeo.com/45833700> (1min 38secs in), accessed Jan 28, 2013. The term “world-system” comes from Immanuel Wallerstein.

⁸ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (California: Sage Publications, 1992), p.8.

Globalization by Arjun Appadurai, who talks in terms of “scapes” – ethnoscapas, mediascapas, ideoscapas, financescapas, and technoscapas. *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives* (2002) by Anthony Giddens is interesting because it looks at the effects of globalisation at a personal level, for example families, marriage etc.⁹

In terms of literary theory, Terry Eagleton’s famous *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) is the obvious starting point. There is also *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2009) by Peter Barry. And of course there are many books on postcolonialism and postmodernism or even “post-postmodernism” (double “post”), for example *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000) by John McLeod; *Postcolonialism: An Introduction* (1998) by Leela Ghandi; *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996) by Terry Eagleton. There is Derek Jameson’s famous *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) but this is more dense, and not recommended for the novice reader. And for “post-postmodernism”, there is *After Postmodernism* (1996) by Terry Eagleton. Terry Eagleton is highly recommended as being both of great intellect but also very readable – a rare gift; Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel prize-winning economist mentioned earlier, is another such example

Please note that this commentary is deliberately intended to be rather more informal, personal and discursive, rather than formal and academic like the thesis, although I do give references wherever relevant.

⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization Is Reshaping Our Lives* (London: Profile Books, 2002), pp.65/66. For example, he talks about unhappy marriages and that the traditional family must change

Part 1: Early stages: themes and context

Getting started

Immediately prior to my PhD I completed my MA in Creative Writing; indeed I tend to see the two as one. Brunel University's Creative Writing MA begins with a session entitled "Getting Started." There are many answers to the question of what to write about: whatever interests you; whatever moves you; write the book that you would want to read. Another answer often given is: "Whatever makes you angry." For me, this is the primary motivation for writing: anger at parents, politicians, prophets and profiteers – what I call the 4Ps – for the way they control and manipulate us to their benefit, whilst brainwashing us into thinking that it is for *our* benefit.¹⁰ Without this anger, I think it would be very hard for me to write. For me, writing has never been about money – as everyone knows there are far easier ways of making money, although it is true that if you love writing then being able to make a living out of it would be a dream come true. Publication, however, *is* a goal. Why? I think it is because of the desire to reclaim the world. It is the mental equivalent of the physical strike back on being struck. We have moved out of the jungle and largely, though not exclusively, replaced physical power by mental power. A large part of the battleground now is fiction, I believe.

So what makes me angry? In general terms it is abuse and exploitation and control; but what makes me livid is the realisation, resulting from the research that went into my novel and thesis, that it is the very people who are supposed to look after us, or who have most power and therefore should take most responsibility, who perpetrate the most abuse, i.e. the 4Ps. Usually they use an external authority, such as God, religion, or nationalism to justify the abuse or control. Examples of bad conditionings include Muslim parents' control of their adult children's sexuality; politicians' use of nationalism to justify things that are not good for the world as a whole, e.g. war over resources or to perpetuate East/West imbalance; profiteers' use of advertising to promote consumption at the expense of the planet, in terms of pollution, resource-constraints and climate change. Extreme examples include some Muslims wasting their whole lives in sexual repression in the name of religion, or suicide-bombers or soldiers sacrificing their very lives in the name of religion or nationalism.

¹⁰ See Part 3 of my thesis, *Cheap Labour = Child Labour*, and the bibliography there, in particular the works of Hannah Arendt, Titus Alexander, Noam Chomsky, Bernard Schlemmer, Immanuel Wallerstein, Howard Zinn, and Dambisa Moyo.

So, on a personal level it is parents who do the abuse, although in their case there is some mitigating factor in that they are quite often only perpetuating the abuse that was inflicted on them. In the personal context, my main concern is for Pakistani Muslims,¹¹ in particular their low educational achievement, sexual repression, high divorce rates or extremely unhappy arranged marriages, and disproportionately high prison rates.¹²

On a global level I am concerned about the problems of globalisation: terrorism, uneven migration, climate change, poverty. Here, I am a believer in the idea that the abuser is always also the victim, and that the West needs to change in its use of force, subtle or otherwise, not only for moral reasons but also out of self-interest. Similarly, and conversely, the East needs to change in its habit of collusion. Of course, when I refer to East/West in this context I mean the ruling classes; I genuinely believe that the great mass of people are pretty much the same the world over.

My aim as a writer is to raise awareness of all the above issues, both personal and global, through my fiction.

Anger is a feeling: it needs to be verbalised in order to be understood. How is this verbalisation done? It is done by digging deep into our unconscious mind to identify these feelings, trying to work out their root causes, and then converting these feelings into words. I think this explains why creative writing is often compared to psychoanalysis and is increasingly being used in therapy.¹³ Although the unconscious mind needs to be so most of the time – because otherwise our conscious mind would be overwhelmed and we would be paralysed with indecision – it can be accessed by inducing a receptive frame of mind, trying to allow the unconscious mind to surface, by “asking” the conscious mind to retreat for a while. This is often best done in the morning before the conscious mind is fully awake, which is what I do. Of course, other writers prefer to write late at night; yet others have even advocated writing under the influence of drink or drugs, although I personally do not advocate this approach, purely on health grounds. But note that all these methods involve relaxing the *conscious* mind.

¹¹ The word “Muslim” is really as vague as “East/West” or “globalisation”. There are significant differences even between Pakistani and Indian Muslims, let alone African, Arab or Indonesian. In this commentary I mostly mean Pakistani Muslims, since that is my own background, but I do not always state this specifically.

¹² Typing “British Muslims in prison” into Google gives any number of media articles on this.

¹³ Metanoia Institute: “MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes”.

<http://www.metanoia.ac.uk/post-qualification-doctorates/MSc+in+Creative+Writing+for+Therapeutic+Purposes>

The first draft is often written in some state such as this, regardless of the method used. The conscious mind is then used later to filter, edit and structure. Some people view a novel as akin to a dream, but a novel is different from a dream because whereas a dream has no *conscious* filter, a novel does.

But it is not enough to just have a receptive frame of mind. A theme is important because the unconscious mind seems to work best by association. Rather than just saying to the unconscious mind, “Go and fetch me something”, it is far more productive to say, “Fetch me something related to this topic.” This process, for a novel in particular, can take a long time. In addition, since we are essentially creating an entire 3-D world in words, it is not surprising that many months, perhaps even years, may be required for this process. In my own case, for this novel, it took nine months to come up with an outline.

So, if a theme is important, it is pertinent to ask, What are my themes of interest?

My themes of interest

I hold the Marxian view that we are conditioned creatures.¹⁴ Our minds, our thoughts, our feelings are all conditioned by our environment: by our bodies, our gender, our race, social class, and by other people. Conditioning can be good or bad, but in this commentary I am mostly talking about the bad, what might indeed be called brainwashing. But there is one way that we can overcome the bad effects of our environment: by reading. Conversely, if we wish to condition others, for better or worse, one way of doing this is by writing.

For me, writing is about digging deep within ourselves in order to uncover this external conditioning – and the associated feelings of pain, anger and discontent – in an attempt to overcome these things. But from the above, it follows that when we do this, we are not only digging deep within ourselves, we are effectively digging deep into our environment. Not only our immediate environment, but the cumulative effects of our environment over our lifetimes, and in particular our childhood and formative years; in other words our history also. This is why, if we dig deep rather than just write at surface

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Public Domain Books, 2005), kindle edition, section 2 (also cited in the thesis): “Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man’s ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?”¹⁴

level, our writing will be of interest to others, as well as ourselves, because it is also *their* environment and history.

So, if my creative writing is about trying to understand my formative experiences, it would help to know a little about my early life; but I also think that these early experiences explain the sort of research that I did for this novel, instead of literary or creativity theory, or why I chose to write my main thesis on the theme of the novel, child labour, rather than say an English Literature thesis examining British Pakistani writers.

I was born in Pakistan and came to Britain at the age of six. My father left Pakistan shortly after I was born, and therefore I spent the first six years of my life without my father. Our early years in Britain were poverty stricken and full of tension for this reason, as well as the fact that we knew very few people. These traumatic and formative experiences are surely bound to be the focus of my writing. And in order to understand them, no amount of studying creativity theory or literary theory will help. Even reading novels by British Pakistani writers would only reassure me that I was not alone but would not totally explain the reasons. The only way these experiences can be understood deeply is by studying economics and history.

Why did my father emigrate? Answer: for economic gain, pure and simple. Not for religious reasons, not for ideological reasons, not for reasons of persecution. It was purely for economic reasons. But why did he have to emigrate? Why was Pakistan poor and Britain less so and why did he come to Britain rather than anywhere else? In this latter case, clearly because of the historical colonial link.

They say that you do not choose what to write about – *it* chooses *you*. So all of this hopefully also explains why I feel compelled to write about Pakistan, but not just Pakistan; I feel compelled to write about the *connection* that exists between Britain and Pakistan, because that is the only way to understand why my father left when I was born and why I was uprooted from my homeland at the age of six. Uprooted from everything I knew – the climate, the geography, my friends, my school, my cousins, my grandparents, my extended family generally.¹⁵

But why child labour? I knew nothing about child labour, had never experienced it, no member of my family had experienced it. So why? I think this is where the nature of creative writing comes into the equation. A novel requires a central theme and

¹⁵ This is referred to in many places in *Pure Mafia*, e.g. p.43,87.

originality is also required. But here again it is appropriate to note that I am referring to my own type of writing, as influenced by the MA and PhD in Creative Writing, where originality is the most important marking criterion; this latter fact is certainly true of Brunel University, but also generally as far as I am aware. Other types of writing quite often want “more of the same” – more of what has been known to sell in the past.¹⁶

I could have chosen any number of themes, for example terrorism or sex tourism. The first theme has been extensively explored and I did not seriously consider it. The second theme was indeed the subject of my MA creative dissertation and so I had done that already.¹⁷ But why have such a theme at all? Why not just write about a British Pakistani family? Some draft-readers have said to me that my novel does not really require the child labour theme; just the depiction of the 2nd/3rd generation British Pakistani family life would have been enough.

My initial attempts at my novel did indeed focus on this, but I found it hard to make progress. The reason? There was no *anger*. I tried to make up for the anger by using comedy but it really did not work, although I hope that some of the comedy has found its way into the final version of the novel to mitigate the horror of the main theme, which would be unbearable otherwise; this latter strategy was conscious and deliberate.¹⁸ I also struggled to find a *plot* for the novel without the child labour theme.

Also, merely depicting a 2nd/3rd generation family would have been appropriate if the recent changes that have occurred in the world, due to the increasing pace of globalisation, had not occurred. It would still have been original, because no other writer seems to be doing this, but any serious writing about the themes I am interested in surely has to take recent globalisation into account.

My anger was not *at* my family, but rather on *behalf* of it. I was not beaten or abused as a child, my parents were not divorced, indeed had quite a happy marriage, especially considering that it was arranged. My questions were: Why did my father have to emigrate and live without his family for six years? Why did my mother have to cope on her own for those six years? Why did we have to live without a father? Why did I not have an extended family, or rather why had I become disconnected from it? Here the need for research revealed itself.

¹⁶ Incidentally, this point about originality refutes the accusation some people make about how the academy encourages formulaic writing.

¹⁷ Rohail Ahmad, “The Dancing Girl of Lahore,” MA creative diss. (Brunel University, 2010).

¹⁸ Actually, the “comedy” has been much reduced because many draft readers felt that the tone created was very uneven, because of the serious child labour issue.

As I struggled with my outline, I was advised not to worry too much, it was early days, and that I should work on my essay and do some reading. But what to read? I think one's choices of what to read are as motivated by one's unconscious mind as one's creative writing.¹⁹ Why did I feel compelled to read about history and economics, rather than creativity or literary theory, for example? Of course, there is a process of trial and error in one's reading as there is in one's writing. I did indeed read books on creativity theory and the writing process but did not feel compelled to pursue these subjects. It was when I started to read some of the books mentioned in the thesis: Marx, Wallerstein, Bayly; books on history, economics and globalisation that I felt I was starting to understand and pinpoint the causes of my dissatisfaction.

So all this hopefully explains why I chose to write my thesis on child labour: without the research on child labour and the wider issues of history and economics around it, there is no way I could have understood my concerns. Not only that; my point about anger applies to the thesis as well as the novel. Although the thesis is much shorter, simply because of the word count restrictions, it took me almost as long as the novel to write: about a year as opposed to one and a half years; the remaining time of the PhD was spent on this commentary.²⁰ The time on the thesis was not so much the writing, which is only about 20K words, but on the reading; though I should say that the total amount written was far more than 20K, perhaps as much as 100K, and much rewriting and editing was required. It would have been very difficult to do all that reading, writing and editing, had I not been driven by the anger over slavery, colonialism, child labour, the hypocritical "humanitarian facade"²¹ of the West, the shameful collusion of the East. (Incidentally, for the novel I must have written many hundreds of thousands of words, and revised it perhaps 50-100 times, which requires a lot of anger!)

¹⁹ Referring back to my point earlier about the contention that we do not choose what we write, *it* chooses *us* – i.e. that it comes from our unconscious mind.

²⁰ Of course, to a certain extent all three components proceeded in parallel, especially in the early stages. But obviously, one cannot literally work on three things at once, so towards the later stages I would say that the novel was finished first, then the thesis, and finally the commentary. But small modifications to the novel and thesis continued up until submission time.

²¹ Bernard Schlemmer, ed., *The Exploited Child* (London: Zed Books, 2000), p.188.

Why child labour?

I should make clear at this point that in this commentary I have done what writing usually does: I have structured into a clear and logical form a process that took many months, and was often blind and groping. Indeed, is this not a what a novel does when it selects a theme and designs a plot?

During my MA, in my search for originality – which is the number one marking criterion at Brunel – my big idea had been that we really needed to move on from postcolonialism. That countries like Pakistan needed to start taking responsibility for themselves rather than continuing to blame colonialism for their problems. I argued that postcolonialism was now out of date and that we should be talking about globalisation. This went down well with my tutors during my MA. Aravind Adiga too has stated this explicitly, when discussing *White Tiger*: “The middle classes think of themselves still as victims of colonial rule. But there is no point any more in someone like me thinking of myself as a victim of a colonial oppressor.”²² But my more detailed PhD research revealed that my MA thinking and analysis had been too shallow, relatively speaking, and hence that Adiga is perhaps wrong too. That the legacy of slavery and colonialism is still with us. All of this made me realise that “globalisation” – an immense concept that is often bandied about so casually by some people, including myself in the early stages of my PhD – was perhaps just a more subtle and complex perpetuation of slavery and colonialism.²³ On a personal level, I also related this in my mind to how parents perpetuate abuse on their children.

Why the desire to understand perpetuation? I think because it seems to be part of human nature that if we have been abused then preventing it from happening to others in future seems to give us some comfort. Of course some people do the opposite: they perpetuate the abuse, parents on their children being the most obvious example. How do we break the cycle of abuse? My answer would be: *by research*.

The desire to do something is also because of my point above about being essentially the products of our environment; if we accept this view, then surely by cleaning our environment we are cleaning ourselves inside? By helping others we are

²² Aravind Adiga, “I highlighted India's brutal injustices: Adiga,” *Rediff, India Abroad*, 16th October 2008, accessed 13th August 2013.

<http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/oct/16adiga.htm>

²³ Manfred Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.1. For example, he starts off by talking about how it has become a “buzzword”, and early books have left a “simplistic impression” on readers’ minds. (p.1).

helping ourselves. This is the “abuser is always also the victim” argument put into the terms of this commentary. For a long time the West has managed to bury away its waste in the East – helped by the collusion of the latter – but that waste is now overflowing back into the West. This concept can also be likened to Newton’s Third Law (“To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction”) but whereas Newton’s law is physical and immediate, its social equivalent can take years or decades or even centuries to manifest. Finally, the desire to do something is also akin to a person spotting a fire: it is an instinctive reaction to want to warn others of the danger.

So how to depict this global-level perpetuation in fiction? Leaving aside the question of anger, I could not do it merely by writing about a British Pakistani family. *There had to be an East/West connection and it had to be British Pakistanis perpetrating the abuse.* For my MA I had come up with the idea of sex-tourism, about a British Pakistani man who goes to Pakistan to abuse young girls. For my PhD I had a number of options, e.g. terrorism, forced marriages, child labour. Terrorism I felt had already been covered. As I searched around for ideas I came across something called the “carpet mafia”, which is a colloquialism for *The Pakistan Carpet Manufacturers and Exporters Association*, who are believed to have killed the child activist, Iqbal Masih, at the age of twelve; he was shot whilst riding his bike.²⁴ It seemed to me that this was just perfect for a novel, because I do believe, like Aravind Adiga, in the concept of “high and low fiction”,²⁵ i.e. that a novel should be entertaining as it delivers its message, like a Trojan horse, or like a sugar-coated pill. I also found, to my astonishment, that there seemed to be no adult novels about the topic; we have to go back to Charles Dickens to find them, whose lifetime (1812-1870) of course ties in with the timeline described in the thesis. There are a few *children’s* novels, most notably *Iqbal* (2005) by Francesco D’Adamo, based on the life of Iqbal Masih, but none for adults.

As far as I am aware, *Iqbal* is the only one set in contemporary times; the others seem to be set during the Industrial Revolution, primarily as a way of teaching history through fiction, rather than for political purpose.²⁶ *Iqbal* is clearly a political novel, aimed at children, and critical of Pakistan but which does not show the East/West link

²⁴ Sandy Hobbs *et al*, *Child labour: A World History Companion* (Oxford: ABC-CLIO Ltd, 1999), p.154 & Hugh Hindman, ed., *The World of Child Labour* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2009), p.508.

²⁵ Aravind Adiga, “An interview with Aravind Adiga,” *BookBrowse*, accessed Jan 28, 2013.

BookBrowse:http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm?author_number=1552

²⁶ I must confess that I did not actually read all these children’s novels, but did do enough research to get a feel for them; but my argument in this commentary would still stand because I am mostly concerned with adult fiction.

of force and collusion. This book was useful to me for atmospheric detail for the Pakistan section, especially the scene with the children in their hut.²⁷

In fact, in many ways *Pure Mafia* could be described as an adult version of *Iqbal*, although of course the story is completely different. Similarly, my MA novella, *The Dancing Girl of Lahore*, was a fictional version of a non-fiction text called *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* (plural) (2005) by Louise Brown, but again the story being completely different, especially because of my interlacing of the personal and the global plot strands. I say all this at the risk of reducing my own claim to originality, but I would contend that really there can be no such thing as true originality: there is always something beforehand.²⁸ Only a Literary God could possibly be truly original. Salman Rushdie, who is my literary hero,²⁹ is regarded as being one of the greatest writers of modern times and yet it is no news to say that his style, magical realism, was pioneered by Latin Americans;³⁰ a truly wonderful example of this is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Gabriella Garcia Marquez, which begins with the perfect hook: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.”

It might be appropriate to just say a few more words about Charles Dickens, who was a child labourer himself.³¹ Perhaps the best example of his work, regarding this theme, is *Oliver Twist* (1838), which contains the famous line, “Please, sir, I want some more.”³²

So, child labour ticked all the boxes: it was original, it made me angry, it showed the East/West connection; and from a fictional point of view, the carpet mafia was just perfect.

²⁷ *Pure Mafia*, pp.79,81-87. In *Iqbal*, there is the reference to chains (p.3), the tomb (p.5), brick factory (p.15), the scorpions (p.17).

²⁸ This is also the view presented in Rob Pope’s book, *Creativity*, mentioned in the overview. Creation from nothing is only possible by a divine being and perhaps not even by him (or her); as the *Rig Veda* says: “Only that God in high heaven knows whether the universe was made or uncreated. Only He knows – or maybe he knows not.” (The unintended [?!] humour of this has been noted by commentators.) p.192.

²⁹ I am less happy with his recent political views. For example, he has called for Pakistan to be declared a terrorist state and “expelled from the comity of nation” – how on earth would that help?: “Pakistan’s Deadly Game,” *The Daily Beast*, 2nd May 2011, accessed 2nd August 2013: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/05/02/salman-rushdie-pakistans-deadly-game.html>

³⁰ Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), pp.3-4.

³¹ BBC History: *Charles Dickens (1812-1870)*: “Charles was sent to work in Warren’s blacking factory and endured appalling conditions as well as loneliness and despair.”:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/dickens_charles.shtml

³² Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Public Domain Books, 1996), kindle edition, p.8.

Choice of theme and plot are driven by a number of factors: personal interest, need for originality, what has been done before. So, my personal interest has been explained above; the need for originality seemed to rule out terrorism, for example. In terms of what has been done before, what is known as tradition of writing, I discuss this next.

Influences and tradition of writing

I have an eclectic taste in reading, from literary fiction to “lad-lit” (e.g. Nick Hornby, *About a Boy*, 2002) and “chick-lit” (e.g. Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, 1996), but my favourite authors are people like Salman Rushdie and Dostoevsky. Focusing on Salman Rushdie, I see him as the pioneer of the Western-South-Asian writer, and I see myself as writing in the tradition starting with him and continuing with writers like Hanif Kureishi and, more recently, the current illustrious crop of writers such as Mohsin Hamid (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 2007; *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, 2013), Aravind Adiga (*The White Tiger*, 2008) Mohammed Hanif (*Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, 2011). Of course there were people like V.S. Naipaul before, whom I do admire, but have not been as influential to me and I think are in the slightly different Caribbean tradition.³³ However, I must mention *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), surely one of the greatest novels of all time, with a heartbreaking ending. So I see myself as a Western-South-Asian or British-Pakistani writer but it goes without saying that I would not want my readership to be restricted to an ethnic subset of people. Nor did I want only male readers, which is why I put a lot of thought into Catherine in *Pure Mafia*; I do not wish to exclude half the human race, like my religion does, and like the West excludes half the world. So here I should note that female authors I admire include Fay Weldon, Margaret Atwood, Arundhati Roy, Yiyun Li.

How do I see myself as extending the tradition mentioned above, as well as following it? This ties back to my brief comments earlier. People like Mohsin Hamid, Aravind Adiga and Mohammed Hanif have moved on from postcolonialism, in that they tend to critique their own countries, rather than the West. Their latest novels are set in their home countries, indeed some of these writers have even physically moved back to their homelands. This step forward of critiquing their home countries is to be welcomed

³³ Another interesting example of East/West style is Prof Aamer Hussein who combines a “magical” Urdu/Punjabi folktale style with a Western narrative style, for example in *Another Gulmohar Tree* (2009) and *The Cloud Messenger* (2011).

but, as mentioned above, my PhD research revealed that they have gone too far, in my opinion. This is one example of how research can influence creative writing for the better, and ties back to my point that the criteria for the critical component should not be too restrictive. I realised that the legacy of colonialism is far from over, indeed is so built into the fabric of the world-model, we cannot yet so easily dismiss it. But neither did I want to continue postcolonial writing in the old sense of the word, of “writing back to the centre”. The more I thought about this, the more I realised that what is happening now is perpetuation, rather than instigation; what I mean here is perpetuation by Western-South-Asians, as well as “native” Westerners, as opposed to only Westerners as in slavery and colonialism.

But the most important point to be made here is that, whilst the first generation / immigrant experience was extensively covered by writers like Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, the 2nd/3rd generation³⁴ seems to have been completely skipped entirely by writers like Adiga, Hamid and Hanif. I believe this is to do with the increasing pace of globalisation, but also due to a lack of awareness of the sort of research unearthed by the present study. It is true that people like Meera Syal and Sanjeev Bhaskar in *Goodness Gracious Me* (1996-1998), and even Adil Ray in the BBC sitcom *Citizen Khan* (2012) are perhaps doing it in TV, but not in fiction. And certainly no one, as far as I am aware, is showing the continuing East/West link of force and collusion, as I have tried to show in *Pure Mafia*.

This difference can even be seen if we compare my MA novella, *The Dancing Girl of Lahore*, with my PhD novel, *Pure Mafia*. *Dancing Girl* is mostly set in Pakistan and critical of it, but does *not* show the East/West link in the way *Pure Mafia* does. However, there are *hints* of the perpetuation argument and of the “world-system novel” in the fact that it is a British Pakistani man who is the sex-tourist, and the fact that he goes from “here” to “there”. However, this was unconscious in *Dancing Girl*, but conscious in *Pure Mafia*.

To return to Rushdie for a moment, and focusing on *Midnight's Children* (1980), *Shame* (1983) and *Satanic Verses* (1988) the overlap between his work and the themes I am interested in are very clear. *Midnight's Children* is about India, about partition; *Shame* is set in Pakistan and in a way can be seen as a precursor to Hamid's

³⁴ I should perhaps define terminology here, since there is scope for confusion. I define first generation as the people who first come over. So, for example, in my case my father would be first generation; I would therefore be second generation; and my children third generation. If the children come with the parents, then this is confusing, but for the purpose of this commentary, my definitions would still stand.

and Hanif's work: although Rushdie's style and depth of writing are unmatched, there are echoes of the humour and satire evident in Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) as well as his other work, and also Hamid's. In fact, the last mentioned book has a definite overlap with *Shame*, dealing, as it does, with General Zia. *Satanic Verses* of course deals with Islam, as well as themes of migration and early modern globalisation, 1980s onwards.

Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993) deals with the 1st/2nd generation immigration experience. The *Black Album* (1995) is about identity, and about a young man who falls in with Islamic fundamentalists. *Intimacy* (1998) is about a man who leaves his wife and children for a younger woman, and clearly there are echoes of this in *Pure Mafia*, although this was not a conscious thing on my part.

The first generation struggles with the immigration experiences of working hard and being cut off from their families, but they do not usually have problems of identity – they know exactly who they are. It is the second generation that tends to struggle with identity, caught between two worlds, and to have clashes of culture with their parents. In the case of Muslims this usually involves alcohol and sexual relationships in particular, as mentioned in *Pure Mafia*.³⁵ One of the ways I think that *Pure Mafia* is different to current work is in showing not the fight between the 1st and 2nd generations, but rather how the 2nd generation may often try to become “modern” and allow their children to become modern, but have to fight grandparents in doing so.

The problems of the third generation are likely to be similar to the indigenous population, although in the case of Muslims there seems to be reverse process going on: “Surveys and polls of Muslim opinion in Britain routinely suggest that young British Muslims in the 16-24 age group are religiously more conservative than their parents and grandparents.”³⁶ This is an example where M.H. Abrams' book *The Mirror and The Lamp* (1953) might be relevant: is literature a reflection of society or does it change society? The answer is, of course, both. One possibility for this sort of theme might be to depict such reverting characters (the mirror). An opposite possibility might be to do what I am trying to do: to show Muslims moving away from that mindset (the lamp). I do this partly by showing that Muslims indulge in sex and alcohol just as much as

³⁵ *Pure Mafia*, p.176: ‘I just thought it would be easier if I found a Muslim boy, like you said. Easier for Mum and her family and all that. Especially with the drinking and stuff.’ Cf. with Anshuman Mondal, *Young British Muslim Voices* (London: Greenwood World Publishing, 2008): “alcohol and stuff” (p.4) and “I’m still a girl at the end of the day. I can’t help myself if I fancy someone” (p.20). My own dialogue was written separately; I only noticed this similarity whilst writing this commentary.

³⁶ Philip Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim* (London: Continuum, 2007), p.11.

anyone; it's not that I particularly advocate or even condone these things, rather that, done sensibly, they are not God-cursed, and are almost inevitable and of course pleasurable.

Most of the writers I have discussed so far have been male writers. What about female ones? Meera Syal is the first name that comes to mind. She confirms my argument: her two books, *Anita and Me* (1996) and *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* (1999) are about the immigrant experience, but as already mentioned she *has* covered the 2nd/3rd generation mindset in TV shows like *Goodness Gracious Me*. Kamila Shamsie is the next name that comes to mind, but she is really a Pakistani writer, although she has recently taken British nationality, and there has been some controversy about that.³⁷ I am not familiar with her whole oeuvre, but *In The City By The Sea* (1998) is set in Karachi and is critical of Pakistan. *Burnt Shadows* (2009) is explicitly discussed as a globalisation novel.³⁸ The third name that comes to mind is Monica Ali who has described the immigrant experience from a Bangladeshi point of view in *Brick Lane* (2003).

I mentioned earlier the concept of the "world-system novel". *Brick Lane* could also be said to be a very good example of this, depicted by Monica Ali using the technique of the difference between the main narration and the harrowing letters from Bangladesh.

Khalid Hosseini is doing similar things for Afghanistan, with *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), that people like Hamid, Adiga and Hanif have done for Pakistan and India.

To end this section, I would like to just discuss some points of detail about *Pure Mafia* in the context of other works. I mentioned Marques's perfect opening line earlier. I played around with many versions for mine, including one that was a play on Charles Dickens, and also a reference to Niall Ferguson.³⁹ My line was: "It was the best of

³⁷ David Blackburn, "The power of Granta's gift to British writers", *The Spectator*, 19th April 2013, accessed 2nd August 2013: "Kamila Shamsie is excellent, but she should not have been eligible." <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/books/2013/04/the-power-of-grantas-gift-to-british-writers/>

³⁸ Book review by Salil Tripathi of *Burnt Shadows*: "These individuals lead global lives even before globalisation became a buzzword": <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/burnt-shadows-by-kamila-shamsie-1643530.html>

³⁹ I am not a great fan of Niall Ferguson who, rather worryingly, is regarded as being one of the top one hundred influential people in the world at the moment. He holds very blinkered and flawed views regarding the supremacy of the West. It would be out of scope go into those fully here but, for example, he asks the question (I am paraphrasing): "Are the successful parts of South America, East or West?" the implication being that if they become successful they are Western, otherwise Eastern. Heads I win, Tails you lose.

times, it was the worst of times: the best in the West, the worst in the rest.” This a pun on the opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and of the subtitle of Niall Ferguson’s *Civilisation* (2011), “The West and the Rest”. In fact, the title of an earlier version of my novel was envisaged thus: “Two Cities *Ki Kahani*”. “*Ki Kahani*” means “tale of”, so that the East/West theme would be reflected in the title itself. But in the end I did not go with this, mostly because it would have required that roughly half the book each should be set in each city.

My current line is rather tame, in comparison: “It was the usual Friday evening chorus of ‘*Coming for a drink?*’” In the end I decided on this because although I do still believe in hooks and dramatic openings, literature seems to have changed for the better in that we do not nowadays require an opening that is *too* dramatic. I do have a mini-hook in the third sentence: “Today was different.”, indicating the inciting incident of the children leaving home, which is used to tide the reader over until the second hook about “the figures”. This is an example of where, if you are not able to start with the main hook straightway, then it is a good idea to have a smaller hook to keep the reader going.

My low-key opening line was partly forced on me by the fact that I could not start with the main theme, but was also partly deliberate in that I wanted my novel to be subtle and to build up gradually to a climax. In this sense, I feel that *White Tiger*, which I love and for me is one of the books of the decade, is actually slightly faulty in that the astonishing pace is maintained throughout, rather than building up to a climax. It has other flaws too; the novel begins: “Sir, neither you nor I can speak English, but there are some things that can only be said in English.” The novel then proceeds in perfect English! *White Tiger* is a wonderful example of how a novel can be both brilliant and flawed. A third flaw, but which is actually an excellent example of how technique can *overcome* a flaw, is that the novel is almost one long lecture, thus breaking all the rules of not lecturing in fiction, but yet it does not *feel* like a lecture. Why? Because Adiga has chosen the perfect narrative technique – of writing it as a series of letters to the Chinese premier, who is visiting India.

My own way of trying to overcome the feeling of being lectured was to use dialogue, and to make sure that the setting, the plot and the characters are such as to make any possible lecturing seem “natural.” But now, here is an example of how “truth is stranger than fiction”. In real life it would be perfectly reasonable that two people in a pub might have a long conversation about politics, in the way that Imran and Catherine

often start to do;⁴⁰ and yet in fiction this would not work, and so I tried hard to keep this to a minimum. In the examples cited, I am certain that in real life I myself would have asked Catherine to expand on her views, but in the novel I deliberately make Imran change the subject. I think there is no easy answer to all this – it is one of the hardest problems in writing political fiction, but it is only a specific case of the generally difficult, but crucial, principle of “show, don’t tell”. However, writing that was *only* show and *no* tell, would be equally ineffectual, I think. And, just to prove that there are no rules on lecturing, Junot Diaz in *Oscar Wao*, has *footnotes* to reveal information, just like an academic textbook!

Some people say that fiction should not be political at all, and certainly not about contemporary events;⁴¹ I obviously disagree with this view, as would George Orwell and Aravind Adiga. Mohsin Hamid contends that “all literature is political”.⁴² George Orwell says: “no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.”⁴³ Adiga too is explicit about this:⁴⁴

“At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the West, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society,” he said, adding that the criticism by writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens in the 19th century helped England and France become better societies.

Film director, Neill Blomkamp, goes even further; he says that social commentary may take a back seat to genre kicks, but: “If you’re not somewhat political or observant, I’m not sure you’re an artist [...] I’m not actually sure what you’re doing.”⁴⁵

In fact, basic Marxism would suggest that since literature is part of the superstructure, above the economic base, and since politics and economics are

⁴⁰ E.g., *Pure Mafia*, p.25,60.

⁴¹ See for example, Tim Finch, “Fiction should tell the immigrant story – but not reduce it to politics”, *The Guardian*, 1st August 2013, accessed 4th August 2013:

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/01/fiction-immigrant-story-reduce-politics-writers>

⁴² “Guardian Books podcast: Political fiction,” *The Guardian*, 5th April 2013, accessed 12th August 2013.

⁴³ George Orwell, *Why I Write*, 1946:

http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw

⁴⁴ Aravind Adiga, “I highlighted India’s brutal injustices: Adiga,” *Rediff, India Abroad*, 16th October 2008, accessed 13th August 2013.

⁴⁵ Neill Blomkamp, talking about his new film, *Elysium* in *The Guardian*, 17th August 2013, accessed 17th August 2013: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/aug/17/elysium-neill-bloomkamp-interview>

inextricably linked,⁴⁶ then literature cannot *but* be political, no matter how hard you try to avoid it; this is similar to Foucault's contention that power is always at work, even when you don't realise it. Take as an example the brilliant *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) which could be described as high-brow "chick-lit", and which is clearly not intended as a political novel; and yet, it perhaps captures the zeitgeist of post-Thatcher Britain like no other novel.

Partly people say that fiction should not be political because they feel that such a novel quickly becomes outdated. This may be true, but it remains a historical document;⁴⁷ so, for example, we still read Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the famous novel about slavery, not to mention Dickens simply for his stories.

⁴⁶ See p.197 of the thesis, *Cheap Labour = Child Labour*, for the Rosa Luxemburg quote that economics and politics are connected.

⁴⁷ This is actually author Matt Thorne's point, not in relation to political fiction specifically, but generally (MA notes, 2009/2010, Brunel University). Also, if the writer is careful to include "eternal" themes such as love, family, the mystery of life etc., this danger is further mitigated.

Part 2: Middle and final stages: structure and content

How did I actually go about writing my novel and thesis? How did the two things feed into each other, and how did my research affect the structure and content of the novel? As I have already mentioned I spent the first few months reading books on globalisation, history and economics, as well as novels of course. After a few months I came up with the idea of child labour as my central theme to structure my story and the lens through which to depict the theme of global abuse and exploitation, of force and collusion. The most important way the theme is reflected in the structure is how the child labour section is buried in the middle of the novel, rather than starting with it as one might expect if one were to follow the usual advice about diving straight into the action. In other words, it reflects the fact that we have exported and buried away child labour in the East, just like it is buried away in the middle of the novel.⁴⁸ From a fictional point of view, the downside of this was that I could not start with the main theme, but the upside was that this avoided the “sagging middle problem”. As for the abuse, at the personal level this occurs in many ways: between Imran and Zara, between Imran and Catherine, for example. Later, the daughter is abused, which was partly because I did not want a simplistic solution whereby she finds a Muslim boyfriend and they all live happily ever after; I also wanted to show that abuse is race- and religion-neutral.⁴⁹

In terms of the research, the child labour theme focused my attention into this area. But at this stage my reading about child labour was not rigorous or academic; I simply wanted to immerse myself in the subject, to get a feel for the child workers, and learn enough to be able to write convincing dialogue for the characters who would know about such things; when necessary, e.g. for dialogue, I checked facts and figures, but I did not really keep detailed notes at this stage. Not keeping notes, indeed not knowing too much detail, was one way of making sure that I did not “lecture” in the novel. The other purpose was to make Imran’s “journey” of discovery about child labour convincing: if the author him/herself is going on a similar journey, then the protagonist’s journey is likely to be more convincing. Mostly this research was what became Parts 2 and 3 of the thesis: the comparisons and the perpetuation policies. Part 1, the accumulation of capital and the exportation of child labour, was researched and

⁴⁸ See Parts 1 and 2 of my thesis, *Cheap Labour = Child Labour*.

⁴⁹ *Pure Mafia*, p.174.

written *after* the novel and is an example of how creative writing can influence research; for this I received some guidance from my academic supervisor, Dr Anshuman Mondal, as to what to read and the main thread to focus on, although the idea of exportation was my own. Why did none of Part 1 feed back into the novel? Because there was no need and none of the characters would have realistically known about it. But it did deepen my understanding of the historical reasons for my father's emigration and therefore my feelings of discontent. And it also showed that sometimes we have to go back hundreds of years to find the solution to our problems, which no amount of creative writing or even psychoanalysis would have revealed; only research could have done this.

I mentioned the "inner journey"; a point about this can be made here. Post-PhD, I feel that this concept is taught in the wrong way. Students are taught that their characters must "go on a journey". Students tie themselves up into knots, trying to do this. I feel this is the wrong way round, for the following reasons. Fiction should be composed of interesting events. These events will obviously affect the characters, physically and emotionally. The writer should think about the effects that these events have on the thoughts and feelings of the character, and also the physical effects. If the writer thinks about this carefully and describes them, the "inner journey" will emerge naturally, it will not have to be artificially forced onto the character.

One crucial thing about structure that I learnt from Prof Weldon, my creative supervisor, which I think is worth recording and is related to this point about the inner journey, was to write in sequence, from beginning to end. This was not the way I used to work and I found it really hard; like most inexperienced writers, I suspect, I had used to follow Aristotle's advice that the writer should "first sketch its [the story's] general outline, and then fill in the episodes and amplify in detail".⁵⁰ But having done it once I do feel that Prof Weldon is right, most importantly because if the protagonist is supposed to go on a journey, it helps if the author undertakes the same journey.

A final point about the inner journey, linking back to the point about the mirror and the lamp. Perhaps the early and middle stages of the journey are the mirror, whilst the later stages, the climax and the epiphany are the lamp?

Similarly to the inner journey, some novice writers try to use Joseph Campbell's theories of the "hero's journey",⁵¹ and try to come up with a story that includes roles

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (London: Amazon Media), kindle locations 412-414.

⁵¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (California: New World Library, 2012.)

such as a “guardian” and “helper” etc. Again, this is the wrong way round. Although Campbell’s work is wonderful and every creative writer should be aware of it, my own view is that they should focus on their story and allow these roles to emerge naturally if appropriate. In *Pure Mafia*, Catherine is the guide, and there are other echoes of Campbell’s myth in the story, but these were not “planned”, or at least not to a significant extent.

Combining research (theme) with plot and character

There is a well known concept of the unique and the universal in fiction, that a character is an individual as well as an archetype, and that the setting is a microcosm of the macrocosm of society. Indeed, this concept is central to my style of writing whereby I try to interweave a personal story with a global story, in other words combining my research with plot and characters.

So, I needed a personal story to go alongside the global story – my way of achieving this. Here, this commentary becomes difficult. The personal story emerges by a complex process, which is as painful and tortuous to describe as it is to create in the first place, of combining these things. Indeed one of the reasons why stories work is because they are a facade we are able to hide behind, both as writers and as society. What I mean by combining these things is that one uses one’s personal experience to make the writing convincing, to depict the theme, but then it has to be wrought into art in terms of the plot and characters created, as a book on creative writing also advises: “keep in mind your responsibility for refining, distilling and transforming that raw material [personal experience] into art”.⁵² My talk of a facade does not mean that everything intimate or embarrassing in a story is “true” because if that were the case, the facade would not work; scenes are usually a collage of personal and reported experience, snippets of the overheard, a mixture of reality and imagination. The facade works because some bits of the story are indeed “true” but others are not, but only the writer knows which. I am reminded of the passage in Martin Amis’s *Money*: “When you, do you sort of make it up, or is it just, you know, like what happened?” “Neither.”⁵³

⁵² Anjana Dev et al, *Creative Writing: A Beginner’s Manual* (Delhi: Pearson Longman , 2012), kindle locations 1476-1477.

⁵³ Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Vintage, 1984), pp.87-88.

This is talking about content in general, but the same point could be made about a protagonist: “Is it you?” we often ask writers. My answer would be similar to Amis: yes and no. Actually, the protagonist of *Pure Mafia* is easier for me to admit identifying with; on the other hand, the protagonist of my MA creative dissertation was a sex-tourist abusing young girls, and that part of it was certainly not me. But much of him *was* me, for example using my repressed upbringing to imagine what the motivations of such a character might be.

To illustrate all this, and at the risk of embarrassing myself a little, I will talk about this further because sex is a deliberate and important theme in my writing. I want to write about it, normalise it and de-mystify it. (But fear not I will not traumatise the reader by going into too much detail!) Imran admits to using sex-workers and there is a scene where he indeed visits one.⁵⁴ This scene is a good example to analyse. It was actually not in the first draft; I added it during the revision process, because I felt that the novel needed some “darkness”. Although this particular scene is totally made up – its content designed to symbolise his internal pain – it is composed of a few things. How did it come about?

At that point in the story, Imran is feeling very desolate. I thought about where he was physically at this point and where he would go after the club. I felt that force of habit would mean that he would head towards Oxford Street, even though it’s too late to catch the tube, and that this would entail passing through Soho. This reminded me of two things. As mentioned in the novel, the previous religious leader of our community is rumoured to have frequented sex-workers in Soho during his days at university: “Some members of moribund Lahore Jamat [community] allege that he is cherishing the memories of his good old days when he was a young and energetic student at the University of London and frequented Soho for pleasure sake.”⁵⁵ In the novel: “I walked up Dean Street and reached Oxford Street, thinking that at least I was in good (?) company: according to rumour our previous holy Hazur had used to frequent these very streets as a student.”⁵⁶

My own first university was also in Central London, and some of my friends and I did also occasionally visit certain dubious establishments, e.g. seedy strip-clubs. Back

⁵⁴ *Pure Mafia*, p.70-71.

⁵⁵ <http://alhafiez.org/rashid/constipak2.html>

There is no direct evidence except that he failed his degree, but it should be noted that this accusation has *not* been made against any of his predecessors or successors.

⁵⁶ *Pure Mafia*, p.71.

then (mid 1980s), Soho was a very seedy place indeed. There was one incident in particular, where the strip-club was extremely seedy, full of the proverbial “men in dirty-raincoats”, and even we, as eighteen or nineteen year old students, were disgusted. We did not repeat the event after that. I sometimes joke in my fiction that I had no experience of girls in my youth, but I am happy to report that this is not strictly true! I did eventually learn how to talk to girls and have healthier relationships with them, although this was a rather long and painful – sometimes humiliating – learning experience. But of course I know that this is not only exclusive to Muslim youths – the Channel 4 sitcom *The Inbetweeners* (2008-2010) makes that very clear! But the point here being that this social skill is hard enough to learn without active repression by Muslim parents, let alone the threat of violence by them.

The purpose of the above confession about Soho, which I am rather ashamed and embarrassed about now, although I would imagine that most young men do this, is that sexual repression is bound to lead to such behaviour. Islam would advocate prayer and cold showers, but I can categorically confirm that these things do not work! I am not sure what repressed girls do – from my limited knowledge and experience, I assume that they indulge in secret relationships. But I would imagine that this might entail unsafe, furtive, quick sex in cars or other such places. Sex is such a strong urge, like hunger, that to repress it is tantamount to abuse. It is surely better that young adults openly have nice, stable boyfriends and girlfriends than that they indulge in this sort of behaviour. I feel this way about my own children; however, perhaps because of the remnants of my repressed upbringing, like Imran, I do sometimes feel a bit guilty for even thinking about these things at all. In the novel, Imran’s thoughts run like this:

I picked up my book but my eyes did not take in the words. I often wondered if there was something wrong with me – the fact that I actually wanted my children to have boyfriends and girlfriends, to have sex, to enjoy the incredible gift that was the body; whether there was some dark incestuous side to me, vicariously enjoyed.⁵⁷

Muslim parents are of course perfectly aware of the strength of the sexual urge, which is why many of them get their daughters, in particular, married off at ridiculously young ages, often to complete strangers; this in arranged marriages which usually end in acrimonious divorce or worse – violence or honour killings. In relation to this, perhaps

⁵⁷ *Pure Mafia*, p.103.

the idea of *mu'tah*, temporary marriage, could be introduced into British law as a way of allowing Muslim young adults to have physical relationships. I am *not* an advocate of introducing Shariah law into Britain in general terms, but I think that bits of it, as long as they do not affect the rest of the population, would be legitimate, and this in particular would solve a lot of problems as well as relieve a lot of misery.

A minor digression here, regarding low educational achievement, mentioned earlier. This is obviously not because Pakistani children are any less intelligent than other children, but because quite often they are required to attend the mosque every day instead of doing their homework. For this, perhaps *all* parents could be required by law to provide a certain minimum amount of time to their children to do their homework. Better educational achievement would of course feed into an improvement in all other problem areas highlighted in this commentary.

Coming back to sexuality and to the present. As depicted early on in the novel, I was flabbergasted to learn, on returning to university as a mature student, that girls have started to frequent lap dancing clubs.⁵⁸ For this change in young, female sexuality see *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Woman and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2006) by Ariel Levy; see also *Delusions of Gender* (2010) by Cordelia Fine, which questions traditional assumptions about gender differences. I will not go into the complex subject of lap dancing and prostitution in detail, as I do not feel qualified to do so. Suffice it to say that some people hold the view that no form of prostitution is acceptable and that it only exists because of economic reasons and the lack of economic power by women; others say that it has always existed, will always exist, and that it is better to have it legalised so that it can be safe. Also, research confirms Imran's view (and mine) that men go to strip-clubs or to sex-workers, not for sex but out of loneliness and a sense of emptiness: "I don't get anything out of sex with prostitutes except for a bad feeling".⁵⁹ A more equal world, a world where investment was made from the very beginning in teaching healthy relationships, family skills etc., would I think alleviate the need for this sort of thing.

The argument that it is better to have safe, legalised prostitution, rather than the unsafe, underground version, perhaps also applies to modern lap dancing clubs: that they are "better" than the old seedy strip-clubs in Soho, although of course the surface

⁵⁸ *Pure Mafia*, pp.10-13.

⁵⁹ Julie Bindel, "Why men use prostitutes," *The Guardian*, 14th January 2010, accessed 3rd August 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/jan/15/why-men-use-prostitutes>

glamour of such places masks a more grim reality. Nevertheless, perhaps it is preferable, for customers and dancers alike, that if people are going to go to strip-clubs that they go in mixed groups, rather than just men in “dirty raincoats”. For more on this subject see for example, *Stripped: The Bare Reality of Lap Dancing* (2011) by Jennifer Hayashi Danna and Sandrine Leveque, which documents the experiences of a number of dancers, as well as an analysis and suggested measures. For example:

OBJECT is an award-winning human rights organisation which challenges the sexual objectification of women and the mainstreaming of the sex and porn industries through lads’ mags, lap dancing clubs or prostitution. OBJECT does this because of the attitude these industries promote about women and the impact these beliefs and behaviours have on discrimination and violence against women.⁶⁰

I do agree with this, but I can also see the validity of the alternative view that those who have no other way of supporting themselves should be allowed to do so by these means. All these things are not really major “themes” of my novel, but I did want my novel to also be a complex depiction of current society, arising out of modern globalisation.

Finally for this section, a brief comment on the Ahmadiyya community, to which Imran and I both belong, might be in order here. Ahmadiyya are basically like Sunni Muslims, except that they believe that a man called Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, born in 1835 in Qadian, India, was the Promised Messiah, the Second Coming of Christ. This is a tiny community, which results in many problems, including the inability to find suitable marriage partners.⁶¹ Also, although they do not condone honour killings, they do require that if an individual marries outside the group, and the partner refuses to convert, they should be cut off by their families – more subtle but almost as bad. Ahmadiyya make much of the fact that they are persecuted and are discriminated against – which is true, even murdered in Pakistan – but they too do the same, by insisting that Islam is the only true religion, and that Ahmadiyya is the only true sect within that religion.

⁶⁰ Jennifer Hayashi Danna and Sandrine Leveque, *Stripped: The Bare Reality of Lap Dancing* (London: Clairview Books, 2011), p.137.

⁶¹ *Pure Mafia*, p.38.

More on creating plot and character

Like most writers I tend to create characters using composites of mostly two people I know, with a smattering of others if necessary. Imran in *Pure Mafia* is more like me than the character in my MA creative dissertation but Imran is not totally me either. The simplest way to describe Imran is that he is a composite of me and my older brother who is even more western than me in his thinking but less western than me in his behaviour. This is actually perhaps even more relevant to the family I created, especially Ayesha and Dan, who are much older than my own children. As soon as you change even one small detail about a person, the character will often change substantially, especially when you take into account the cumulative build up of plot events. The reason why a character can never be entirely the same as the writer, no matter how autobiographical the story, is partly because of the selective nature of creative writing. Also, quite often the protagonist may be the “immature” version of the writer, at least in the early stages of the novel, and becomes more like the “mature” version as a result of the inner journey. In other words, the novel re-enacts the real-life journey of the writer, which I think also explains why when we meet writers in real life we are often surprised by the difference between them and their characters. An additional explanation here is the fact that when we meet the real-life author we are only meeting their limited conscious version, whereas their writing is from their huge unconscious.

Although even before the MA/PhD I used to use plot and character in order to depict my theme, I always had this nagging suspicion that you were not supposed to do that. Prof Weldon’s view is that this is okay: “Point first, plot second.” This also relates to what she says about characters: she “proceeds on a need to know basis”. But all this needs to be expanded because it leaves one with a niggling feeling of suspicion that this is not the way fiction should work, that somehow it is contravening “artistic integrity”. What this really means, I think, is that this can only be done in the planning stage and/or in the early parts of a novel. As the novel proceeds, and plot and character build, the author becomes more and more constrained. In the later parts of the novel, the fictional aspect must take over, and the plot and characters must never be artificially forced into doing something for the purpose of the theme. At its extreme this can lead to a *deus ex machina* type ending, which is to be avoided at all costs. A novel, unlike a thesis, should not set out to prove or lecture, but more to raise awareness, although this can be

difficult. This is particularly so for political writing, and is something that I struggled with constantly for this novel: how to explain the ongoing link of force and collusion? To an extent of course one does not need to, but I think a certain amount *is* required. This can be done in a number of ways: through narration, through the thoughts of the character, and through dialogue. For a PhD novel, one can also rely on the critical component, but what about for the general reader? Perhaps partly this is where “marketing and promoting yourself” comes into it. As part of that process one tries to publish articles, or engage in some form of public debate, to “explain” your writing. Mohammed Hanif combines his fiction with equally satirical articles targeting the Pakistani government and the Taliban.⁶² Nowadays, of course, there is also blogging. I have recently set up my own website/blog to do just that.⁶³ Harriet Beecher Stowe published *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853) to document the facts about slavery that she had depicted in the original book, which were disputed by supporters of the practice.

In *Pure Mafia*, I do this through snippets of dialogue between Imran and Catherine, plus one long scene between Imran and “Uncle”.⁶⁴ Strangely enough, I feel that this scene, which is obviously a key scene, in many ways works better than some of the dialogue between Imran and Catherine, even though it is very long. The dialogue between Imran and Catherine I tried to keep to a minimum, but I’m still not sure how far I succeeded; I may cut it down further. But I think the long scene works because it comes late in the story, has been properly set up and foreshadowed, and is in keeping with the characters and the relationship between them, and is obviously a climactic scene. It also sets up what is to follow between Imran and his wife, Zara. I also made sure to intersperse the dialogue with external events, such as Auntie coming in with the food.

But more generally, to the extent that fiction does try to prove anything, it does so by the depiction of lived experience, through the emotions, rather than the intellect,⁶⁵ although I do not think it is either possible or desirable to divorce the intellect entirely in fiction. In dialogue, for example, and when showing the thoughts of a character, intellect is bound to have a place. Similarly, in academic writing we try to avoid emotion but it is present, even if only indirectly in our argument and choice of subject-

⁶² See Mohammed Hanif’s page in *The Guardian*:

<http://www.theguardian.com/profile/mohammed-hanif>

⁶³ www.HaveYouReadIt.com

⁶⁴ *Pure Mafia*, pp.119-130.

⁶⁵ See for example, Celia Brayfield, *Bestseller*, for more details on this, eg: “Storytelling is a way of explaining the world emotionally rather than analytically.” (p.13).

matter. The difference between fiction and non-fiction lies in the *proportions* of emotion and intellect in the writing.

In terms of some of the other major characters, Catherine is based on a combination of some young women I know, but a crucial point about her is as follows. She originally wore mini-skirts and revealing tops. But Prof Weldon said that this was rather clichéd. “How about if she wears socks and sandals, instead?” she said. “Be different, not obvious.” The socks and sandals would not have suited my theme, but this was what gave me the idea that perhaps Catherine wore *shalwar-kameez*. From this point her character took off; she is the character I am most proud of in the novel, in the sense that I think she is quite original and is the most constructed character. After learning that lesson, I tried to apply the principle of being different to the rest of the novel.

The *starting* point for the wife and in-laws was my own ex-in-laws, but for artistic reasons, (not to mention the risk of libel!) I changed quite a lot of things. For example, my ex-wife has two brothers and a sister; I took out the sister and made the brothers twins with quite different physical appearances from their real-life counterparts, as well as changing the physical and personality characteristics of the wife. And of course my ex-in-laws do not run a carpet import/export company or any other business for that matter. The resulting wife and family thus bears almost no resemblance to the original, which is also true of Imran’s own family.

Influences from other arts

In terms of how I write scenes, I think the way I do this is similar to the way other writers do it, and the way I imagine actors work. I close my eyes, I step into the scene, I look around, try to see as much detail as possible, use all my senses, think about my character’s thoughts and feelings at that point in the story, what has gone before. This is probably done with the right brain; and then I write, presumably using my left brain to select the important details.

Talking of acting, there have been influences on my writing from other areas of the arts also, in particular film. When I was learning to write, I specifically used to imagine my story as a film and then use that to write. I also try to see it as a film because this forces the writer to make things concrete, to convert the sounds and images onto the page. I have mentioned that I wanted to use suspense – i.e. for my story to

build gradually to a climax – which of course is a common technique for both fiction and film. Alfred Hitchcock was perhaps *the* master of suspense, and I also enjoyed his “Three Investigators” series of children’s novels when I was young. The Bollywood film, *Sholay* (1975) is a masterpiece of rhythmic story structure – alternating light and serious, rising gradually to the blistering climax at the end – that I have emphasised above.

But there is a further, very specific example of how film affected my novel. My original idea for this novel was to try to write a western novel using the Bollywood film structure. In this structure, the first half is usually light and funny, then there is a dramatic revelation, followed by an intermission (Bollywood films can be quite long); the second half is then usually action or sad, and then finally the happy ending, although nowadays the ending is not always happy.

But, although some draft readers got this, the feedback from other readers, especially “Western ones” was that they were confused, in particular because the tone changed so dramatically halfway through. One experienced reader said that [Western] readers make up their minds about the tone of a novel in the first few pages and if it suddenly changes, they get confused. I edited the novel in response to this, but I now sometimes feel with some regret that maybe I should have stuck to my guns; but in the end I tried to play a delicate balance between that version and integrating the feedback given.

The setting and ending

How did research affect the setting of my novel? Ealing was chosen because it suited the characters and plot, and is near to where I live and grew up and therefore know about. Deciding on the location of the business required a little bit more thought and effort, using Google Maps. In the end I decided on Chiswick as being suitable because it was between Ealing and Putney but also close to the M40 and the industrial area of Slough for the warehouse of the company. I used *rightmove.co.uk*, which has photos and floor-plans, to find suitable houses for the characters to live in and to help me visualise, the houses being chosen based on price and the aspirations of the characters.

More interestingly, the setting of the Pakistan part of the novel, Sheikhpura, was more dictated by heavyweight research. My initial investigations revealed a number of industrial towns in Pakistan that could have been used as the setting. It made sense to

limit the options to those near Lahore, where I was born, and which I know about. These included Muridke and Sheikhpura. Muridke would have been a logical choice, since that is where Iqbal Masih came from. But, as mentioned in the novel, I have actually briefly visited Sheikhpura,⁶⁶ so from a creative point of view, to enable me to write with a little bit of confidence – bearing in mind that I did not actually go there for the purposes of this novel – it made sense to use that; the reason I did not visit Pakistan was purely due to financial and time constraints. This initial tentative decision on setting was confirmed when I saw that the CIWCE document mentioned in the thesis actually includes data on Sheikhpura, although the data itself did not find its way into the novel. The finding of this document also confirmed my decision to use the carpet industry as the basis of my novel. I initially started with footballs, and here we can see a good example of how decisions can potentially produce quite different works. If I had stuck to footballs, I can imagine that the novel might have played on the connection between the fact that children should be *playing* with footballs, rather than making them; there might have been connections to the world cup and its relationship to “fair play”, “say no to racism” etc.

I say that I did not actually visit Pakistan for this novel. So how did I authenticate my writing? Obviously I used my own memory from previous visits. I also spoke to family, friends and acquaintances. I used YouTube and Google Maps. The shack scene came from a simple Google search for “Lahore slums”; I have also personally witnessed similar places. One very good book about Lahore, that was also useful in this regard of providing atmospheric detail, was Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Lahore: City of Sin and Splendour* (2005).

Some draft readers have said that the Pakistan section is too short. But it should be remembered that as a proportion of the time, it is about right. The novel is set over eight months. Imran spends only ten days in Pakistan, i.e. 4%. In terms of content, the Pakistan section is about 11%. Having said, in the first draft it was even shorter and some people said it needed deepening. That was when I added the scene with the children in their hut,⁶⁷ and also the bit at the end of that chapter about Imran and his British passport.⁶⁸ Having said all that, it is not just about percentages of course. The real reason for not making it longer was: what else could I have added, other than

⁶⁶ *Pure Mafia*, p.40.

⁶⁷ *Pure Mafia*, pp.81-87.

⁶⁸ *Pure Mafia*, p.91-92.

extending the misery? As mentioned in the thesis, child labour is *not* a complex problem – it is merely made out to be. The novel really does say pretty much all that needs to be said about it.

The ending of *Pure Mafia*⁶⁹ caused me a lot of headache and kept changing right to submission date. Endings are notoriously hard, but I had particular problems because neither plot strand lent itself to an easy resolution. There is no simple “solution” to child labour – or rather, there is, but people do not want to implement it. The “love story” did not lend itself to an easy or happy ending either, at least not realistically, due to Imran and Catherine’s age gap and different stages of life. To try and solve this problem of the ending, Catherine finding out about her father was added late in the day, in the hope of giving some kind of catharsis to the reader; this hopefully also adds a small “twist”, especially tying it in with the child labour theme, with the sporting goods factory. This new ending required going back and inserting some foreshadowing.⁷⁰ I think I am now as happy with the ending as I could possibly be, given the themes, plot and characters of the novel.

Final Remarks

The purpose of this critical commentary was primarily to give an account of my creative process, what role research played in it, and to give an overview of the tradition of writing. It is deliberately more informal and discursive than the thesis, although it does also put forward an argument about the gap in contemporary British-South-Asian fiction – depicting the 2nd/3rd generation and showing the ongoing link of force and collusion; this is an area for possible further investigation.

As for child labour, my final comment would be to say that we now live in a global swimming pool, and it is no longer possible to pollute one half of it without polluting the whole of it.

⁶⁹ *Pure Mafia*, p.185-193.

⁷⁰ *Pure Mafia*, e.g. p.28,52,112.

SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

A PhD in Creative Writing has three primary requirements, two of them in common with other PhDs, the third more specific. The first requirement is to make an “original contribution to knowledge”; it is generally accepted that in this case the novel itself does that, and I give a summary below. The second requirement is to demonstrate scholarship and research; my thesis was designed to do that, as well as to provide a research context. The third, specific, requirement is to give an account of the creative process and the role that research played; my commentary was designed to do that. There is a lack of consensus as to whether the critical component(s) should be original or not, but my view is that if the novel is original, then anything relating to it is also bound to be original to some extent.

Firstly, and proceeding in reverse order of weight, the **commentary** was primarily designed to give an account of my creative process, the role of research, and the tradition of writing; but I do believe it to have kernels of originality in its identification of a gap in contemporary British-South-Asian fiction. This area could be investigated further. Also, to the extent that we are all unique human beings then an account of our creative process is also bound to be “original” to some degree.

Secondly, I do believe my **thesis** to have elements of originality. Not so much in the ideas in isolation but in how I have put them together, my argument of how child labour was exported, tracing the chain of events, the various comparisons, I believe to be original. My arguments that cheap labour equals child labour, that cheap labour is not a comparative advantage, and my definitions and working out of what a non-slave wage (or international minimum wage) might be, I believe to be original.

Finally, and most importantly, I believe my **novel** to be original in a number of ways. First and foremost the themes of child labour and the carpet mafia. My treatment of a 2nd/3rd generation British Pakistani family, especially an Ahmadi one, I believe to be quite different to existing work; and I believe that my novel starts to fill the important gap mentioned above and in the body of the commentary. The use of language, its tropes using globalisation, Muslim history, and its *combination* of East/West tropes; for example, “Sword of ibn Khalid” instead of “Sword of Damocles”, and “global warmth” as code for lust. The setting of Sheikhpura; of course it is easy to be original in terms of setting, but in this respect I would define originality as being where the location has some significant interest, in this case child labour.

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