The Dead of Summer

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Extract

one

Along the back streets, down to the river he took me. Through the wastelands filled with those white flowers, the ones that smell of cats' piss, of summer. Past our hideout, past the warehouses and the factories, almost to the gasworks. Into a scrapyard, not the one we used to play in. And there it was.

By the end of that summer three of us were dead. Tell me, does your pulse quicken when you see those headlines? You know the type: 'Murder Spree of Schoolgirl Loner'; 'Boy, 13, Rapes Classmate'; 'Child, 10, Stabs Pensioner'. Mine too, I've collected them all, over the years. And when you pass those gangs of half-grown ghouls that haunt the streets in the half-light, does your pace quicken just a bit? Do you

walk a little faster? It's understandable. Mugging, fighting, raping, killing – kids today, they're animals.

But of all the world's mini-monsters making headlines, wreaking havoc, my friend Kyle was the most famous of all. And I was there. I loved him. Take a seat, Doctor Barton, I'll tell you everything. It's time to tell you everything.

We moved to Myre Street in 1986. I remember I was embarrassed by our crappy furniture. We were so *obviously* the skint Paki family without a pot to piss in, moving it all in by ourselves. So predictable were we with our brown flowery sofa and rubbish telly, sat there in the middle of the street. Plus I was humiliated by my dad's manky old cardi and my sisters' miniskirts and my Auntie Jam in a sari, for Christ's sake.

I knew all the neighbours were watching from their windows. *Knew* they were saying, 'Family moving into 36, dear. Asians by the looks of things. Don't think much of their sofa.' Knew that somewhere, behind one of those nets, someone was laughing at my hair.

I sat on the kerb behind a smashed-up car and willed my brother Push to drop our sofa on his feet while those grand-but-fucked south-London houses crowded and jeered over our row of council homes like playground bullies. I watched my family traipse back and forth with the card-

board boxes that contained our lives and turned away just in time to see Kyle walk out of his gate.

No. 33 Myre Street. 'The House of Horrors'. Big black windows and peeling paint, a roll of carpet rotting amongst the weeds outside. The newspaper men must have been chuffed to bits when they first saw those pictures – the place had 'creepy' written all over it.

And what did I think of Kyle that first day? Not much. I just thought he looked stupid. It was boiling hot and he had an anorak on, zipped right up to his scrawny, birdy neck. And his trousers were too short for his legs. He didn't look at any of us as he walked off down the street but that was the first time I saw Kyle – if that's the sort of thing you're after. He walked off down the street and I didn't see him again until I started school.

The thing you have to remember here is that to everyone else this is a horror story. 'The Events'. 'The Truth Behind The Mines Murders!' But to me it was life. It was just my life. Do you know what I mean? Things happened. Things went wrong. OK, things went very, very, wrong. But at the time it was just us kids – me, Kyle and Denis – just kids knocking about. Because after the questions; after the whats, the whys, the whens, after the outrage and the disbelief, I'm just me, here, without anything I used to have.

* * *

My brother Push and I started school the following Monday. Lewisham High was pretty much just like any other shit-hole south-London comprehensive in the eighties: concrete and kids, wired glass and pissed-off teachers. A forecourt with a broken fountain full of empty crisp bags out front.

When I was introduced to my class and told to take a seat the only place left was next to this fat black kid called Denis. He was the sort of kid who sits alone for good reason. You know when you can just tell without even having to talk to someone, that they're a bit simple? He was the special needs kid, every class has got one. He had National Health glasses thick as car lights and his school uniform was spic and span, his tie too perfectly tied right up to his chin to have done it himself.

I sat down next to him and he turned around, took his specs off, and did this weird thing with his eyes. He sort of peeled the top lid over until the pink under-lid was left so it was just the bloody film. Then he grinned at me like he expected a biscuit or something. I just smiled politely and hoped he'd leave me the fuck alone.

No such luck. I was obviously the only person who had sat next to him in years. I was his new special pal. I was stuck with him. He knew it, the other kids knew it, and after my first long day with him trailing around after me like my big, fat, black retarded shadow, I knew it too. I

didn't really care. I guess I thought that even Denis was better than nothing. I am not someone who makes friends easily either.

Denis wasn't much of a conversationalist. That first day's efforts pretty much went like this.

Me: 'So, Denis! What's the canteen like here?'

Him: 'Do you like the A-Team?'

Me: 'Got any brothers or sisters, Denis?'

Him: 'Have you ever stood on your head until your nose bled?'

But there's something strangely intriguing about having your every question answered by another, totally random one, and by lunchtime I was beginning to enjoy myself.

Me: 'Live near here then, Denis?'

Him: 'Have you got a dog?'

Throughout the day I'd catch glimpses of my brother Push hanging out in the canteen or drifting through corridors between classes. He was clearly throwing himself into Making New Friends. I guess it helped that he was a good-looking, charming bastard. I just thought he was a bastard. He pretended not to recognise me when Denis and I passed in the hall. I eased my way through that first day, taking in the important landmarks, noting the leaders and the losers while pretty much being shunned by both, and by the time lessons finished for the day it was crystal clear that this school was going to suck just as much as my last one had.

By home time I'd managed to get out of Denis that he lived around the corner from me in Brockley. Assuming this meant I'd be stuck with him for the entire bus journey home, I was actually pretty pissed-off when he seemed mad keen to sidle away by himself as soon as we reached the gates.

'You not catching the 53, then?' I asked, not actually caring, and trying not to sound like I cared, in case he got the wrong idea and thought that I cared. Which I didn't.

Denis shrugged his massive shoulders in his too-tight, shiny blazer, looked at his feet and for once answered my question with a proper answer. 'Gotta wait for Kyle. Gotta wait here till he comes.' Then he looked away, down the street where no one was. A big, dumb smile on his big, dumb face.

I looked down there too, not really knowing how to stick around, then said, 'Oh right. See you later then.' But I stood there for a few minutes longer, swinging my Co-op carrier with its biro sticking out of a hole in the bottom, staring at an ice lolly melting into some dog-shit by my foot. Denis didn't move a muscle or even look at me again. Finally I shrugged and trudged off by myself, not quite able to believe that Denis had any mates and more than a little put out that he didn't want me to hang out with them. Still, he was a retard and his mates were probably retards too, so what did I care? I had better things to do.

As I reached the corner I looked back and saw the skinny white kid from my street walking up to Denis. He was still wearing the anorak. Denis was flapping his arm up and down waving like a lunatic, his big plate of a face beaming like the moon.

That summer of 1986 was hot everywhere in England. In our corner of south-east London the days rolled by in blue and gold, the sun bouncing off the dustbins and burning into windscreens. It lit up our faces, bit at our eyeballs. And when I think about that summer I think of it as like a flaming meteor tearing through empty space. As my bus lurched and heaved through New Cross that first day, my school shirt was damp with sweat and I knew it was going to be a long few months until the holidays began. I wished I had a cigarette.

Seven years ago, that was. When I was a different person. When I was thirteen and still Anita. When I didn't know Kyle.

When I was eleven my mother died suddenly of a well-kept secret. One minute she was stirring a pot of rice in our kitchen in Leeds, the next she was crumpled on the floor clutching her left arm. I'm no expert (or maybe I am), but it was a peculiar death, really. I remember at the time I felt a little embarrassed as I laughed, because it was such a

strange joke for her to make, on a Monday evening at seven. 'That was rubbish,' I'd said, getting up from my homework for a better look. When it came to fake dying, my mother was clearly in need of advice.

And then I saw her face.

All the things people say about shock aren't true. Time doesn't stand still and you aren't rooted to the spot. What I did do was scream the bloody house down while running like a moron back and forth between her body and the kitchen door. When my father and brother and sisters piled in they found me kneeling, screaming still, trying to shake her awake.

Angina, my Auntie Jam said later. A ticking time-bomb that heart of hers. I wish I'd known. Wish I'd known there were only a certain amount of ticks and tocks my mother's heart had left: I'd have counted every single one.

In the months that followed, my family was laid waste. Sadness ate my dad up whole. It wrecked him, battered him, finished him. He walked around or mostly sat in a fairly convincing dad-shaped disguise but behind his staring eyes brain-eating zombies had clearly been at work. We could not reach him. He didn't want us to. Mostly he wanted to drink beer and watch telly in the dark.

And it was easy then for me, Push, Bela and Esha to lose our grip on each other. It was simpler not to hang around

the house she had loved us in, her 'milk chocolate buttons', half-Yorkshire, half-Bengali. It was easy not to notice our family unravelling if we were not there to watch.

The months passed and bit by bit Mum's presence faded from the house and the absence of her filled it up. Gradually fewer and fewer envelopes addressed to her landed on the mat; somebody, I don't know who, moved her coat from the hall, her make-up from the bathroom cabinet. With no one to insist on family meals or curfews, no one to keep an eye on what we did with our time, who really noticed when the others stopped bothering to come home at all sometimes or if I forgot to go to school now and then?

Finally, our Auntie Jam made a stand. Sari swishing with disapproval, Dad was swept into the kitchen for a bollocking. She'd seen Bela coming out of a pub in town, heard rumours that Push was out drinking in the park every night, that Esha was carrying on with the man from the kebabby. As for me, did he even know where I went during the day? Because it certainly wasn't to school. Her scandalised voice hissed from under the kitchen door as I hung over the banister. Silly cow, I thought. With every outraged word, the subtext was clear. If Dad had done the decent thing and married a Bengali woman in the first place, none of this would have happened. Even in death my mother was an embarrassment and now her miserable half-white kids

were dragging the family down even further. Enough was enough. Besides, she had plans for our house.

It's fair to say, by the time Dad pulled himself together sufficiently to let Auntie Jam talk him into swapping our shitty council house in Leeds for her mate's even shittier one in London, the Naidus were not winning any prizes for 'Most Together Family of the Year'.

After that first day at Lewisham High, I came home to find Push and Dad watching telly in the lounge. They were each sitting on an unpacked cardboard box eating rice crispies, last night's dinner plates and Dad's empty beer cans round their feet.

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We've got spooks and ghouls and freaks and fools at Rentaghost . . .

When he saw me in the doorway Push said, 'All right Nitty-no-tits? Saw you with your new fella today.' He grinned into his rice crispies. 'Got yourself a catch there, haven't you?'

Hear the phantom of the opera sing a haunting melody,
Remember what you see is not a mystery, but Rentaghost!

'Yeah,' I said. 'Funny,' I said, and went upstairs. In our room Esha and Bela were getting ready to go out. Picking my way through a fug of hairspray, over puddles of jeans and knickers, shoes and bras, I sat down on my bed to watch. 'Mind out, Nit.' Esha used my head to steady herself as she climbed up next to me. Her arms held out for balance, she looked at herself in the half mirror hanging opposite, giggling as Bela got up too, pretend-surfing as they wobbled about on my duvet in their white stilettos.

My older sisters are beautiful and so is Push. ('Poor Anita,' my Auntie Jam said once, giving me the evil eye.) Skin like Bourbon biscuits, they had black hair to their bums (I'd hacked mine off with the kitchen scissors when I was nine) and Mum's wide, green eyes. *Desperately Seeking Susan* was their favourite film and they wore white lace fingerless gloves and black Ray-Bans and a shedload of red lipstick. Deadly, in other words: the blokes of Lewisham didn't stand a chance.

I fiddled about with our pink radio-alarm clock, twiddling the knob between stations, listening to the static until Bela shouted at me to pack it in and I went to stare at myself in the bathroom mirror. I looked at my face a lot back then. Not because I thought I was pretty – I knew that I was not – but because eventually, if you stare long enough, you stop recognising yourself; you lose yourself. It's like if you say the same word over and over again –

gradually it becomes just a sound. Meaningless. If you stare at yourself long enough you begin to look like someone else entirely or like no one at all. Sometimes I could pass half an hour like that, scaring myself witless with my own reflection.

My face and eyes are small and brown, the sockets dark like I've been punched. Two bruises that match the ones on my father's face. I have inherited his wounds. The backs of my hands, my knees and feet are also darker than the rest of me and like I've said, I've always cut my black hair short. In bright light, my arms look quite furry, like a spider's. I was small for my age and skinny. When I was thirteen I wore Push's hand-me-downs rather than my sisters', and strangers, if they thought about it at all, would assume I was a boy.

Later, when my sisters had come back drunk, and my dad had fallen asleep on the sofa and Push had gone to bed, I lay awake and listened to Bela and Esha whispering in the dark. In the few weeks we had been here they had fallen in love with their new life. They were mad about London. They never talked about Leeds or their old friends, or Mum.

They threw themselves into trying out the pubs in Deptford and New Cross, starting college and planning their escape from our dad, our crappy house, and from me. They

were sixteen and sick to death of death. They didn't want sadness anymore. Didn't want anything to bring them down. A soppy song on the radio? 'DePRESSing!' They'd switch stations. A tragic movie on the telly? 'BORing!' They'd kick Push to turn it over. Dad sitting in the dark, drinking beer? 'Just ignore him, silly old bat.' They weren't having any of it. Life was too short. Turn up the music, cheer up, have fun!

While I listened to them whisper I remembered how after Mum died I suddenly began to see her everywhere. Out of the corner of my eye I'd spot her in the strangest of places. As I wandered the streets when I should have been at school, a breathless laugh, a flash of red coat or a whiff of Anais-Anais would have me swivelling my head or snuffling up the air like a dog.

My mother had a lightness in her looks and in herself that spilled into Push and the twins but that ran out by the time it was my turn. I, alone, was the dark dregs of my father's cup. And yet she loved us all and our house was a happy place, in its way. My dad, vague and quiet and usually to be found pottering with our beaten-up old Ford out front, or in our backyard's flower beds, she loved fiercely, protectively. If she'd find him sometimes staring into space or brooding somewhere by himself she'd bustle and boss him and kiss and hug him like she would with us and he'd blink into life with a surprised, delighted smile. Sometimes

I'd catch them sitting together on the sofa or at the kitchen table, my mother laughing and the big, black bruises of my father's eyes holding her face in tender astonishment.

She was the life of our house, of us. The life, the glue, the point. Her broad Yorkshire accent, her wide lap, her laughter and her love would gently calm Push's restless energy, force my sisters to share their secret twin world with the rest of us, pull my father from his fuggy silences and forgive me, forgive me, stubbornly, determinedly, forgive me for being the person that I was.

And the rope that kept my family tethered was unbreakable, I thought. Strong. After she died I would often sneak into her wardrobe, just stand there in the dark among the coats and dresses and fill myself with her smells. The perfume mingling with the sweet-sour smell of armpits and soap powder and that perfect smell that was just hers alone. But every time I returned the smell seemed to get a little less, like one of those scent-drenched strips you get in magazines that have been opened and discarded and left to fade. Eau de Mum. Until someone packed away her clothes when I was out one day. My mother was stacked neatly, violently, quietly, in boxes in our attic and that was that.

When my sisters finally fell asleep that night I knelt on my bed and lifted the nets to smoke one of their fags through the open window. I blew rings into the orange-tinged

blackness for a while and then I saw Kyle come out of No. 33. He stood on his doorstep for a few seconds and I glanced at the radio-alarm clock. It was way past two. As I watched he knelt down to put on the shoes he'd been carrying, quietly closed the front door, then disappeared off down the street.