EDGWARE ROAD

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For Markus, Adam, Leo, Amira, Jamie, Feliks and Mila

'For why is gambling a whit worse than any other method of acquiring money? How, for instance, is it worse than trade? True, out of a hundred persons, only one can win; yet what business is that of yours or of mine?'

The Gambler, Fyodor Dostoevsky

EDGWARE ROAD, LONDON

15 DECEMBER 1987

1

She looks up at the front of the station by twisting herself round, turning from the pavement to the shiny red brick arches. It says in huge black and white letters, made out of tiles: EDGWARE ROAD. Definitely at the right stop then. She's been here fifteen minutes and there's no sign of him and she goes back inside the ticket hall. It's a small station; just a few barriers opening into a narrow exit, and not many people about. A family of Americans in matching shell suits, and a lady in a burkha with the sparkliest shoes ever.

She can't have missed him.

She'd wanted to wear her Wham! T-shirt and Mum told her not to, and she'd won the argument and now she's in this wind tunnel. The cold wind whips straight into her face. And it's kind of weird standing here, maybe she should walk around to warm up? She has three ten-pence pieces in her pocket, in case of emergency. There's a corner shop over there, it's basically a little kiosk built into the wall. She's under strict orders not to leave the station. The shop barely counts, does it? She goes in and has a look at the rows of sweets, and settles on a KitKat for nineteen pence.

Back in the ticket hall she unpeels the paper wrapper and

eats one of the chocolate fingers, saves the other one for later, carefully folding over the foil at the top. There's a clock fixed into the wall and if she cranes her neck she can see that it's twenty minutes past. He really is late now and the last thing she wants to do is tell her mum. He's going to arrive, full of apologies. She shouldn't have eaten half of the KitKat because he's going to take her to a burger place and she won't have an appetite.

What will she talk to him about when he arrives? School's going OK. She loves reading. She doesn't like the playtimes when the boys put down goals made from their coats and jumpers and take over the whole space. All the girls end up squeezed on the other side, not able to run around freely. The boys leap for headers and fly round like birds with their arms out behind them when they score a goal.

On Friday she'd sat down on a bench, squeezed in between two girls from her class. One of them was eating crisps out of a packet. She didn't share them. She didn't mind her not sharing because she doesn't like salt and vinegar, and she had said so.

The girl kept picking out crisps and inspecting them for dark edges.

'So why'd your mum and dad split up then?' the girl on the bench had asked. And she'd ignored her.

She's never actually thought about this question in a way that she can put into words. Maybe that's what she should ask him about. She twiddles the end of her hair round her fingers.

Still no sign of him. She should have brought a book. Her legs are getting tired and she knows she probably shouldn't sit on the floor. It looks grubby. The floor is made up of black and

white checks, like a chess board, but the white tiles are chewing gum grey, so she sort of squats on her haunches.

'You alright, love?' The Tube man, ancient in a faded blue uniform with a blue turban and a long grey beard that ends in a wisp, has been watching her and now he comes out from behind his little glass kiosk, leaving the office untended, to speak to her, specially.

'Yeah, I'm OK, just waiting for my dad.' It's been drummed into her not to speak to strangers and she deliberately looks away, as if her father will turn the corner at any second. It's nice of him to check, though.

A few more minutes and she'll use that last coin in the phone box; she'll have to call Mum and tell her to pick her up early, to meet her back at Hammersmith. Never mind, she's eleven now, well into double figures. Almost a teenager, she can deal with this. What is it that Mum always says? There's worse things happen at sea.

She goes out onto the pavement, into the roar of the traffic where the flyover meets the main road. There's a red phone box a few steps from the station. The door is heavy to push open and inside it smells of wee and ashtrays. She has to stand up on tiptoe to reach the receiver. Around the edges of the phone box cards have been stuffed into the glass panes and stuck onto the doors; pictures of naked women, turning so their bums are high in the air, showing off their G strings, not really smiling. Some of the cards are trampled on the ground and she can't help standing on them, on their massive boobs, and feels bad.

The receiver is so heavy too, like a brick, and damp from other people's breath, and she steadies herself with one hand, though she doesn't want to touch anything in this phone booth.

She stands on tiptoes and dials her home number, then follows the instructions to pay when the tone sounds. Mum, she will say, she rehearses it in her mind. It's fine, he didn't come, I'm fine, I'm coming home now. Please can you pick me up at the station? She lines up her ten-pence piece carefully at the slot. Clunk, it's in the bowels of the machine. There is no ringing. Just the dialling tone. It's eaten her coin. She bangs at the telephone cradle, and sticks her fingers in the change-box below to see if the coin will roll back down. It's lost.

She rummages around in her backpack to see if there might be another ten pence in there somewhere, although she knows there won't be. She is very careful to keep any coins that come into her possession in her purse. The only other things in her bag are an apple, slightly brown, and an old copy of *Smash Hits* which she's read about seven times, and which has crinkled up. She'd better go back on the Tube to Hammersmith and then she'll find her way back from the station to home. She's pretty sure she knows the way.

The ticket in her hand has gone damp and bent so she can only feed it through the barrier by smoothing it out in the palm of her hand, like one of those cracker gifts, a red fortune-telling fish – she has one at home, you have to smooth it with your fingers, and make it curl upwards to say yes, or arch backwards to say no, like a dying fish out of water, a shining, flapping thing. Still, she can't get this ticket straight and she's starting to worry, when the man with the turban comes out of his booth again and opens the barrier for her, and waves her through without speaking to her.

PART ONE

1981 & 2003

2

They stood alongside each other on the one-armed bandits in the darkest corner of O'Connors next to the toilets. The smell of dried piss was almost masked by the fog of cigarette smoke, which hung low in the pub.

Khalid had known Imran for about three months.

It was about eleven thirty in the morning and they were the only punters. Brian was quiet that morning, still half-cut. He wiped last night's sticky beer residue from the tables, and pulled chairs down from the tabletops with a bang.

'Bar's open,' he mumbled, not to them, or anyone else, slinging his tea towel over his shoulder. 'Still at it, fellas?'

The two of them worked like factory workers, hands fluttering on the square buttons, feeding back the coins when they tumbled down. The tangy smell of copper and nickel rose up from the money, held by a thousand hands.

They ignored Brian, they were used to his complaints and the way he invited them in before opening time and then always felt let down by their choices, as if they didn't drink enough. And once they'd been thrown off the machines by a navvy, who came in and told them to shove off out of his way. Khalid liked Irish pubs in any case. You could usually find someone to stand

you a drink in O'Connors, or in the Rose of Tralee further down the road. In Khalid's view, Sufism and Catholicism had a lot in common. Imran knew his views on the subject and was mostly in agreement. The Irish and the Asians, their own little people in a sea of imperial bastards.

Pissing their money away. That's what Suzie called it, and Khalid knew that she was wrong. It was only coins, never notes. And the sudden lighting up of the screen, and the cash pouring out. It was beautiful. The way that chance could hurl you up and bring you back down on your feet, five pounds richer, ten pounds richer. The rattle of money pouring out, like rapid gunshot. There was a new machine on the far side of the bar that asked for answers to general knowledge questions, like *Mastermind*, and some of the other regulars believed you could fiddle it, if you played it enough times, and could recall who did what to Marilyn Monroe. Khalid found it dull. You would never beat that kind of machine. Everyone knew the house always won. Only chance was pure. He didn't need to know he was clever, he just needed to know that he could beat the odds.

Imran got it. He was the same.

Khalid and Imran came straight here after their shift, straight down the Central Line from Marble Arch to Shepherd's Bush. They were still wearing their white shirts and black suit trousers, their bow-ties folded in their pockets. Imran had dark stubble, which burgeoned on his chin during the night shift. He always looked undone by the morning, with his shirt riding up over his belt, whereas Khalid was as pristine as he had been the previous evening. Just that night he'd been mistaken for a punter by one of his own colleagues, and he couldn't say he wasn't pleased. He could have been a diplomat from the High Commission or

the rakish son of a high roller, out on the town with the family chequebook.

London was a grid of pubs of varying quality for Khalid – the type of fruit machines, the likelihood of a win, the warmth of the place. They should have both been sleeping, and there were women, children – they knew vaguely – in the back of their minds, waiting for them, somewhere, complaining that they hadn't returned. The night shift did things to you. Sometimes they came off it buzzing and they had to have a flutter, to do something to burn off the energy. Sleep didn't appeal. Khalid wasn't the only one, lots of them felt like that after the casino closed. And after all, he'd seen these players walking away with pockets full, thousands, screeched away by their chauffeurs in the morning light; why shouldn't he have his own little go?

'What you going to do if it closes?' Imran had a habit of talking while he played. Khalid found it threw his concentration off to chat, but he didn't want to be rude to his friend. And Imran was anxious, always seeing the risks round the corner, never the opportunities.

'Face that when it comes to it.' The lights flashed dull blue, the machine played a quiet jingle. Jingle – jingle – better luck next time. He fed in another coin.

The club was under review by the Gaming Board. It was in the High Court and all over the papers like a bad rash. There was a rumour of dodginess, a whiff of malpractice. The sheen was coming off the most fashionable place in town, and Hugh Hefner was on the defensive. Not that it stopped the stars – they were still coming. But Khalid could feel that the wind had changed direction. The glitter was coming unstuck.

'I'll be shafted,' said Imran. 'Got to think of something else. I want to be my own man, you know?'

'What about the Windies?' Khalid tutted under his breath as the machine gulped down more coins. The rumour was that, if Playboy closed, there would be jobs for loyal staff in other locations, like Florida, maybe even the Bahamas. 'The club there is going to be on the beachfront, bhai. They're building it out of an old plantation house. All the Hollywood stars take their holidays there.' Khalid had told Suzie all about it. They had laughed together about wearing floaty white clothes, drinking out of coconuts with long straws. They had whispered about how much Alia would like the beach. She was only four and hadn't seen the sea yet. It would be a good place to grow up. 'Bastard machine.' Another loss. Khalid slid in more money, eyeing Imran briefly to see if he'd noticed his damage. 'Good cricket. All year round.' He pulled down the lever of the bandit with his right arm.

Suzie liked the idea of monsoons, and Christmas in the warmth. She had started looking at bikinis in catalogues. She had circled two; a yellow one and a fancier one, with frills, big blue spots on cream. It will suit them. A fresh start, a good time to move on from the grime of London. Khalid could see the upside.

'I'll believe it when I see it.' Imran had a little win. The machine flashed orange and red, the cher-ching of the coins rolling down. 'Lownes, Hefner – I think their days are over, Khalid. I think it's time to make it on your own. Under your own steam. Ladies in pom-pom tails and ears, it's not going to last, is it?'

Imran had a sort of morose look about him, for someone who

had just made five pounds from a machine. He put the money in his pocket as if he was about to go. A pang of anxiety raced through Khalid. He needed a win before he could step out into the day, before he could even contemplate sleep.

'Don't go yet, bhai.' He called Imran brother and he looked the part. Imran, the younger, shorter one, with his pockmarked skin and skinny frame. There would never be any competition between them. A brother, nonetheless. It amused Khalid the way they walked in sync, and patted each other on the back. They weren't related at all – they only met at the club a few months ago when Imran walked up to his roulette table, in the middle of a game, looking for the floor manager. 'That's me,' Khalid said and Imran nodded, and then he started sticking close.

Sometimes it occurred to Khalid that his mother would be appalled that he hung out with such men. Imran's father probably had a bullock cart back home. They never talked about it, and it was all so different at Playboy. They had black friends, Chinese friends, working the blackjack tables and pouring martinis. You could change your name and run away from your roots. Tony – their mate on the Playboy cloakroom – had ditched his slave-owner name by deed poll, was pleased as punch about it. He was Tony King now. It wasn't the same as Karachi; things rolled differently.

The machines had fallen silent.

'Want something for that?' Brian offered from behind the bar where he was stacking pint glasses. He changed a fiver for Khalid. He didn't really mind if they didn't drink, as long as they kept playing.

And sometimes they did drink, too.

'Never quit while you're ahead.' Khalid went straight back to

the machines and gave half of it to Imran, sliding the coins into the warmth of his palm.

'OK, just one more.' They both pressed down their levers at the same time.

The reels started to turn again behind the glass screen, apples, plums, dollar signs, in a chain, and there was an order to the pattern: red, orange, blue, green, which Khalid could anticipate. It looked random, spinning into a fruity blur. But if you saw it often enough you knew where the win might be. There was a slight element of skill, which gave a beauty to it that he couldn't explain.

'I met this Mr Gupta,' Imran says, 'Gujarati. He's got plans, got paisa, he actually got a loan from some new bank… he's starting up a chain, three chemist shops already in Harrow, two in Wembley.'

'Go on.' He wanted Imran to keep talking so he could concentrate on when to press the buttons.

'Thinking of going to work for him – says he'll teach me – how to develop photographs. Says he'll send me on a course, even.'

'Not the same as being your own man, though, is it?'

'Proper hours, and I'll see my boys. Anyway, I like cameras, all that stuff.' Imran glanced across at Khalid. It was almost as if he was asking his permission to leave the club. He couldn't deny him. They were all passing in the night. Most of them flitted in and out like bats.

KHALID DIDN'T LIKE TO THINK OF HIMSELF AS A COMPANY MAN, though he was wearing the cufflinks with the little bunny logo,

he dressed the part and he had never said a bad word about the club or the owners. It was a well-paid job, as jobs went, and there had been a time when everyone was talking about Playboy. They still were – just for the wrong reasons.

And Khalid is a good croupier. Nobody quibbles when he's on duty.

His job is to be there in the background, almost invisible, holding the whole place together in the palm of his hand, like a little god, staying out of the errors of men's ways – it's not for him to say. He has to have their absolute trust, to hold their complete respect. He never shares in the joys of winning or commiserates when they blow it all. He never smiles or, God forbid, laughs. He takes it seriously and doesn't let his concentration show.

He must know over a hundred regulars by name.

He can do the sums. A lot of the odds are ingrained in his memory.

Good evening, Lord Ashbury.

Good to have you with us, Monsieur Boustani.

Place your bets please, gentlemen.

The world comes to his floor. He's seen grown men break down in sobs. He's seen silly, tipsy show-offs with the women they want to impress, and dedicated believers with their notebooks, who think they've found the system to beat the house. Well-known celebrities – rock stars, footballers – skulk in wearing dark glasses, even wigs, and he's seen Harley Street's finest heart surgeon study the deftness of his own hands. Khalid's hands are always on show, thin nimble fingers, nails neatly pared back and immaculately clean.

And they like him for his discretion and tact. They like the

transparency on the table and the way that he never coughs or slips up or asks the same question twice. He never turns his back or hides his actions. They don't think much more about him than that. That is enough.

'I want to try my own thing. Playboy's just…' Imran wrinkled his nose as if he'd smelled something sour. 'It wasn't part of my plan.'

IT WASN'T KHALID'S PLAN WHEN HE CAME TO LONDON EITHER. His entry visa had said college student. He had enrolled at Imperial College to study mechanical engineering. MEng (Hons). That was the plan.

That was what his parents wanted. It was expected of him and he'd gone along with the scheme, always knowing deep inside him that he didn't intend to conform; that the pathway marked out in hope, in his father's study, was a simplification of the way life twisted and uncoiled.

London was expensive; he hadn't really had to deal with money much before, and soon he discovered what he described to himself as the cash-flow problem. He took a couple of loans from drinking mates for textbooks, for LPs. He had started putting a punt on the horses at lunchtimes, just a flutter, when the allowance from his mother was running dry. It had soon become clear that the trickle from home wouldn't allow him to live like other young people in London, drinking and dancing in Soho, and wearing interesting clothes.

The idea had occurred to him to try to earn some cash.

Someone mentioned to him that Playboy was hiring.

It wasn't straightforward; he'd had to do a maths test, long

divisions, he'd rattled them off, and he'd been asked to stand upright in the middle of the room, examined as if he were a prize beast. Victor Lownes himself circled him, inspected him slowly, front, back and sides. The famed London boss, with a name like a lounge or a yawn, in his black polo neck, looking like he'd just got out of bed. He nodded, and said, 'Well hello, charmer,' in his New York murmur, 'welcome to Playboy.' They didn't want anyone old or ugly. And they liked the internationals because the club was a meeting place for the world, as Lownes had put it, so Khalid was a perfect fit.

And then life really started. His life at night was dazzling, and the university students around him, and his lecturers, soon seemed tired. Scruffy in their moth-chewed jumpers and their cords. They were waiting in an ante-room, whereas life was fizzing all around him at Playboy. And who wanted to spend all that time learning tiny details to be regurgitated, just to get a salary in some anonymous firm of civil engineers, building multi-storey car parks, when you'd seen the kinds of money that could be made and lost in a night on Hyde Park Corner, in the blink of an eye?

He had dragged himself into college after the night shifts, and more and more he found himself sleeping through his alarm clock, missing a deadline to submit an assignment. He was at a loss about what to talk about with his classmates when he did manage to attend a lecture.

It was a company that treated its staff well, located at the best address in London. A state-of-the-art tower, ten storeys tall, overlooking Hyde Park, the Dorchester on one side and the Hyde Park Hotel on the other. They had a canteen to be envied and legendary Christmas parties. He was promoted to

Gaming Inspector and was making £8,500 a year by the end of 1978. That was the year he made an annual bonus and put down a deposit on an upper floor flat on the Queen Caroline estate. He had chosen Hammersmith because of the Piccadilly Line.

He looked at his hands on the fruit machine, how he offered them to the table with the palms up and rotated them at the wrist, palms down.

He resisted the temptation to make any of it theatrical. There were croupiers that made a show out of it, but it wasn't his style. Far better if he went unnoticed, was just part of the backdrop to the game.

Women could be a problem. The ones on the arms of rich men could be tricksy, especially if they weren't playing. Too much time to look him up and down, already bored before they even crossed the threshold of the club. And they noticed his long fingers, and the deftness with which he dealt out, and they liked the sheen of his jet-black hair and the hand-tied bow-tie, and his dimples. Their eyes bore into him, willing him to drop his concentration, to look in their direction, so that they could flaunt something, a cigarette holder or an engagement ring. Sometimes they tried to whisper to him, and to ask him where he was from. He's learned how to keep his eyes down, and to think of the numbers, to just concentrate harder.

'It's fine with me, Imran, you should give the photography a go. If that's what you want, if Hasina says so too. You're missing out on a chance. Think of the life, my friend. The Bahamas, blow me down. Come and see us on the beach. Take Hasina on a proper holiday. Show her the world.'

'She can't swim,' said Imran.

Brian was studying them, watching them with his arms

folded, a look of pity from across the bar. 'Hair of the dog, fellas?'

Imran shook his head. He had no stomach for alcohol; it always ended badly.

'How's Suzie?'

'She'll be worrying.' Khalid slipped another handful of coins into the machine.

Imran did the same, and the fruit began to whirl again.

'Let's get back home, shouldn't we?'

KHALID WAS ON THE WAY. HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN HOME FIVE hours earlier. It was past lunchtime. The excuses ran through his head, like tunes that he had played too many times. Better not to say anything. She hated excuses, especially, she said, when they didn't make logical sense. She had made that very clear. He was walking along King Street towards the Hammersmith end. Home in fifteen minutes. He just had to walk down a small row of shops, and turn two corners, past the greengrocers, the dry cleaners and the bookies.

He took it all in, the long panels of glass revealed the shopkeepers, counting change, exchanging words with customers. The old ladies with their headscarves, pulling along trollies, and the trays piled outside the greengrocer, lined with fake grass, dull potatoes and a few hints of springtime, greens and cabbages. The butcher's racks of beef, fat, bald chickens, and whole flanks suspended from meat hooks, the owner glaring out in his bloody apron as a Rasta laughed with his friend outside, his braids streaming from his crocheted tam. It was all alright. He wasn't in his element but he was alright here. He crossed at

the zebra crossing by the newsagents, where the lollipop lady chivvied a group of children over in the other direction, with hair dripping from swimming, and the Easter eggs, stacked like shoeboxes in the window, decorated with fluffy yellow chickens. And his mind flickered to home; it was his choice to be here, this and not the heat and dust. He had wanted things wrapped in layers of plastic, factory fresh. He had wanted modern stuff, people in shoes, temperate weather, sliced white bread. It had all been his choice.

A neighbour with a child about Alia's age was talking outside the post office, with another mother with a buggy. She didn't notice him, or at least didn't greet him. He strode past the shops. He could swear he wasn't looking at the chalkboard with the odds pasted up outside.

Someone ran into William Hill. The way the man was trotting, half-running, flat cap in hand, suggested something starting. It might be a big one? The windows of the bookies were frosted, so it was impossible to see in, as if something distasteful or adult happened inside. He just allowed himself a glance at the board. Newmarket. The names – that's what grabbed him – Raider, Pizarro, Brave Knight. He knew this shop well – in his pocket he had one of the stubby undersized biros that you could pick up for free. He had made promises not to go in there again, to Suzie, to himself. He'd even said to Imran the other day, 'It's a mug's game,' parroting one of Suzie's phrases, but he wasn't feeling it in his heart.

It wasn't as if he'd been trying to hide it.

He had left newspapers on the table, with names circled in red biro, all asterisks and loops and underlining. He'd tried to explain it to her. She didn't want to hear. It's all some kind of