If You Don't Know Me by Now

A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton

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Extract

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‘Out of darkness cometh light’

Wolverhampton motto

1. Life of Surprises

Drinking alone needn't necessarily be a lowering experience. If you're in the right place, say Paris or New York, in the right bar, somewhere with pavement tables or window seats, and in the right frame of mind – having just made a couple of billion from shorting the US dollar, for instance – I imagine it could be quite pleasant kicking back with a whisky sour, watching those less fortunate than yourself (i.e. everyone) shuffle past as you sit snug and smug in your tailored Gucci suit.

But sipping neat vodka smuggled into your mum's house in a promotional Fitness First rucksack, dressed in a lumberjack shirt that cost £7.99 fifteen years ago, and peering out at a double-glazed view of Wolverhampton, a town which was once the beating heart of Britain's Industrial Revolution but whose only claim to fame now is that it is home to the headquarters of Poundland, 'the UK's largest £1 retailer', isn't so cheerful.

This isn't where I pictured myself as a thirty-year-old. But then very little of what has happened recently was planned, and I certainly didn't expect to do what I'm going to do next. You see, after a few more weeks behind this Argos flatpack desk, and a few more bottles of this Asda own-brand vodka, I'm going to type up a letter I've been drafting, in one way or another, for half a lifetime. When I'm done, I'm going to send it to someone in India who, for an almost unethically small fee, will translate it into a language I can speak and understand but cannot read or write, and when he is done, I'm going to get him to read it out over the phone. Finally, if satisfied with the diction and the tone, I will hand it over to the person I love more than any other and let the contents break her heart ...

Perhaps the biggest surprise in all of this is the sense of resolution. I always thought that when it came to the crunch, at the

moment of assassination, I would, as I always seem to at critical moments, consider the consequences and flounder. But while there is a powerful urge to run away, there is a stronger determination not to let yet another opportunity for a better life drift by. And, unless I'm very much mistaken, this shortness of breath, this tightness in my chest, isn't due just to anxiety, but to excitement also. Excitement borne from the knowledge that this is necessary and I am right.

★

Things were very different six years ago, when I was twenty-four. I worked for a newspaper then, a job in the media, writing about the media; I had a girlfriend – let's call her Laura, and let's say she was a TV producer – and I didn't split my time between London and my parents' home in Wolverhampton as I do now. In those days, coming to the West Midlands was a monthly, sometimes fortnightly occurrence. And the weekend it all began, I was due to come to see my parents after a guilty gap of nine weeks.

If memory serves, on the Friday night before I set off there was a dinner party at Laura's flat in north London. All the guests, like us, worked in the media, the menu consisted of recipes from Jamie Oliver's *The Naked Chef*, and discussion ranged from complaints about Tony Blair's religiosity, to complaints about the celebrities we'd respectively met, to extended moaning about how we wanted to quit our lousy highly paid jobs, which allowed us to meet our heroes, wangle backstage tickets and hold the high and mighty to account, in favour of less stressful, more meaningful lives as bricklayers in the Outer Hebrides.

Throughout, I stayed true to three fundamental tenets of middle-class London life: never confess to religiosity (you may as well confess to paedophilia); never admit to being impressed by a celebrity you've met (you may as well confess to paedophilia); and always moan about your job (it seems the price of a flash job in your twenties is self-loathing). In practice this meant

suppressing the fact that there was once a time when I prayed for an hour every day, concealing the fact that I'd entered the number of every celebrity I'd ever interviewed into my mobile phone, and ignoring the voice of the Indian immigrant in my head which, during the Hebridean bricklaying fantasies, kept on muttering: *there's a lot to be said for an office job and an opportunity to contribute to a money purchase pension scheme.*

The evening ended with a spilt glass of red, a group rendition of Elton John's 'Rocket Man' and the embittered charity worker living upstairs asking whether we knew what time it was. It was 3 a.m. Laura and I were in bed soon afterwards. And, five hours later, I was reaching blindly for her Jacob Jensen alarm clock, dragging myself out of her John Lewis bed and brushing the cobwebs from my teeth with her Paul Smith toothbrush.

I fixed myself a breakfast of muesli and unconcentrated orange juice and, on hearing deathly murmurings drifting from the bedroom, went in to say goodbye.

'You okay?' She had a sweet way of sleeping curled up in the middle of mattresses.

'Feel. Sick.'

'You drank two bottles of wine.'

'Two?' I kissed her on her forehead and passed the Evian from her bedside cabinet. 'Why didn't you stop me?' She pressed the plastic bottle against the side of her face, as if trying to ease bruising.

'I've got to go.'

'Eugh.'

'Drink lots of water.'

'What if I die?'

'Drink lots of water.'

'How come you're okay?'

'Water, my dear.'

She put a pillow over her head and groaned: 'Could you leave a bucket next to the bed?'

Leaving the flat, I headed off to what I called, with the compulsory irony of my trade, 'the Paki shop', where I picked

up an edition of the national newspaper I worked on, to check whether they had run an interview I'd conducted with a prominent media personality. This being London, I made no attempt at small talk with the newsagent as I did so, and he knew better than to attempt banter in return, and on the way to the Tube station I proceeded not to give the time of day to: the embittered charity worker from upstairs, who was walking down the street in Birkenstocks, having most likely spent the morning washing lepers or helping violent lunatics reintegrate into the local community; the spaced-out German banker whom I'd never spoken to and who lived below Laura; the teenager whom I'd never spoken to and who lived with the Spanish architects next door to Laura; and the postman I had down as a madman because he was forever smiling and trying to wish people a 'good morning'.

I fell asleep on the Tube halfway through my own article, woke up at Euston, and caught an overland train, on which I surrendered to my delayed hangover, waking up two hours later to the sight of rusty corrugated roofs and polluted land dissected by lines of poisoned, trolley-strewn canalways. Wolverhampton. I disembarked feeling even worse than Laura had looked, and felt worse still as I approached the taxi rank and remembered I was related to at least a third of the cabbies in Wolverhampton.

This may not, on the face of it, sound like a problem. But it plays havoc with Punjabi etiquette: the cabbie, on seeing you are a relative, will feel honour-bound not to charge you; but you, knowing the cabbie will have been queuing for some time for a lucrative fare, will feel honour-bound to insist he takes payment. Like so many social interactions in the Sikh community, the encounter will end in a kind of wrestling match, with one person trying to thrust money on the other, the other refusing to accept, and both people ending up offended and possibly physically bruised by the other's persistence.

That afternoon, with my head throbbing, I didn't have the stamina for such a showdown so ended up hovering around the taxi rank, variously pretending I was waiting for someone, pretending I was taking vital phone calls, and trying to catch

glimpses of drivers' faces without actually catching their eye, until I was certain my driver wasn't an uncle or a brother-in-law. He was, however, inevitably, a member of the world's fifth largest organized religion. Couldn't have been any more Sikh, in fact: pictures of all ten gurus sellotaped on to the dashboard; incense sticks dangling out of air vents; a pair of miniature boxing gloves bearing the Sikh *khanda* hanging from the driving mirror. Moreover, his turban was Khalistan orange, suggesting militancy. And if he was anything like my militant Sikh relatives who also drove taxis for a living, there was a possibility he was carrying a 'ceremonial' sword under his seat for protection, though I tried not to think about this as we pulled away, instead just tried to wallow in the happy fact that he barely grunted in acknowledgement when I announced my destination. Sweet silence . . .

. . . until the Ring Road, when he was suddenly overwhelmed by the loneliness of the short distance cab driver and the intercom sign flickered into life.

'SO WHERE YOU FROM THEN?'

I dread this question in London cabs because it usually means me replying: 'Wolverhampton' . . . and the London cabbie responding with: 'Ha. I mean, where are you from *originally*?'

I will then say: 'I'm *originally* from Wolverhampton.'

The cabbie will say: '—'

I will then say: 'You want to know which country *my parents* are from?'

The cabbie (usually pretty uninterested by now) will say: 'Yeah.'

'They are from the Punjab, in north India.'

'When did they come here?'

'Erm . . . dunno.'

'Why did they come here?'

'Dunno.'

The remainder of the journey invariably passing in awkward silence.

While the categories and vocabulary differ in Wolverhampton,

I dread the conversation for the same reason: because the cabbie's aim is to pigeonhole and classify.

'I'M FROM LONDON,' I shouted back in bad Punjabi.

'*Ki*?'

I repeated myself, louder, more slowly, but in English.

'You don't speak Punjabi then?' he asked in Punjabi.

'*Hahnji*, I do,' I said in bad Punjabi. 'Just out of practice.'

The rear-view mirror framed only one eye, but I could tell his glare was one of disdain. 'So where you from originally?' he continued in Punjabi, regardless.

'I'm originally from Wolverhampton,' I said in bad Punjabi.

'I mean . . . which *pind*? Your father's village?'

I really should have known the answer to the question. The nature of Sikh migration from the Punjab into Britain – some villages were transposed, complete with their broiling caste strife, en masse – means I grew up hearing names of villages being bandied about. I even spent a fortnight at my father's home in India during one of my university holidays. But so intense was my boredom during this trip – my extended family's interest in me limited to asking how much I earned, when I was going to get married and, in the case of my male cousins, whether English girls were easy – that I'd developed a mental block on the name.

'Can't remember,' I admitted eventually, in bad Punjabi.

The cabbie rolled his eyes. At least, he rolled the one eye I could see.

'I think my father's village is somewhere near Jalandhar,' I added, realizing as soon as I'd uttered the words that they were as helpful as saying a town was 'somewhere in the vicinity of London'.

The end of the cabbie's moustache twitched. I knew what he was thinking: *idiot* bilayati*, doesn't know anything about his own culture.* I glowered back in a way that intended to convey: *you're in England now, make some kind of effort to learn the language of your new home* – before developing a sudden and keen interest in the view from the window. We were travelling down from the town centre to my parents' suburb in the south of the town via the

Dudley Road, a corridor lined with Indian doctors' surgeries, Indian sweet shops, two Sikh temples – one for the Jat (farmer) caste I belong to, the other for those of the Chamar caste – Indian supermarkets, Indian barber shops, Indian insurance brokers and Indian jewellery shops. You could, if you lived here, never deal with anyone who wasn't Indian. And my parents rarely do.

Eventually, having driven past an uncle's house, around the corner from my parents', and an aunt's house, just up the road from my parents', we pulled up outside the semi-detached I spent my teens in. The fare came to £5.90 and I passed a tenner through the passenger window: 'Make that £6.50, mate.'

He repeated the amount back to me in Punjabi, in an incredulous tone. *'Sade chhe pornd?'*

For a moment I couldn't figure out why he was scowling. Was it that I was addressing him in English? Or had the unnecessary and admittedly moronic 'mate' proved grating? It's not a word I normally use, but it springs from nowhere when I talk to men from lower socio-economic groups. Plumbers, builders, all C2DEs get it, which is ironic as I hardly have any mates in these professions at all. But eventually the penny dropped. He was cross because he thought I was asking for £6.50 *in change*. I'd forgotten people don't tip in the West Midlands.

'*Nai, nai*,' I said, cringing. 'I mean *take* £6.50. I'm giving you a sixty pence tip. You know . . .' For some reason I had switched back to English, albeit with an Indian accent '. . . EXTRA. BONUS. THANK YOU.'

What seemed reasonable in a mental calculation sounded derisory uttered out loud. He took the money, flipped the change back in my direction without taking the tip, and screeched off with the closest thing you can get to wheelspin in a 2.4-litre diesel-engined TXII.

★

In the hallway, there was the familiar aroma of chopped onion and cardamom and an unfamiliar hush. I've got used to it recently,

but the quietness would often take me by surprise in those days. A part of me expected it to be like it was when I was a teenager: my brother playing R. Kelly in his room; my two sisters squabbling in their bedroom; Mum crashing pans in the kitchen; Dad watching TV in the living room. But standing there, my eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the light, all I could hear was a tape recorder murmuring prayers in the kitchen, and four plastic fish bopping around epileptically in the made-in-China twenty-inch-tall aqua lamp placed on the phone stand. Opposite the lamp – probably a present from one of my market-trading relatives – hung a framed and flashing picture of the Golden Temple, and at my feet lay a set of bathroom weighing scales and two ancient brown suitcases, a reminder of the reason for this particular visit home: my parents were heading off on one of their biennial trips to India.

Needless to say, this was no impulse trip. Like most Punjabis, my parents don't really do spontaneity. Even a picnic in the park requires several hours' preparation: an hour to make the necessary dal and samosas; half an hour to pack the necessary dal and samosas into Tupperware boxes; and an additional hour or so for complaining about ailments (my mother's favourite pastime) and watching *BBC Parliament* (my father's favourite). For them, the relationship between the distance due to be travelled and the preparation required is exponentially proportional – a return journey to the Subcontinent being planned with the kind of precision and detail that NASA usually reserves for launching a space shuttle, the intention to travel to India being announced at least twelve months before anyone gets near a plane. The brown suitcases had been half-packed when I'd last visited.

I swayed on the spot, psyching myself up for what was to come: the switch from West to East, South to North, English to Punjabi, rationality to superstition, smoked almonds to salted peanuts . . .

'Mum?' I said it with a slight Indian accent. 'Dedi? *Main aa gaya*.'

Dad appeared first. Slouched and barefoot, he walked up to

me slowly, shook my hand, patted me on the back and returned soundlessly to his armchair in the living room. Next, Mum came out of the kitchen smiling, looking broad in a *chuni*, a scarf and a shawl, and gave me a suffocating hug. She then took me to a sideboard in the kitchen, where she had laid out, waiting for me, a large cauldron full of birdseed, a tin of spinach, a packet of kidney beans, and a tin of plum tomatoes. First, I was instructed to wash my hands and run them through the birdseed. Then I was told to touch, in specific order, the packaged foodstuffs. Finally, she fetched a single large red chilli from the larder, squeezed it between her fingers, and, after circling it around my head five times, set it alight on the gas stove.

Centuries of superstition have probably gone into each element of this ritual, none of which I understand fully, but the birdseed would subsequently be scattered in the local park, an act of inter-species charity designed to bring luck; the spinach, kidney beans and plum tomatoes would be donated to the temple – again, to bring luck; while the burning of the chilli was meant to get rid of '*nazar*', a concept loosely translating as 'evil eye', which you can supposedly contract if you are admired in any way. Other Indians choose to ward it off by hanging fresh green chillies over doorways or wearing anti-evil-eye bracelets.

While the chilli snapped and crackled, my mother, contrary to her nature, didn't utter a single word, and as she stood with her hands held up in prayer, I padded off to the living room. The wall dividing the two downstairs rooms has now been knocked through, and the main room is wide and airy and filled with large sofas. But then it was cramped, with a line of chairs bought in an office clearance sale against one wall and a short settee opposite the TV, which itself stood next to a large set of double-glazed patio doors offering a view of the expansive lawn. Dad was dozing on the settee behind a curtain drawn to protect him from the midday sun. I sat down next to him, removed the remote from his hand, and flicked away from the Welsh Assembly coverage he had been watching until I found a music programme.

Before I'd even had time to begin despairing at the state of

modern pop, Mum had produced a lunch consisting of aubergine curry, lentil curry, mango pickle, chapattis, Indian salad, concentrated orange juice, and a Penguin bar. She watched as I began to eat and halfway through the first chapatti asked how many more I would like. I said one, knowing she would give me at least two more than I asked for, and she went into the kitchen and came back with three, knowing that I would have asked for two fewer than I actually wanted. As I ate, she attempted to increase the number of chapattis that ended up in my belly ('You're fading away!') by taking some away while I was part-way through them ('That one's gone cold,' 'Oh dear, forgot to smear butter on that one') – until the sum of the fractions amounted to seven chapattis.

Thus weakened, and unable to move from the pink sofa because of the bolus dilating my intestine, I listened as Mum began listing her latest maladies (a new crick in her neck, a throb in her knee), bringing me up to date with what she had been up to (a combination of visits to the temple and looking after the adored grandchildren), handing over the day's mail for translation into Punjabi (a letter from the dentist, a leaflet from the Jehovah's Witnesses), and asking whether I'd called or liked any of the nice Sikh girls whose telephone numbers had been sent to me in recent months.

On receiving the inevitable 'Not really,' she sighed long-

sufferingly, stated once again that any girl would do, as long as she was the right religion, right caste, right age, right skin colour, right height, right profession and displayed the traditional skills of cooking, knitting and sweeping, and then launched into one of her monologues. This, among other things, informed me that my cousin Harjit was up on an assault charge ('That boy will never learn, but he says the police hit him first'), my cousin Sukhjit had bought a house next to his parents ('Such a good boy, *looking after his parents*'), my cousin Daljit had been arrested for brandishing a sword in a petrol station ('You'd think a taxi driver would know that petrol stations have cameras'), an uncle on Dad's side of the family was having a bypass ('Thank God my heart is one of the few bits of me that still works'), a girl at the end of the road had been spotted talking to a boy on the Dudley Road ('No shame, those girls, no shame'), the white woman down the road was being divorced by her husband ('No sense of family, those *goras*, no sense of family'), my cousin Hardip had secured a £70,000-a-year job after graduating with an accountancy degree ('Why couldn't you've studied something useful?'), the council had put up signs saying people couldn't feed pigeons in the park any more ('What harm do a few seeds do? They're God's creatures'), my cousin Jasbir in India had been injured under the hooves of a bullock ('He may have been drunk'), and a boy who had been in my class at primary school had got married to a nice simple village girl from India ('Will I live to see your children?') . . .

The monologue went on and on and on, through the remainder of the music programme, through the BBC News national bulletin, as I went upstairs to unpack, even as I went to the toilet.

'. . . I'll call you every day when we're away . . .'

'Mum, I'm on the toilet.'

'. . . make sure you keep your phone on . . .'

'Mum, I'm on the toilet.'

'. . . otherwise, your father and I, we'll worry . . .'

'MUM. I AM ON THE TOILET.'

Thankfully distraction arrived in the form of my three elder

siblings, who, like me, were visiting, as custom and duty dictated, to wish my parents well on their trip to India. They came in age order, beginning with my eldest sister Narinder, known as Puli, followed by my elder sister Balbinder, known as Bindi, and my elder brother Jasmail, known as Rajah. My Punjabi isn't great, but I'm proficient enough to suspect my siblings haven't been lucky with their nicknames: 'Puli' means 'cutie' or 'slightly dim', depending on who you ask; 'Bindi' seems to be the word used to describe the mark that some Indian women wear between their eyebrows, and okra; and while 'Rajah' rather snazzily means 'King', it's old-fashioned and my brother is forever trying to rebrand himself.

I'm free of a nickname, but then I'm the family freak in most respects. My siblings got jobs straight after school and settled in Wolverhampton, whereas I left the town for university as soon as I could and never came back. My siblings were all married to spouses of the correct race, religion and caste by the age of twenty-one, whereas I, at twenty-four, was secretly dating someone of the wrong race and religion and of no caste whatsoever. And while they had two children apiece, I had . . . well, a rather large record collection, the highlight of which was every track ever recorded by George Michael.

On arriving, Puli, a housewife, left her two kids and market-trader husband downstairs in the living room and went upstairs for a lie down. Bindi, also a housewife, left her taxi-driving husband and two kids downstairs in the living room and went to fix some food in the kitchen. My brother's wife, Ruky, who was then working as a bank cashier but is now a driving instructor, joined Bindi, while Rajah, a middle manager, took a seat with his two kids downstairs and did what he always does best: looked way too good for his age. My brother has always been a handsome boy, but with the man-hours he puts in at the gym, and with the rest of us disintegrating at a great pace, the gap seems to be growing. Seeing him at home is sometimes like watching Brad Pitt making a cameo in *EastEnders*.

The house had suddenly gone from being too quiet to being

too noisy, with kids screaming and bouncing on the sofas and adults bellowing across the room at and over each other,* reminding me that while I found the quietness eerie, I preferred it to the mayhem I grew up in. When the noise reached such a pitch that I thought my hangover headache was going to turn into an aneurism, various Indian neighbours I hadn't seen in ages, and in some cases had never seen before at all, started popping over with messages and parcels for their loved ones in the Punjab, the concepts of British Telecom and the Royal Mail evidently having eluded them during their decades of British residency. And then, when I thought the aneurism was going to morph into something even more catastrophic, various aunts and uncles started popping round too, to make last-minute deputations to my mother regarding an ongoing family dispute over inherited farmland in India – a dispute which seemed to have been raging longer than the Middle East crisis.

Not that my parents seemed bothered: Mum multitasked calmly at one end of the living room, simultaneously dealing with visitors' queries, complaining about her arthritis, and feeding two or three children; while Dad monotasked at the other end, blankly watching the Bollywood video channel that my brother had tuned into. Somewhere in the middle, I attempted to laugh off suggestions that my hairstyle and jumper were 'gay', tried to ignore the wild laughter that erupted whenever I uttered a word of Punjabi, resisted suggestions from various male visitors that we go and

* If we are to believe Lieutenant-Colonel Malcolm, writing in 1812 after spending several years in the Punjab with the British army, this is something of a racial trait. In his inadvertently entertaining 'Sketch of the Sikhs: A Singular Nation', Malcolm complains that Sikhs are 'bold and rather rough in their address; which appears more to a stranger from their invariably speaking in a loud tone . . .' In a note, he adds: 'Talking aloud is so habitual to a Sikh, that he bawls a secret in your ear. It has often occurred to me, that they have acquired it from living in a country where internal disputes have so completely destroyed confidence, that they can only carry on conversation with each other at a distance: but it is fairer, perhaps, to impute this boisterous and rude habit to their living almost constantly in a camp, in which the voice certainly loses that nice modulated tone which distinguishes the more polished inhabitants of cities.'

watch a blockbuster opening at the local multiplex or for a few drinks at the Glassy Inn down the road, and fielded a barrage of massively uninformed questions about my job ('So you write things and they appear on telly?') and my religious habits ('You still go to the *gurdwara* every Sunday?').

Throughout, I obeyed the three fundamental tenets of my Sikh household: never confess to religious doubt (you may as well confess to paedophilia); never get annoyed with repeatedly explaining what you do for a living (unless you're a doctor or an IT consultant, they won't understand); and never admit to a male relative that you don't want a drink.* In practice this meant omitting to mention that I'd never attended a *gurdwara* in London, that I'd already seen the film in question at a media preview, and ignoring the voice of the Londoner in my head saying: '*The only white wine they serve at the Glassy Inn is a Chardonnay.*'

There's only so much you can take, though, and when my mobile rang, and I saw that it was Laura, I instinctively walked out of the room, into the kitchen and out into the garden. Taking phone calls surreptitiously wasn't the only thing I did to ensure the relationship was kept secret. The concealing also involved: never doing anything with Laura within a 100-mile vicinity of the West Midlands; going on arranged marriage meetings to keep up the pretence that I was looking for a good Indian wife; only giving my family my mobile number, so I could pretend to be at home when I wasn't; keeping a flat of my own even though I was more or less living with Laura (just in case the family visited); and never introducing any of my family to any of my friends or vice versa.

It turned out she was calling to tell me: (i) she had thrown up three times; (ii) she was feeling better now; (iii) she was watching *A Room with a View* for the thirtieth time; and (iv) she wished I was there with her. I wished I was there with her too, even more so when I returned to the mayhem of the house. Indeed, unable to face the living room, I decided to have some quiet time in

* The opposite rule applies with female relatives.

the front room, occupying myself by making sure Mum and Dad's luggage met the stipulations of Uzbekistan Airways, the airline they had chosen to risk their lives with.

This was a simple task, complicated only by the fact that while Uzbekistan Airways stipulated that the packed suitcases shouldn't weigh more than 20kg each, for some reason – perhaps it can be traced back to Partition, when many Punjabis were forced to pack everything they owned and flee for their lives – Mum wanted to take the collective belongings of Wolverhampton's 18,000 Sikh residents with her. I plonked her battered suitcase – its age evident from the blue and white Pan Am stickers plastered down the sides – on to the scales, and the needle lurched to an obese 35kg.

Groaning, I re-entered the chaos of the living room to inform her. She was still sitting serenely amid the bedlam, engaged in conversation on the sofa with an auntie I didn't recognize. They appeared to be talking at cross-purposes: auntie-I-didn't-recognize conveying a complex and convoluted message she wanted delivered to the daughter of her great-uncle's second cousin, who lived in a village just outside Jalandhar; my mum describing at length a new pain in her left shoulder. I shouted over the din and waited for a reaction. Some time later – Mum's monologues are like ocean liners, they require time to change direction – she was peering at the scales over the rims of her large owl spectacles.

Standing next to me, she seemed smaller than ever before. Mum has always complained of being old and tired, was doing so when I was four and she was thirty, but she was beginning to look it. I felt a pang of protectiveness, warm feelings blotted out with the ink of irritation when she defended her overpacking with a shrug and the remark: 'But it's the first time we're going to India in two years!' After a pause, she added: 'Besides, there are two of us travelling, *hunna*.'

I bit my tongue. I lose my temper so easily with my family, and can't decide whether this is because my family are simply exasperating, or whether it is because I speak in Punjabi to them

and my Punjabi skills are so poor that I get frustrated at my inability to express myself. * Trying to remember how to breathe, I placed my father's suitcase on the scales. Fifteen kilos. Underweight. Typical, I thought. It's astonishing how little my father owns – in the whole house, the only thing he uses for himself is one cupboard, which rarely contains more than a few jackets, trousers and jumpers. He owns no records, no books, no photos, no documents, no mementos. Anyone sifting through his things would think he didn't exist. And sometimes it is like he doesn't exist: while at five foot ten and fifteen and a half stone there's a lot of him to see, he pads around the house as soundlessly as a cat; he is as spare in his remarks as a monk, and more often than we'd probably admit, we forget he is there.

'Mum, even if you're allowed to combine what you take, which I doubt you are, together you're still ten kilos over.'

'Ten kilos?' I could make out the shape of the ceremonial dagger under her Indian suit. 'What's that? A few bags of sugar.'

I explained that ten kilos was quite a lot actually and that the Uzbeks weren't renowned for their happy-go-lucky attitude. Then I unzipped the case. The contents made me gasp, like I did when I flipped open the back of my first watch. It was hard to believe that so much could have been packed into such a small space. Among the expected clothes and toothbrushes and prayer books and documents, I could see two coconuts, a box of Typhoo teabags, a box of Rice Krispies, a pair of my old Prada trainers, three prayer books, six unsewn women's suits and six men's shirts still packed in cellophane.

* Or it could be that people have different personalities when speaking in different languages. The phenomenon was recently investigated by a psychology doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, who conducted a study monitoring the character traits of 225 Spanish/English bilingual subjects in both the US and Mexico as they responded to questions presented in the two languages. According to *Scientific American Mind* (June/July 2006), she found that when using English, the bilinguals were more extroverted, agreeable and conscientious than when using Spanish. Her conclusion was that people who speak two languages 'feel like a different person depending on which language they are speaking'.

My initial impulse was to ask how on earth my Prada trainers had ended up in the case, but as I could guess why – Mum had decided they'd make a good gift for my cousins in India – and as I know the importance of choosing which battles to pick with my mother, I instead raised the issue of the cellophaned shirts. I recognized them as the currency of Punjabi hospitality. Every time a Punjabi Sikh visits any relative on any special occasion, the host is obliged to give the visitor one of these shirts, plus a woman's suit, plus some cash. The woman's suit is generally unsewn – a section of material out of which a salwar kameez can be made. The amount of cash, for some superstitious reason, is usually £21. Meanwhile, the shirt generally has two characteristics: it is wrapped in plastic and is utterly unwearable. The only thing a recipient can do with such a garment, with its bizarre combination of browns and greys, stripes and pointy collars, is to pass it on as a gift to another relative. By the look of these shirts, they had been in circulation since 1973.

'Mum.' I tried to speak evenly and calmly. '*Why?*'

'I can't visit people empty-handed, can I?'

'But, look . . .' I pointed at a sticker on one of the shirts, and, struggling with my tone and my Punjabi vocabulary, continued. 'Made. In. India. This is like taking *retah* to the . . . what's the word? . . . in English they call it the desert. *Maruthal*? Yes. Like taking *retah* to the *maruthal*. They'd be cheaper to buy out there. Especially if you factor in what you'll have to pay for taking them, because you know you'll be charged for the extra weight . . .'

The mention of a possible fine did the trick. After all, this is the woman who will walk a mile to save 50 pence on a 10kg bag of onions, who will carry the 10kg bag of onions home on a bus and on foot rather than pay for a taxi, who considers carrier bags an extravagance. She allowed me to pluck the shirts and women's suits from the case, but clutched her chest as I did so, as if each abandoned item was a child she was having to give up for adoption. There followed lengthy negotiations over other items, but eventually the job was almost done and I was left to

trim off the final few kilos, with the warning: 'But leave the coconuts – *okay*?'

With Mum gone, my editing became more brutal. Two of the three prayer books went. The teabags and Rice Krispies went. But then, underneath the cereal boxes, I came across something more surreal than even the coconuts: two 2kg boxes of East End Vegetable Margarine – 'made with 100% vegetable oil, no animal fat'. Incredible. Mum had allocated a fifth of her allotted luggage weight, on her flight from Birmingham to Amritsar with a five-hour stop in the horrific-sounding metropolis of Tashkent, to . . . margarine.

I laughed, made a mental note to tell Laura about it later, and tried to think of a possible explanation. Maybe she was planning to make chapattis along the journey to my father's village? Perhaps there was some superstition related to margarine? I flicked through my mental database of Punjabi folklore.

It was good luck to mutter '*Waheguru*' before you embarked on any task.

It was bad luck to wash your hair on a Saturday or a Tuesday.

It was bad luck to look at the moon.

It was bad luck to sneeze when setting off on a journey (a nightmare when you have allergies, like I do).

It was bad luck to step on money.

It was bad luck to leave one shoe resting on another.

It was bad luck to point your feet at a picture of a guru or a prayer book.

It was bad luck to spill milk.

It was good luck to scoop up the placenta of a cat that had just given birth.

It was bad luck for a nephew or niece to be in the same room as an uncle from their mother's side of the family in a thunder-storm.

No. I couldn't remember anything margarine-related . . .

But picking out the boxes with the intention of storming into the living room and remonstrating, I found they were lighter than

I'd expected. They rattled too. Phew. Mum was using the boxes as containers. She hadn't lost the plot completely. I opened one and found it contained medication: Mum's herbal pills for her migraines; non-herbal pills for her arthritis; antidepressants; vitamin supplements; paracetamol. The second one was heavier, and contained five boxes of tablets. The brands emblazoned across them meant nothing to me. But the name on them did. Jagjit Singh. Dad.

I thought this peculiar because my father is rarely ill. He has diabetes, but the condition is managed well. I had a fuzzy memory of him once being prescribed sleeping pills. But I thought that was a temporary thing. Indeed, I couldn't remember a single time that he'd complained of feeling sick. Couldn't recall him ever having a lie down during the day, for that matter. Ferreting around the box for a clue, I found an envelope addressed 'TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN'. I was a 'to whom it concerned', so I opened it. It was a note from Dad's GP, Dr Dutta.

> This patient has been registered on my panel since 1969 and was re-registered in 1993. In fact, he is known to me from 1969. He suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. (He is often confused and cannot communicate facts and his wife has to assist him.) He is on regular treatment of injection and tablets (which he often forgets), and his wife has to keep an eye on his medication. He also suffers from diabetes for which he is having regular check-ups and treatment. He is visiting his family in India and he is going for a short visit.

Blinking at the words, I thought: fuck. *Schizophrenia*.
And then: *Christ*. That's what my sister Puli must have too.