

YOU'RE NOT PROPER

SAMPLE

Tariq Mehmood is an award winning writer and film-maker. His books include *Hand On The Sun* (Penguin); *While There Is Light*, (Comma). He co-directed the award-winning documentary *Injustice*. He currently teaches at the American University of Beirut, in Lebanon and lives in Beirut and Manchester.

S A M P L E

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Kiran

I live in Boarhead West. And on the other side, in Boarhead East, live the scarfies, turbans and beards. In between us, there's a great big graveyard. There used to be a textile mill where the graveyard ended. My granddad worked there. The mill's gone now. The graveyard took it over. It's where the Muslims are buried. In the middle of the graveyard there is a roofless church, with a huge weeping willow tree near it. That's where the Willow Tree Mob, the WTM, hang out.

In this Northern English town of mine, especially during the long summer days like now, when the sun shone well into the night, I was happy. I belonged. I had my gang, and nobody bothered me. But then I woke up and couldn't work out who I was.

It all started a few weeks after my fourteenth birthday. I was hiding from Mum in my bedroom, listening to Lady Gaga on my headphones. I had a poster of her on my wall, in snakeskin, with high-heeled, snakeskin shoes. A great, big, green snake with black stripes, almost as thick as her waist, crossed her legs and went under her back. An orange snake with black patches curled around her neck and slithered across the green one towards her waist, looping around her neck. The poster covered half the wall opposite my bed. It was huge. It was awesome.

It was perfect. It stopped my thoughts from flying out of my bedroom and banging on Donna's head and asking her, 'What did I do to you?'

I turned away from Lady Gaga and pushed my head into my pillow. I had washed my face so many times, trying to clean off the cross that Donna had drawn on my forehead; I could smell the soap from my pillow.

I turned over onto my back. The crack in the ceiling that ran from one end of my bedroom to the other jeered down at me. I heard Mum come out of her room and walk down the stairs. She called out to me when she got to the bottom. I didn't answer her. I could still see an image of Jake, standing under the willow tree, watching, just watching as Donna drew the cross on my forehead. The words she hissed rang in my ears, 'Now you are a Christian.' It hurt when she started but the pain stopped when the other girls laughed. I begged them to stop. But they just laughed and laughed. I wanted to scream but instead I laughed as well.

'Leave me alone,' I said, tossing over again, hoping to chase the memories out of my head. 'You'll feel better in the morning, girl,' I assured myself.

Little did I know how wrong I would be.

It was nearly midday when I got my head out from under my quilt. Mum had knocked on the door a few times, and I had grunted in reply and gone back to sleep. Yesterday felt like a bad dream. I had forgotten to draw the curtains last night. The sun lit up my room. A ray of light shone up on Lady Gaga.

I rubbed my forehead. I could still feel Donna's pen going up and down and across. The memory of yesterday

came flooding back to me. I had wanted to get away from the heavy silence of *it*. Mum and Dad had stopped talking to each other and I had gone to see my gang. The quickest way to get to the old church was through the broken railings of the Muslim side of the graveyard. I could have walked over the railings but didn't. I took a running jump instead, stumbled and fell. As I was getting off the ground, I heard them laugh.

Shamshad Ali, a big, busty scarfie, who goes to the same school as me and who hates my guts, was pointing at me. Laila Khan was sitting next to her on a bench not far from where I had fallen and Aisha Sadiq, wearing a black tracksuit top and bottom was doing stretches touching the ground and standing up again.

My backside was up in the air. I stood up, brushed my skirt and wanted to die. A sharp pain ran down my right leg. I tried not to limp but couldn't help it.

After a bit of jogging on the spot, Aisha said something to Shamshad and then ran towards me, she shouldered me as she ran past and out of the graveyard.

To get to the old church I had to go on the path that ran right past them. As I got closer, Shamshad stood up, blocked my way, and said, 'What's with you here?'

I looked at her ugly face and wanted to say, 'Does it belong to you?' Instead, I smiled sheepishly, and said, 'Nothing!'

I slowed right down thinking, 'How could you just say, *nothing*? Why didn't you tell her, "What do you think? You think you own everything! You think you're better because you're Muslim?"'

'*Kali Gori*,' Shamshad said, sizing me up.

I stopped.

‘You’re white inside aren’t you?’ Shamshad tutted pointing to her arm, ‘but brown like me.’

I kept quiet.

Shamshad came towards me saying, ‘Oreo.’

‘I like Oreos,’ I knew I shouldn’t have said this even as the words came out of my mouth.

Shamshad looked at Laila and the two of them laughed. I didn’t find anything funny but I laughed as well. Just then, I caught a glimpse of Donna and the gang. I waved at them. Shamshad stepped aside and I ran past her.

No one in the gang greeted me when I got to them. Jake stood on his own, under the flowing branches of the tree, kicking the trunk gently. Megan and Chloe stood either side of Donna. Megan had her arms folded across her chest and Chloe played with a twirl of her blond hair. Donna glared at me like I was dirt.

‘Alright, Don?’ I asked.

Megan scratched her back and gaped at Donna.

Donna ignored me and nodded for Megan and Chloe to follow her and walked towards a hedge close to me. I went up to Jake and asked, ‘What’s with everyone?’

He grabbed hold of a small branch in his fist and stripped the leaves off it.

‘Ouch, that must have hurt, Jake,’ I said.

‘It’s our Dex,’ Jake said tossing the leaves to the ground.

Before he could say anything else, Donna pushed Laila through the hedge and came out holding Shamshad by the wrist. Laila stumbled and fell. Ripping the hijab off Shamshad’s head, Donna said, ‘Spying on us, eh?’

‘Oh please don’t,’ Shamshad cried, trying to get the hijab back. ‘Me Dad’ll kill me!’

‘Me Dad’ll kill me!’ Chloe mimicked, snatching the hijab from Donna and waving it just out of Shamshad’s reach.

Donna's impersonation of Shamshad, especially with her Pakistani accent, was so good I couldn't help but laugh. I laughed all the louder remembering what Shamshad had said to me earlier.

'Stop it, Donna,' Jake said, coming out from under the tree.

Donna ignored Jake and kept waving the hijab in front of Shamshad. 'I said give it to her,' Jake said, stepping towards Donna.

Donna stared at Jake for a moment and then crumpled the hijab and threw it into a bush. As Shamshad retrieved her hijab, Laila brushed her clothes with her hands saying, 'You're just a coward at heart, aren't you?'

Donna clenched her fists and turned towards Laila. I had seen her batter people when she was like this. I quickly stepped in between her and Laila, and said, 'That's enough, Donna.'

Donna came up to me, grabbed me by the shoulders, and whispered into my ear, 'Whose side are you on?'

As I stepped away from Donna, I saw Shamshad and Laila run down the path away from us.

When they were out of sight, Donna held up a pretend gun and pointed it towards me, saying, 'Bang! Bang! Bang!'

'What's up with everyone?' I asked.

Donna put her hand into her trouser pocket, pulled out a photograph and squatted onto the ground. She kissed the photograph and started crying.

Megan went up to Donna, took the photograph from her hand, came up to me and held it close to my face. It was of Donna's boyfriend, Jake's brother Dex, in army uniform posing with a gun.

Donna stood up, pointed the pretend gun at me and said, 'You Taliban have got my Dex and if anything happens to him, you're dead. Paki.'

'Let up, Don,' I said.

'You're Muslamic, aren't you, *Karen*?' Megan sneered.

'I'm one of us,' I said, turning to Jake, hoping he would take my side. He just looked at me, a look I had not seen before. Like he was looking at someone he didn't know. Turning to Donna I said, 'And it's Islamic, like, or Muslim, you know.'

'It's all the same, innit?' Donna glared at me and asked, 'You're really one of them aren't you?' My stomach knotted.

'Com' on, say it then,' Megan said poking me in the chest with her finger.

'I'm not a Muslim,' I said and then I laughed falsely. I wanted to say, none of us in WTM believe in God any road, but instead, I said, 'And unlike you, I go to church, at least sometimes.'

Holding a small silver crucifix around her neck, Donna stood up, pointed at me with her fat finger and asked, 'Where's yours?'

Everyone just stared at me. I was frightened and as I turned to leave, Chloe blocked my way saying, 'You're not proper, not like us.' Her freckly, pink face a burning red.

'I am. I'm proper, just like you,' I said choking on my words.

'I'll make you proper,' Donna grabbed my wrist. She towered over me. Megan held me by the shoulders and Chloe pushed my arm up my back. 'Jake!' I called out.

He ignored me and went back under the tree.

I felt Donna's pen digging into my forehead. I don't know how long she rubbed it into my head but she stopped when I noticed Shamshad and a load of hijab-wearing girls, coming towards us. Donna, Megan and Chloe scampered.

The sound of a song from prehistoric times chased yesterday's nightmare out of my mind. Someone was playing *Lovely Day*.

Throwing the quilt off me, I sat up in bed and looked around my bedroom. My school jacket was hanging on the back of my door, not on the floor where I had dumped it. My skirt and socks were in the wash basket and not by the side of my bed. The music outside got louder and I said to Lady Gaga's poster, 'It's not your type.'

My mobile buzzed. I tried to remember where I had put it. I saw it flashing in my jacket pocket. By the time I got to it, it stopped. I had four missed calls from Jake and one text. I read the text: *Sorry for what they did to you.*

Clenching the mobile tightly in my hand, I felt like throwing it against the wall. Instead, I replied to Jake: *U?* Jake replied before I got back into bed: *I did nthng.*

Me: *Yeh nthng.*

I waited for Jake's reply and then I wrote: *Lol.*

And then I sent another message: *A Paki eh. Lol.*

My eyes began to burn and blur as I sent another: *Cross me forehead+hope 2 die. Lol.*

I dropped the mobile on the floor and pulled the quilt over my head. The telephone started buzzing. I picked it up, pulled the quilt over my head and read it. It was Jake. I rejected the call.

He rang again and I answered this time, ‘What you do want?’

‘You know our Dex is missing out there don’t you...’

‘I know now. It’s writ on me for’ead, isn’t it. Beside, I didn’t ask him to go did I...’

‘And you know what I think. I didn’t want him to go. I hate this war. You know I hate it. I told him “I don’t want you to go...”’ I’d had enough of Jake and disconnected the call.

He immediately sent a message: *Sorry.*

I replied: *Lol.*

He replied: *C u @school.*

I replied: *H8 u.*

I sent another: *All of you,* before turning the mobile off.

‘Karen, you’re really one of the gang now, aren’t you, girl?’ I said aloud, taking my head out from under the quilt. ‘Islamic, Muslamic,’ I sniggered as I thought about how I had laughed at the way the gang made fun of the hijab-wearing women. I felt a knot in my stomach as I remembered how I had laughed when Jake had gone up to a man with a long beard and a turban, and said, ‘Run for your wives.’

The knot tightened and I felt the pain coming back in my forehead. I knew now, I never did belong to the WTM, my gang. They never saw me as I saw them. I never saw me as they saw me. I thought I was just me. And who was I? Mixed-race? Oreo? Christian? Muslim?

The image of Donna and the gang scampering at the sight of Shamshad and the hijab-wearing girls flashed through my mind. I felt a pang of jealousy. They knew who they were. They belonged. They believed. They didn’t need to pretend to be anything, they just were. And me, what was I? I certainly wasn’t what I thought I was. What was I

anyway? What a messed up family I had. A Muslim Dad who loved beer and bacon and a Christian Mum who didn't believe in God, but went to church.

I lay in bed thinking back to how Mum used to take me to church on Sundays. How beautiful she looked in her flowery red dresses, with her blonde hair falling on her shoulders and her thin nose. She wore a silver nose stud, which she only put on when going to church, one Dad had bought her when they had first met and the story of which she always mentioned on these days with a sly remark, 'If Man U had not won, I am sure he would never have bought this for me.'

Sometimes, getting ready for church, I would stare at my own nose in the mirror. It was thin, but no matter if I looked at it a thousand times and told myself it looked like hers, it just didn't. And whenever I asked her about this, she would go silent for a moment, as though I had asked her the most difficult question in the world and then squeeze my nose saying, 'It doesn't matter dear. You have the loveliest nose in the whole wide world.'

Mum's chin is beautiful and perfectly round and I hate mine. It's pointy and too long. Mum's eyebrows are so perfect, she never needs to have them plucked and mine grow so fast, one day I'll need a hedge trimmer.

At church she would smile at this person and laugh with that one, her green eyes lighting up each time, like she had not seen them for ages. She once told me she got her eyes from her Dad and blonde hair from her Mum. But I never did see these grandparents of mine. They died before I was born, Mum said. They were upset with my Mum 'cause they didn't want her to marry my Dad. They didn't think much of Pakistanis. But Mum loved my Dad. Even though he's a slob my Dad, Mum still loves him.

The last time I went to church with Mum, Dad was fidgeting about in the living room. As we were about to leave he sniggered, 'And say hello to *Him* and his son.'

Mum cleared her throat, letting out a disapproving, 'Ahm.'

'Stop filling me daughter's head with all this rubbish,' Dad said, as we were about leave the house.

Mum looked at me, grinned, flicked her eyes, shook her head, and then shouted back to Dad, 'Make sure you keep an eye on the chicken, its simmering.'

'Not going to lay an egg now is it?' Dad replied.

In church we stood in our usual place, in the last aisle near the door, holding our hymn books, but as soon as we started singing the first hymn, 'Onward, Christian Soldiers', Mum grabbed my hand and whispered into my ear, 'I hate this one,' and led me out of church. I was glad.

When we got home Dad was stomping about in the kitchen.

'I bet he burnt the chicken,' Mum said to me.

'I turned it off, before you ask,' Dad said coming out of kitchen, rubbing his head in both his hands.

He had curry stains on his white vest, which he had clearly tried to wipe, smudging it all the more.

Mum folded her arms in front of her, smiling one of her *herehegoesagain* sort of smiles and nudged me in the ribs.

As Dad was about to turn into the living room, Mum said, 'Well, Lucky, aren't you going to ask how it was?'

'How was it?' Dad asked, opening the door to the living room. The television was on. And what else would he be watching but football?

‘Aren’t you a bundle of laughs to come back to,’ Mum smirked, following him.

I loved moments like this, Mum and Dad. They were such kids.

‘Aren’t you going to ask your daughter how it was for her?’

‘How was it, Karen?’ Dad asked, placing his elbows on the coffee table, his chin in his hands and his eyes fixed on the television screen.

‘Alright, we left just when the first hymn started,’ I said.

‘Go on sweetheart, sing it for your Dad, you know it by heart.’

‘No.’

‘Go on dear, you know how much I love seeing him like this,’ Mum whispered into my ear and then gave me one of those great big smiles, which meant that if I did what she asked, then there were a lot of brownie points for me.

I started singing: ‘Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, With the cross of Jesus going on before.’

‘Oh God, why this,’ Dad snapped and stood up. He turned around. He was white with rage. His fist clenched.

Mum pushed me behind her saying, ‘Lucky, don’t you bloody well dare.’

I thought Dad was going to hit Mum. I had never seen him like this. He stood there shaking. After a moment, he pointed at the television screen and said, ‘City are at the top of the league.’

I slid out of bed, went into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I was a flat-chested, brown girl with a thin nose. I screamed, thinking, ‘Who are you?’

The girl looking back at me had shoulder-length, curly, black hair. She had black pupils and thick eyebrows. Her arms were like her face, brown with black hair on them. This wasn't me. I must be dreaming, I thought, and slapped myself on the face. I felt numb.

I screamed again, and this time I couldn't stop.

Mum came rushing upstairs, soapsuds dripping off her yellow rubber gloves, 'What's up, dear?' she asked.

I heard Dad jumping out of bed.

I placed my arm next to Mum's white-skinned arm and cried, 'I didn't turn out like *you!*' I cried, 'I'm not white, Mum!'

Mum gave me a hug, kissed me on the head, saying, 'It doesn't matter Karen, dear. I love you all the same.'

'My name's not Karen, is it Mum?'

'Did someone hurt you, Karey?' Mum asked.

'No,' I said. 'It's not Karey, is it Mum?'

Touching my forehead Mum asked, 'What happened here?' 'It's not Karey, is it?' I asked again.

Mum didn't say anything back.

'What happened, Karen?' Dad asked, rubbing his eyes.

I saw Dad's reflection in the mirror. He was wearing a white vest and tartan boxer shorts. The vest was crumpled up over his big belly. His greying chest hair stuck out of the vest towards his chin and stomach. He had really hairy arms and hands. His eyes were bloodshot.

'My name is Kiran, Dad. It's Kiran and not Karen, isn't it?'

Dad looked at my Mum. They exchanged a *whatssheonabout* look. 'Your daughter says she's not white,' Mum said to Dad. I could tell they were having a hard time keeping a straight face.

'Neither am I, sweetie,' Dad said. 'You look just like me.' 'Oh god Dad, I don't want to look like *you,*' I said.

Mum ran her hand across my face, wiping my tears. Dad went back to his bedroom holding his forehead.

Mum gave me a *don'tyouworry* type of a hug. Dad snored. Mum and I looked at each other and laughed. She kissed me on the head and went downstairs. I went to my bedroom and tore the poster of Lady Gaga off the wall; tore it into pieces and shoved it into the bin next to my wardrobe.

Dad snored even louder.

Yep, they're right, I thought. I've got a sort of Muslim Dad.

'Well Dad, you can drink and snore your way out of your religion, but I can't get you out of me.' I said aloud. 'Help me find *me* Dad, I need you...' Just then, Dad let out the loudest snore I had ever heard from him.

I looked at the back of my hand. It was brown. I turned it over and my palm was a lighter brown, with little splotches and three lines curving down the middle. I saw the faces of my gang flash in front of me: Jake looking at me with his blue eyes, Donna glaring at me, her double chin wobbling, the airhead Megan nodding and Chloe shaking her hair out of her face. They didn't see me. I was buried somewhere in a mosque behind my brown skin. Well gang, I thought, I am Kiran Malik and I am what I am. That is what I am and there is no getting away from it for me. 'And what are you?' I asked aloud and I answered myself, 'I am going to find out where I belong.' And I thought of Shamshad. I felt pride thinking about her gang, even though they hated me. They were right to hate me. I hated myself.

I grabbed my CDs and flung them towards the bin, one by one. Some hit their target; others hit the wall. 'What's music got to do with it?' I said to myself. 'And besides, *Karen* spent a lot of her pocket money there.'

I picked up the CDs. Some of the cases had cracked. Putting the CDs back made me feel better. When they were all back in their positions, I pointed at them and said, 'When I'm ready, I'll get rid of some of you, so make sure you behave!'

I touched my forehead. It still hurt, a strange sort of hurt that went deep down, somewhere, somewhere, where I was hiding from myself. Well, Kiran, I thought, whoever is hiding behind this skin is not a Christian.

I don't know how long I fuffed about in my bedroom, when I went down, Mum was wiping invisible dust off our immaculately clean kitchen worktop.

My Mum is not like normal Mums who tell you to tidy up after yourself. Mine has a place for everything and everything has its place, especially on one of those days when the East Boarhead Curry Club come round. That's Mum's new hobby. She teaches our neighbours how to make authentic curry. In the curry club, there's old George from next door, and snooty Elizabeth from number 31, and one or two other dinosaurs.

'Are you feeling better dear?' Mum asked, wiping the inside of the sink.

'Mum, can I talk to you? There's a lot I want to say.'

Mum rinsed the cloth and replied, wiping the worktop, 'Course you can love.'

Mum stopped, let out a sigh, rinsed the cloth and said, hanging it on a tap to dry, 'Why did you take me to church, Mum?' I cried wiping tears with the back of my hand.

'I didn't want you to turn out like me or your Dad, dear,' Mum said letting out a deep sigh. 'If I had faith, this pain inside me, maybe it wouldn't hurt so much, maybe it wouldn't hurt. Sometimes it hurts so bad, I

just don't want to live, just can't take it anymore. Oh my love, I should have held you tighter. How could I have let you go?'

'What pain, Mum?' I wanted to ask. 'Held who Mum? Please Mum, tell me what is this secret that you and Dad are keeping from me, this thing that comes like a terrifying shadow of silence over our house?' She would never tell me and I was always too scared to ask. Whatever it was I had to find out, without this I couldn't find me. I didn't know then that my search to find me would destroy my family and my world.

She looked at me with eyes that hid behind a coldness that came on when *it* took hold of her, but today, her eyes were rolling, as if she was fighting to stave *it* off, now winning, now losing. Her face went pale, ghost-like and then her colour returned.

'I never want to go to church again, Mum. I don't feel Christian, I just don't. I don't know what I want but I don't want to be what I am. I hate my gang now, Mum. I don't want to be like them. I'm something else. I want to have faith like you used to say. And I've decided I want to be a Muslim. That's how I feel, Mum.'

Mum untied her stripy blue apron, took it off her and said, 'That's nice dear.' I suddenly felt a rush of hatred for Mum and said choking on my words, 'Don't you care what happens to me, Mum?' 'Of course I do, I love you.'

'Is that it? That's all you have to say?'

Hanging the apron on a hook on the back door, Mum turned around and gave me a look, which said, *you're just stupid kid*. 'If you want to try Islam for a while, that's OK, sweetheart.'

‘Oh Mum, it’s not a game. I’m really, really serious,’ I cried.

Mum snapped out of her look, kissed me on the cheeks, held my face in her hands and said, ‘I love you because I love you for being you.’ Hugging Mum I thought of me walking into school wearing a hijab. I knew they were going to laugh at me when they first saw me at school wearing a headscarf. But I didn’t care. I was going to wear it. That was how it was going to be.

Pulling away from me, Mum said, ‘I think you should talk to your Dad.’

‘I know, Mum.’ I said, ‘Love you.’

Dad was in his usual place in the living room.

‘How do I become a Muslim?’ I asked Dad walking into the living room. ‘Yes pet, you can. Take a fiver from me wallet,’ Dad was glued to a football match he was watching on television. ‘You don’t know what I need Dad,’ I said. ‘Alright, pet...’

‘I’m not your pet, Dad,’ I said, gritting my teeth.

‘Alright, you can have a tenner,’ he said, waving his hand in the air.

Mum stood behind me. I stomped over and stood in between the telly and Dad, and said, ‘How do I become a Muslim?’

He looked at me in bewilderment, like I had just asked him the most difficult question on earth. He looked at my Mum and they exchanged a *whatnow* type of look.

‘You don’t know, do you Dad?’ I said.

Dad shuffled his bum on the settee. ‘You don’t do you?’ I repeated.

‘He doesn’t,’ Mum said. ‘His real God’s football, really. And if Mohammed the Prophet played for Manchester United, then you’d have known everything, wouldn’t you, Lucky?’ Mum jibed.

‘Less of the tongue, Sharon. And since when did you start believing in all that Holy Mother stuff?’ Dad said. ‘Apart from Guinness, the only decent thing you Catholics have come up with is Man U.’

‘You really don’t know a thing, do you Dad?’

He turned the television off, rubbed his hand through his thick curly hair, and said, ‘Course I do.’

Pointing to the sofa opposite him, he said, ‘Sit there.’

I did. Mum came and sat next to me. I wanted Mum to say something, to say no, she had tried to turn me into a Christian. Then I would tell her what was really, really on my mind but she just stayed silent. I said to her, ‘You’re not bothered what I become are you?’

Mum and Dad looked at each coldly, like they were about to fight. Like *it* was going to start right now and Mum would turn into a ghost. I didn’t care. Mum took a deep breath and sighed, ‘I just want you to be happy, Kiran.’

‘You’re lying,’ I said. ‘You’ve always lied to me.’ ‘All you have to do is believe in Allah,’ Dad said.

‘That’s just God.’

‘Yeh,’ said Dad.

‘I can teach you more later.’

Mum put her hand in front of her mouth. I couldn’t tell if she was laughing or crying.

‘But what do I have to do to become a Muslim?’

‘You have to recite the *Kalmas*,’ Dad said, ‘as a start, like.’

Dad recited the *Kalma*, ‘*La ilaha, illallah, Muhammad ur Rasoolullah*.’ He looked a bit unsure of himself, and said, ‘It means: There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is his prophet.’

‘Are you sure, Dad?’

‘Yeh, pretty much. It’s something like that.’ Mum left the room.

I tried to repeat what Dad said but kept forgetting.

Dad went back to the television, and I left to buy my first hijab. As I was leaving the house, Mum stood by the front door and looked at me.

‘What is it Mum?’

She just looked at me with eyes that seemed to flicker between different worlds, one where she saw me and the other where I couldn’t see her. Her blonde hair was held back by a black ribbon. It was the first time I noticed streaks of grey in her hair. The lines on her forehead twitched. She didn’t look like the strong woman she was, always knowing what had to be done and when.

‘Dinner’ll be ready when you get back, Kiran,’ she said.

It was bright and sunny outside, with a slight chill in the air. A few drops of rain came down out of a cloudless sky. Our neighbour, old George sat in his front garden, with Bruno his dog, near him. I waved to him and George nodded to me.

Getting out of our gate, I said a loud ‘Hi’ to Elizabeth, our other neighbour. She was coming towards me, holding the leash of her poodle, which was a few steps behind her, lifting its leg near a broken street lamp. She lifted her chin to make sure I knew she had been to the hairdresser and smiled back at me. I stepped onto the road. There were so many unfilled holes in it nowadays, ever since the last freaky cold winter a couple of years back, when, after the snow melted, the tarmac had cracked, so everyone drove really carefully.

I turned left and crossed the road close to where a car had been burnt. Some older boys were sitting in the carcass, taking turns smoking a large, hand-rolled cigarette and eyeing me. I felt like sticking my finger up

at them, and telling them to go get a job, instead of doing this all day. But there weren't any jobs round here.

They were still eyeing me up so I quickened my pace. I didn't really know where I was going to get my hijab from, but there were plenty of shops in East Boarhead, I was sure to find one. The quickest way to get there was through the graveyard, but I didn't want to bump into anyone and went the long way round, along St. Enoch's Road, past boarded-up shops and derelict houses with broken windows. The road snaked around the cemetery and changed into Market Road as it got closer to the city centre.

At the junction where the new road began there were a group of shops I hadn't noticed before. I stopped outside the window of a shop called 'Cluck-Cluck'. A shop worker, a small white woman, was dressing a female mannequin in blue lacy underwear. The dummy was wearing a shiny, white hijab. I was giggling at the sight of the mannequin when a tall woman dressed in flowing black robes stopped close to me and looked at the same mannequin. Apart from her eyes, everything else about her was covered. She even wore black gloves. She walked into the shop and I went in after her.

Inside the shop, she went up to the mannequin that was being dressed and felt the underwear. As she was doing this, the shop worker pointed to a stand and said, 'They're over there.'

The woman in black went over to the stand, picked some underwear and went to the counter to pay.

I went to the back of the store, chose a couple of hijabs from a pile in a wooden basket and stood behind the woman in black to pay. She turned round to me and said, 'And less of those dirty looks, young lady.'

When I got home with my hijabs, the East Boarhead Curry Club, pans in hand, were walking into our house. Old George, with his violin case dangling off his shoulder was at the back. Once they were in, I carefully closed the door and tried to sneak upstairs, unnoticed. I avoided the first step, as it squeaked, and had just put my foot on the next one when Mum called, 'Kiran, sweetheart, can you come here?'

I pretended not to hear her and took another step.

'Come on love, I know you heard me,' Mum called again. I really dreaded moments like this.

'Mum, please, can't Dad do it this time,' I yelled back. 'No one trusts his judgement,' Mum replied.

I stomped into the kitchen, folded my arms in front of me, my shopping bag still in hand and hissed, 'What?!'

Old George as ever was in his white trainers, yellow shorts and a matching, sleeveless sweatshirt. He had a great, big, proud smile across his ugly, bony face. He tapped on his creation, which was in an oblong, silver pan. Next to George stood Elizabeth, her ridiculous brown hat with small plastic flowers still on her head and whatever she was cooking in a reddish, brown baking bowl, whose lid was in the shape of a flower. And next to Elizabeth was a flat, round woman, in a fading, black skirt and a fading, black blouse. I didn't know her name but everyone called her the 'bulldog' and kept away from her. Her pink, chubby face was all blotchy. Each time she moved, the flab under her chin wobbled. She stood behind a tall, stainless steel pan. Mum was leaning against the sink. Someone's cat was perched outside in the garden behind Mum.

'Please Mum, not again,' I pleaded, with my stomach turning at the thought of what was about to befall me.

'Your Mum's such a good curry cooker, she is,' George said rubbing his tongue over what few teeth he had left. He touched the lid of his pan and added, 'I've made a special doo peeza, I have.'

I trembled.

'You know that dish don't you?' George asked me and then he answered himself, 'course you do.'

'It's do peeaza, George,' Mum corrected him.

'I've forgotten exactly what it means, like,' George said scratching his shiny, bald head.

'Two onions,' Mum said.

'Two onions!' George said, raising his silver eyebrows, his clean-shaven face twitching. 'Oh, dear.'

'Double onion, you idiots,' Dad shouted from the living room. 'Double Onion!' George repeated, a look of bewilderment on his face. 'I hate onions, Mum, you know I hate them,' I protested.

'Oh my,' George sighed, lifting the lid off his pan.

I could have just died at the sight of his creation. It was something sickly reddish yellow, with lumps in it.

'I thought it meant double vindaloo,' George said meekly. 'What's that?' I snapped.

Mum put her hand to her mouth, her eyes laughing.

'Cornflake do peeaza, that's what it's meant to be, like,' he said. 'You daft git,' Elizabeth said lifting the lid of her pan, 'you can't make Cornflake curry. I made chicken tikka masala.'

The only way you could tell that Elizabeth's creation was once a chicken was from the burnt drumsticks, which were almost completely black, floating in a gooey, brown sauce.

I dropped my arms to my sides and yelped. I wanted to leg it out of the kitchen when Mrs Bulldog stirred and lifted the lid of her pan. A rich aroma of freshly chopped coriander mixed with the smell of spices and lentils and

filled the kitchen. She smiled and said in a soft voice, 'I used real ghee and lots of fresh garlic for the garnish. I think you should taste mine first, love.'

'It all looks delicious, you know,' I said throwing Mum a pleading look.

Mum flicked her eyebrows and nodded, freeing me from my ordeal. Just then, Mrs Bulldog put her nose up at George and said, 'I bet you wouldn't dare feed it to your dog, George.'

'I already have and he loved it,' George interjected.

They all burst out laughing and I bolted out of the kitchen, thanking my lucky stars.

I had hardly got into my bedroom when I heard Mum running upstairs. I dived onto my bed and quickly got under the quilt, but Mum hadn't come for me and went into her own room. Just then, George starting playing a jig on the violin downstairs. I cringed and shouted from under the quilt, 'Oh, God save me!'

'You coming, love?' Mum said, entering into my room.

I kept my head under the quilt and didn't answer. Downstairs, the violin was now being accompanied by clapping and the muffled curses of Dad.

'Come on, love,' Mum said.

I lifted the quilt off my head and there was Mum, wearing a green dress with black stockings and her black dancing shoes; her hair was neatly brushed and was held in place by a green hairband across her forehead. 'What's up, Mum?'

'It's such a lovely day...'

'But what's with the dancing?' I interrupted.

Holding her hand straight by her sides, Mum started dancing, her feet beating a perfect rhythm on my bedroom floor.

Mum looked like a little girl skipping. She danced out of my room and down the stairs. I followed, I just had to see what Dad made of all this. It was a match day.

He was standing by the door of the living room tapping his feet.

Elizabeth was twirling round and the flab on Mrs Bulldog was doing a frenzied dance to the tune of George's jig.

'Can't you play anything other than Morrison's jig, George?' Dad asked.

George flicked his eyebrows and carried on playing. He suddenly looked years younger.

In the morning, Mum left for work at Asda. She did the early shift on Mondays. I lay in bed a bit longer than I should have. I kept thinking about what everyone would say at school. I jumped up, got dressed, put my headscarf on, ran downstairs, wolfed down some Cornflakes and bolted out of the door.

On the bus to school, a few girls gave me the evil eye, but I ignored them. This was the first time I wasn't worried about meeting Shamshad. I was going to tell her I knew the *Kalma* and I was sorry for everything that had happened in the past. This was the new me and I'd like us to be friends.

I got off the bus reciting the *Kalma* to myself when she jumped out of the old warehouse. I was startled, but that was nothing compared to what I felt when I realised what I had done.

I looked down at my legs and realised what Shamshad was looking at: me, wearing a black hijab, a white shirt, a school tie, a black blazer, a short, black skirt, and white socks. I turned round to run back home and ran into Aisha Sadiq. Laila was close by.

‘Push her to me, Laila,’ Shamshad said.

Laila didn’t touch me.

‘Whose side are you on, Laila?’ Shamshad asked, grabbing me.

Shamshad called everyone towards her, and I was trapped in the middle of a circle. Their mouths were wide open. I dropped my arms by my side. They were really heavy. She spun me round. I kept thinking, ‘You deserve everything you get, Kiran.’ The whole world was laughing at me. And so it should. Shamshad was pointing her mobile phone at me. Mixed up rubbish, that’s all I was, trash. You’re right Shamshad, and you’re right Laila, and every one of you. How could I do this to you?

I don’t know what happened. All of a sudden everyone just vanished. I turned around and walked, not knowing where I was going.