

A *Granta* Best Young British Novelist 2013

Sunjeev
Sahota
The
Year
of the
Runaways

'All you can do is surrender, happily, to its power'

Salman Rushdie

THE
YEAR OF
THE RUNAWAYS

SUNJEEV SAHOTA

PICADOR

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WINTER

1. ARRIVALS

Randeep Sanghera stood in front of the green-and-blue map tacked to the wall. The map had come with the flat, and though it was big and wrinkled, and cigarette butts had once stubbed black islands into the mid Atlantic, he'd kept it, a reminder of the world outside. He was less sure about the flowers, guilty-looking things he'd spent too long choosing at the petrol station. Get rid of them, he decided, but then heard someone was parking up outside and the thought flew out of his head.

He went down the narrow staircase, step by nervous step, straightening his cuffs, swallowing hard. He could see a shape through the mottled glass. When he opened the door Narinder Kaur stood before him, brightly etched against the night, coat unbuttoned despite the cold. So, even in England she wore a kesri. A domed deep-green one that matched her salwaar kameez. A flank of hair had come loose from under it and curled about her ear. He'd forgotten how large, how clever, her eyes were. Behind her, the taxi made a U-turn and retreated down the hill. Narinder brought her hands together underneath her chin – 'Sat sri akal' – and Randeep nodded and took her suitcase and asked if she might follow him up the stairs.

He set her luggage in the middle of the room and, straightening right back up, knocked his head against the bald light bulb, the wire flexing like a snake disturbed from its tree. She was standing at the window clutching her handbag with both hands.

'It's very quiet,' Randeep said.

'It's very nice. Thank you.'

'You have been to Sheffield before?'

'My first time. What's the area called again?'

'Brightside,' he said.

She smiled, a little, and gazed around the room. She gestured towards the cooker.

'We used to have one like that. Years ago.'

Randeep looked too: a white stand-alone thing with an overhanging grill pan. The stains on the hob hadn't shifted no matter how hard he'd scrubbed. 'There is a microwave, too,' he said, pointing to the microwave. 'And washing machine. And toaster also, and kettle and sofa-set . . . carpet . . .' He trailed off, ridiculous to himself. 'The heater works fine. It's included in the rent. I'm sorry there's no TV.'

'I'm used to it.' She looked to the wall. 'Nice map.'

'Oh. Thank you. I thought . . .' What did he think? 'I want to visit every continent of the world.' She smiled politely, as if he'd said he wanted to visit the moons of Jupiter. 'It's one of my dreams.'

There were only two other rooms. The bathroom was tiny, and the pipes buffalo-

groaned when he forced the taps. In the centre of the greenish tub the hand-held shower lay in a perfect coil of chrome, like an alien turd.

‘And this is your private room,’ he said, opening the second door.

She didn’t step inside. There wasn’t much to see: a double bed, a rail for her clothes, a few wire coat hangers. Some globs of Blu-Tack on damp, loose wallpaper. There was a long, hinged mirror straight ahead which they found themselves staring into, him standing behind her. She didn’t even reach his shoulders. It was cold and he noticed her nipples showing through her tunic. Frowning, she pulled her coat shut and he averted his eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘It’s too small. And dirty. I’ll look for something else tomorrow.’

‘It’s fine. Honestly. Thank you for finding it for me.’

‘Truly?’ He exhaled relief. ‘There is a bus from the bottom of the hill that can take you into town.’

‘And that hill will keep me in shape.’

‘And this isn’t an area with lots of apneh.’ Her lips parted, but she didn’t speak. ‘Like you asked,’ he reminded her. ‘And the gurdwara’s only a few stops away. In Burngreave. I can show you? If you like?’

‘We’ll see,’ she said. ‘It’s late. Can I call you tomorrow?’

‘Of course. But you should know that the flat downstairs is empty. So no disturbances.’ He smiled, pleased with himself. ‘Yes, this flat was a special find. Especially at this time of year, it is not easy. We were lucky.’ That ‘we’ was problematic and knocked him off balance. ‘But I should go,’ he said hastily. He took up his red tracksuit top and zipped it to his chin, pushing the short sleeves up to his elbows.

She walked him to the stairs, saying, ‘You should probably bring a few of your things and leave them here.’

He nearly blurted out that his suitcase was just outside, in the gennel. ‘I will bring some. But I will telephone you first.’ He wouldn’t be one of those boys who turned up at a girl’s house unannounced and unexpected. Then he remembered about the meter tokens. ‘The light.’ He pointed down the stairs. ‘There is a meter underneath. It takes the pink electric tokens. Not the white ones. The pink ones. There is a shop around the corner. The aunty there sells them.’

She looked confused. ‘Do I have to collect these tokens? Like vouchers?’

‘Collect them from the shop, yes. Only be careful you put the cards in straight. Would you like me to show you? The meter?’

She’d never heard of electricity being pink, or white for that matter, but she was tired from the journey and said she really did just want to sleep. ‘But thanks for everything, Randeep.’

She used his name, without ‘ji’ and to his face, which hurt him a little. But this was England. ‘No problem. And do not worry. You won’t need any for a while yet. I put lots in before you came.’

She thanked him again, then – perhaps out of nerves, needing her fingers occupied – retightened her chunni over her turban and under her chin. It made her eyes look bigger, somehow.

Randeep opened his wallet and held out some notes to her. ‘Next month’s.’ He was

looking away. He hated doing it like this. At least when she lived in London it had gone by post. She too seemed embarrassed to take it.

He said goodbye. Halfway down the stairs he stopped, looked round. 'I hope you don't mind, but is everything all right? You are not in any trouble?'

'Oh, I just need to rest. I'll be fine tomorrow. Can I call you?'

'Of course you may. Of course.' He smiled, then went down the remaining steps and opened the door. He nodded a final goodbye. She leaned forward out of the doorway, arms folded. She looked uncertain.

Randeep held his suitcase across his lap on the bus ride home. Of course she wasn't going to ask him to stay. It was stupid of him to have thought she might. If anything, he wondered now if she'd seemed eager for him to leave her alone. He spat coarsely into his hankie and worked out a bit of dirt on the brown leather of his case, which still gleamed, in spite of the coach to Delhi, the flight to London, and now three months spent wedged on the roof of that disgusting wardrobe.

He got off right outside the house and saw the grey-blue light of the TV flickering behind the closed curtains. He'd hoped they'd be asleep by now. He went the long way round the block, stopping off at the Londis for some of those fizzy cola-bottle sweets.

'You are leaving?' the singh asked. The suitcase.

'I was helping a friend move only.'

The TV was still on when he got back. Randeep turned the key gradually, wincing at the loud final snap of the metal tongue, and went straight up to his room on the second floor. He sat there polishing his workboots with toilet roll and after that he changed the blanket on his mattress, taking care with the corner-folds. Then he lay down, the darkness roomy around him, and with no real enthusiasm reached for the toilet roll once more.

It was near midnight when the clanging of the gate woke him up. He hadn't meant to fall asleep afterwards and the scrunch of sticky toilet paper was still in his hand.

Downstairs, he went through the beaded curtain and found Avtar gulping straight from the tap. The back of his uniform read Crunchy Fried Chicken. Randeep stood in the doorway, weaving one of the long strings in and out of his fingers. There was a calendar of tropically naked blonde women on the wall by the fridge. Someone would have to get a new one soon.

Avtar turned off the tap, though it continued to drip. 'Where is everyone?'

'Asleep.'

'Did someone do the milk run?'

'Don't think so.'

Avtar groaned. 'I can't do everything, yaar. Who's on the roti shift?'

Randeep shrugged. 'Not me.'

'I bet it's that new guy. Watch, they'll be bhanchod burnt again.'

Randeep nodded, sighed. Outside the window, the moon was full. There were no stars though, just an even pit of black, and if he altered the focus of his eyes, he saw his vague reflection. He wondered what his father would be doing.

'Do you think Gurpreet's right? About what he said this morning?'

'What did he say this morning?'

'You were there.'

‘I was asleep.’

‘He said it’s not work that makes us leave home and come here. It’s love. Love for our families.’ Randeep turned to Avtar. ‘Do you think that’s true?’

‘I think he’s a sentimental creep. We come here for the same reason our people do anything. Duty. We’re doing our duty. And it’s shit.’

Randeep turned back to the window. ‘Maybe.’

‘And I asked bhaji, by the way, but there’s nothing right now.’

The job, Randeep remembered. He was relieved. He’d only mentioned it during a low moment, needing solidarity. One job was enough. He didn’t know how Avtar managed two.

‘How’d the thing with the girl go?’

‘Nothing special,’ Randeep said.

‘Told you,’ and Avtar picked up his satchel from where it rested against the flour barrel. He took out his manila college folder and wriggled up onto the worktop.

Randeep had learned by now that when Avtar didn’t want to be disturbed he just ignored you until you went away. He let the beads fall through his hands and was turning to go when Avtar asked if it was true that Gurpreet hit him this morning in the bathroom queue.

‘It was nothing,’ Randeep said.

‘He’s just jealous, you know.’

Randeep waited – for sympathy? for support? – but Avtar curled back down to his book, trying out the words under his breath, eyes glinting at the end of each line. Avtar’s posture reminded Randeep of the trips he used to make between college and home, his own textbook open on his lap.

In his room, he changed into his tracksuit bottoms, annoyed he’d forgotten to warm them against the oven, then slid inside the blanket. He knew he should try to sleep. Five hours and he’d have to be up again. But he felt restless, suddenly and inexplicably optimistic for the first time in months. Years? He got up and moved to the window and laid his forehead against the cool pane. She was somewhere on the other side of the city. Somewhere in that dark corner beyond the lights, beyond that pinkish blur he knew to be a nightclub called the Leadmill. He wondered if she’d noticed how he’d spent each evening after work scrubbing the doors and descaling the tiles and washing the carpet. Maybe she was thinking about all he’d done right now as she unpacked her clothes and hung them on the rail. Or maybe she’d decided to have a bath instead and was now watching TV, thick blue towels wrapped around her head and body the way British girls do. His forehead pressed harder against the glass. He was being ridiculous again. There was no TV, for one thing. But he couldn’t lose the sense that this was a turning point in his life, that she’d been delivered to him for a reason. She’d called him in her hour of need, hadn’t she? He wondered whether she’d found his note yet, the rose-scented card leaning inside the cupboard above the sink. He cringed and hoped she hadn’t. At the time, in the petrol station, he’d convinced himself it was the sophisticated thing to do. Now, he exhaled a low groan and closed his eyes and forced himself to remember each carefully written word.

Dear Narinderji, I sincerely hope you are well and are enjoying your new home. A beautiful flat for a beautiful person. And a new start for us both maybe. If I may be of any assistance please do not hesitate to make contact. I am at your service day and

night. In the interim, may I be the first to wish you, in your new home, a very Happy New Year (2003).

Respectfully yours, Randeep Sanghera.

It was gone 2 a.m. and Avtar was still sitting up on the counter. He'd long set aside his college notes. His ankles were crossed and the heels of his trainers lightly tapped the cupboards. He could feel his eyes start to close, a shallow dark descending. He jolted himself upright. 'Come on, come on,' he said, half to himself, half to Bal, the guy he was waiting for. He checked his phone. He recounted the money. He had enough, had earned enough. Then his phone rang, too loud for that time of night. It was them.

'So we come to yours?'

'No, no. Keep to the gardens.' He didn't want them knowing where he lived.

He zipped up his jacket and sneaked out of the house and down onto Ecclesall Road, heading away from the city. The shabby restaurants were all closed, the pound shops shuttered. He liked this road in the day, a place of business and exchange, a road that seemed to carry on into the hills. Tonight, though, there was only a scrappy silence, and the city at his back, the countryside glowering ahead. He gripped the top of the zip between his lips, flicking it with the end of his tongue, and breathed out puffs of air that hung briefly in the cold. He turned up towards the Botanical Gardens and saw them sitting in their rich black BMW, faces flooded by the car's interior light. The engine was still gunning. Bal got out, the eldest of the three brothers, all long leather and shaped facial hair. The gold ring on his right hand was the size and shape of a fifty-pence piece. Avtar nodded, jogged to meet him.

'Why so late? I have work soon.'

'True what they say, man. Fuckin' cold up north.'

'You were held up?'

'By another one of you chumps. In Birmingham. He won't be doing that again.'

Avtar handed the money over. 'It's all there. So tell your uncle not to bother my family. Do you understand?'

Bal counted it, note by note. 'Good. It's just my share, then.'

'Arré, go fuck a cow. I can't pay extra every—'

He slapped Avtar. 'It's two o'clock in the bastard morning, I'm in the arse-end of nowhere and you want to argue the fucking toss?'

Hand on his cheek, Avtar looked over to the two in the car, the baseball bat he knew they kept in their boot, then back at Bal's heavy face. The height, which stretched the fat out of Bal's body, couldn't do the same for his slabbed cheeks and jaw. He took three more notes from his pocket and threw them across. 'If we were in India, bhaji, I swear I'd break all your bhanchod bones.'

Bal feigned confusion. 'What would I be doing in India?' Then he laughed and pinched Avtar's cheek, as if he were a child.

Three hours of sleep later, Avtar forced his stiff second pair of socks up over the first and pulled on his oversized workboots. He stuffed the sides with kitchen towel until they fitted. Then he picked up his rucksack, his hard hat and reflector jacket, and locked the door quickly. He was late.

He and Randeep were the last of the twelve to come down the stairs. They mumbled

a quick prayer over the smoking joss stick and rushed out. Avtar didn't mind: it meant they got the nearest waiting point. The street lamps were still on, spreading their winter yellow. The chill was sharp as needles.

'So cold, yaar,' Randeep said, and tucked his gloved hands into his armpits.

They turned onto Snuff Mill Lane and waited beside a twiggy hedge near the Spar. The National Lottery sign reverberated in the wind. Any van pulling up would look like it was only delivering the day's newspapers.

'There used to be a flour mill here,' Randeep said. 'Hundreds of years ago. I read about it.'

'Yeah,' Avtar said, too tired to really talk.

They took out their Tupperware boxes and peeled off the lids. Avtar held up one of his chapattis: a brittle misshapen thing full of burn holes. 'No joke, I genuinely think my cock could do better.'

Randeep smeared the chilli gobi around his roti, then rolled it all up like a sausage.

The white Transit arrived and they climbed into the back and squeezed onto the wheel arches. The others were already in there, eating, or asleep on the blankets that covered the corrugated floor. Randeep squashed his bag under his knees, behind his legs. Opposite, Gurpreet was drawing on his roll-up and looking right at him.

'Did you wear that jacket all the way down the street?' Gurpreet asked, rocking side to side. 'Do you bhanchod want to get seen?'

'I was in a hurry.'

'In a hurry to get us all caught, eh, little prince?'

He'd have to take some of his clothes over to her soon. He concentrated on that.

'So what was she like, then?' Gurpreet asked. 'Our Mrs Randeep Singh?'

Randeep pretended not to hear.

'Oy! I asked you something.'

'Nothing. Like any girl.'

'Oh, come on. Tall, slim, short? What about . . . ?' He mimed breasts.

Frowning, Randeep said he didn't notice, didn't care to notice.

'And she didn't let you stay?'

'I didn't want to.'

Gurpreet laughed. 'Maybe one day you will.'

'Leave him alone,' Avtar said, strongly, eyes still closed.

'Where are we going today?' Randeep asked quickly.

Vinny – boss, driver – spoke up: 'A new job, boys. We're off to Leeds.'

They all groaned, complaining about how late they'd be back.

'Hey, ease up, yeah? Or maybe I need to get me some freshies who actually want the work?'

Someone in the back closed his fist and made the wanker sign, a new thing that had been going round the house recently.

The proposed hotel site was directly behind the train station. A board so white it sparkled read, *Coming soon! The Green: a Luxury Environmentally Friendly Living Space and Hotel in the City of Leeds*. But right now it was just a massive crater, topsoil scraped off and piled in a pyramid to one side. At least all the bushes and trees had been cleared.

They assembled in the corner of the station car park, looking down onto the site. Another vanload joined them. Mussulmans, Randeep guessed. Bangladeshis even, by the look of them. A man approached, his hard hat askew on his big pink head. He went straight to Vinny and the two spoke and then shook hands.

‘All right, boys,’ Vinny said. ‘This is John. Your gaffer. Do what he says and you’ll be fine. I’ll pick you up at seven.’

The van reversed and Vinny left. Randeep moved closer to Avtar: if this John was going to pair them off then he wanted to be with him. But John began by handing out large pieces of yellow paper, faintly grid-lined. Avtar took one, studied it. Randeep peered down over his shoulder.

‘These are the project plans,’ John said, walking back and forth. ‘As you can see there’s lots to do, lots to do, so let’s just take it one step at a time, yes? You understand?’

‘We could do this with our eyes closed,’ Avtar muttered. ‘Saala bhanchod.’

‘Oy! No, bhaji!’ John said, bursting into Panjabi, pointing at Avtar with the rolled-up paper. ‘I no longer fuck my sister, acha?’

Avtar stared, open-mouthed, and then everyone was laughing.

They put on their hats, smoothing their hair out of the way, chose tool-belts and made for the footings stacked in neat angles on the wooden pallets. John called them back. He wanted stakes in first.

‘But it will take twice as long,’ Avtar said.

John didn’t care. ‘We’re doing this properly. It’s not one of your shanty towns.’

So Avtar and Randeep piled a wheelbarrow with the stakes and bumped on down to their squared-off section of the site. ‘You put in the stakes and I’ll follow with the footings,’ Avtar said.

Randeep dropped onto one knee and held a stake to the ground. With a second glance towards the plan, he brought down his hammer. ‘Like last time?’ He wasn’t going to fall for that again.

‘It’ll take all week just to do this,’ Avtar said. ‘It’s as big as one of their bhanchod football grounds.’

At lunchtime, they found their backpacks and joined the others sitting astride a large tunnel of aluminium tubing, newly exposed from the dig. Beside them, a tarpaulin acted as a windbreak. They slid off their helmets. Their hair was sopping.

Afterwards one or two pulled on their coats and turned up their collars and sank into a sleep. The rest decided on a cricket match to stay warm. They found a plank of wood for a bat and several had tennis balls handy. They divided into Sikhs and Muslims, three overs each. Gurpreet elected himself captain and won the toss. He put the Muslims in to bat.

‘No slips, but an edge is automatic out,’ he said, topknot swinging as he ran back to bowl.

He was knocked for fourteen off the first over, the last ball screaming for a six. Gurpreet watched it arc above his head and land somewhere in the car park.

‘Arré, yaar, there’s something wrong with that ball.’

‘Right,’ Avtar said. ‘The fact that it is being bowled by you.’

Randeep laughed but when Gurpreet glowered he fell silent.

They needed thirty-one to win and came nowhere near, with Avtar going for glory

and getting caught, and puffing Gurpreet easily run out.

‘These Mussulmans,’ he said, throwing aside the bat. ‘Cheating is in their nature.’

John approached and for the first time Randeep noticed his gentle limp.

‘Bohut good work, men, bohut good work. But come on, jaldi jaldi, it looks like you’ll have it all khetum in no time.’

Avtar and Randeep stowed their lunchboxes and trudged down the site. Another six hours to go.

Vinny was late that evening.

‘Some of us have other jobs to get to, yaar,’ Avtar said.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ Vinny said. ‘I had to go to Southall.’ He was forced to turn left.

‘Crazy one-way system in this city.’

‘Is there work in Southall?’ Avtar asked, up and alert.

‘Hm? No, no. The opposite. I’ve found another one of you slackers. You’ll have to make some more room back there.’

No one spoke. It was nothing new. They came and went all the time.

Soon they hit the motorway. Someone asked if Vinny Sahib had heard anything about any raids? Because one of those Mussulmans, you see, he was telling that the raids have started again.

Vinny whistled a single clean note while shaking his head. ‘I’ve not heard a thing. Why would I? Far as I’m concerned you’re all legit, ain’t you? You all showed me your papers. Nowt to do with owt, me.’

The van continued in the slow lane, the tyres rumbling away under Randeep, a vibration that felt vacantly erotic. Then something made him sit up. At first he thought it was rain but it was too slow and gentle to be that. Then he understood, and touched his fingertips to the back window. ‘Mashallah,’ someone said, as Randeep felt them all brimming up behind him, pressing and jostling to stare at the sky, at the globe of tumbling snow around each street light.

At the house, Avtar persuaded Vinny to drop him off at the chip shop, leaving Randeep to eat alone in his room. Soon he was in bed, too exhausted to call Narinderji, too exhausted even to sleep, and he was still awake when he thought he heard a door sliding shut, like a van’s side door, and the downstairs bell being rung. He swiped clear a patch in the window – Vinnyji again? – and went down the first flight of stairs. Gurpreet and the others had edged into the hallway, shushing one another.

‘It’s Vinnyji,’ Randeep called down but no one seemed to hear him.

Gurpreet bent to the letter box, just as Vinny’s voice came through, shouting that he was freezing his fucking kecks off out here. Quickly, the door was opened and he hurried in. He was hunched over, looking shorter than usual, and each needle of his spiked hair was topped with a bobble of snow. Behind him was someone new.

Randeep joined them in the front room, glancing around for Avtar. The others were all there: some perched on the mattress laid over the metal trunk, two squatting on an upturned milk crate, several flopped into the Union Jack deckchairs nicked from a garden a couple of weeks ago. The TV was balanced on a three-legged stool in the middle of the room, playing their favourite desi call-in show.

‘This is Tochi,’ Vinny said, his thumb chucked towards the new guy. ‘Starts tomorrow, acha?’

He was very dark, much darker than Randeep, and shorter, but he looked strong. The tendons in his neck stood out. Twenty-one, twenty-two. One or two years older than him, anyway. So another he'd have to call bhaji.

'I've got a spare mattress in the van. He'll be staying in yours, OK, Ronny?'

It wasn't really a question but Randeep said he was absolutely fine with that.

He and Tochi carried the mattress up the two flights and leaned it against the wall. They'd have to take out the wardrobe first.

'Wait,' Randeep said and placed his suitcase to one side, out of harm's way.

'Cares more about that fucking suitcase . . .' Vinny said.

They bullied the wardrobe out and shoved in the mattress and then Vinny said he had to go.

'Have a beer,' Gurpreet said, joining them on the landing.

Vinny said he couldn't. 'Was meant to be back an hour ago. She'll have the face on enough as it is.' He turned to the new guy and made a star of his hand. 'Five sharp, you understand? These lot'll show you the ropes.'

When the three of them were left, Gurpreet folded his arms on the shelf of his gut, slowly. 'So. Where you from?'

Tochi walked into the room and closed the door. Gurpreet stared after him, then pushed off the banister and huffed downstairs.

Randeep waited. He wanted to make a good first impression. He wanted a friend. He knocked and opened the door, stepping inside. The guy looked to be asleep already, still in his clothes and boots, and knees drawn up and hands pressed between them. He'd moved his mattress as far from Randeep's as was possible in that small room: under the window, where the chill would be blowing down on him, through the tape.

'Would you like a blanket? I have one spare,' Randeep whispered. He asked again and when he again got no reply he tiptoed forward and folded out his best blanket and spread it over his new room-mate. Downstairs, there were still two rotis foil-wrapped in the fridge. He heated them straight on the hob. He liked the froggy way they puffed up. Then he coated them with some mango pickle. He didn't want to join the others in the front room, where he could hear the TV blaring, but he didn't want to disturb his new room-mate either. So he stayed there, marooned in the middle of the kitchen because there wasn't a single clean surface to lean on, tearing shapes out of his roti and feeding himself.

By 3.15 the next morning Randeep was awake and washed and dressed and in the kitchen binning the previous day's joss stick and lighting a fresh one. He said a quick prayer, warming his hands by the cooker flame, and set about getting what he needed: frying pans, rolling pin, butter and dough from the fridge, a cupful of flour from the blue barrel. He dusted the worktop with the flour and tore a small chunk from the cold brown dough, softening it between his palms. He had just over an hour to get sixty rotis done.

He paced himself and rolled out the dough-balls methodically. Four rolls up, turn it round, four rolls more, a pinch more flour, three more rolls on each side and then into the pan. He found himself whistling even as his upper arms filled with a rich, dull ache. There was movement around the house: radio alarms, the thrust of a tap. He quickened up and once the rotis were done and wrapped he dumped the frying pans in

the sink for whoever would be on washing duty that night and replaced them on the hob with four large steel pans of water, full gas. He added tea bags, cloves, fennel and sugar and while all that boiled he gathered up the five flasks and dozen Tupperware boxes stacked on the windowsill. Each box bore a name written in felt-tip Panjabi. He found an extra box for his new room-mate, Tochi, and spooned in some potato sabzi from the fridge. As he carried a six-litre carton of milk to the hob, Gurpreet wandered in, the bib of his dungarees dangling half undone. He was pinning his turban into place.

‘All finished? Thought you might have needed some help again.’

Randeep flushed but concentrated on pouring the milk into the pans.

‘Clean the bucket after you wash, acha?’ Gurpreet went on, moving to the Tupperware boxes. ‘None of your servants here.’

He had cleaned it, he was sure he had, and his family had never had servants. He didn’t say anything. He just watched Gurpreet moving some of the sabzi from the other boxes, including Randeep’s, and adding it to his own. He wondered if he did this with everyone or only when it was Randeep on the roti shift.

‘Where’s your new friend from?’

Randeep said he didn’t know, that he went to sleep straight away.

‘His name?’

‘Tochi.’

‘Surname, fool.’

Randeep thought for a moment, shrugged. ‘Never said.’

‘Hmm. Strange.’

Randeep didn’t say a word, didn’t know what he was driving at, and stood silently waiting for the pans to come to the boil again. He had the twitchy sensation he was being stared at. Sure enough, Gurpreet was still there by the fridge, eyes fixed.

‘Bhaji?’ Randeep asked. Gurpreet grunted, seemed to snap out of it and left, then the hiss of the tea had Randeep leaping to turn off the gas.

Soon the house was a whirl of voices and feet and toilet flushes and calls to get out of bed. They filed down, rucksacks slung over sleepy shoulders, taking their lunchbox from the kitchen counter; next a rushed prayer at the joss stick and out into the cold morning dark in twos and threes, at ten-minute intervals. Randeep looked for Tochi but he must have gone ahead, so he paired up with Avtar as usual. Before he left the house he remembered to take up the pencil strung and taped to the wall and he scored a firm thick tick next to his name on the rota.

Overnight, the ground had toughened, compacted, and at the end of the morning they were still staking it out while Langra John – Limpy John – and three other white men went about in yellow JCBs.

‘Wish I had that job,’ Randeep said, closing his lunchbox. ‘Just driving about all day.’

Avtar clucked his tongue. ‘One day, my friend. Keep working hard and one day we’ll be the bosses.’

Randeep leaned back against the aluminium tunnel. He shut his eyes and must have nodded off for a while because the next thing he heard was the insistent sound of Gurpreet’s voice.

‘But you must have a pind. Was that in Calcutta too?’

Tochi was sitting against a low wall, the soles of his boots pressed together and knees thrown wide open.

‘I’m talking to you,’ Gurpreet said.

‘My pind’s not in Calcutta.’

‘Where, then?’

Tochi swigged from his water bottle and took his time screwing the top back on. He had a quiet voice. ‘Bihar.’

Gurpreet looked round at everyone as if to say, Didn’t I tell you? ‘So what are you?’

Avtar spoke up. ‘Arré, this is England, yaar. Leave him.’

‘Ask him his bhanchod name.’

Shaking his head, Avtar turned to Tochi. ‘What are you? Ramgarhia? Saini? Just shut him up.’

‘Ask him his bhanchod name, I said.’

Tochi made to get up, frost crackling underfoot. ‘Tarlochan Kumar.’

Randeep frowned a little but hoped no one saw it.

‘A bhanchod chamaar,’ Gurpreet said, laughing. ‘Even the bhanchod chamaars are coming to England.’

‘Who cares?’ Avtar said.

‘Only backward people care,’ Randeep said, but Gurpreet was still laughing away to himself and then John limped up and said they better get a move on.

‘Do you think he’s got a visa?’ Randeep asked, when they started up again.

Avtar looked at him. ‘When did you last meet a rich chamaar?’

‘His parents might have helped him.’

‘Janaab, don’t go asking him about his parents. He’s probably an orphan.’

That evening Gurpreet knocked on their bedroom door and said he and a few of the others were going out, so Randeep and Tochi would have to help with the milk run. ‘You’ve got Tesco.’

‘Where are you going?’ Randeep asked and Gurpreet made a fist and pumped it down by his crotch.

‘And stop buying those bhanchod cloves and whatnot. We don’t have money to waste, little prince.’

Randeep waited until he heard him on the stairs, out of earshot. ‘He’s that ugly he has to pay for it.’

Tochi was threading his belt around himself. The swish of it sliced the air. ‘You’ll have to do it yourself.’

‘I can’t carry all that milk. Do you know how far it is? Can’t you help me?’

‘Join one of the others.’

‘But we can’t all go to the same place. The gora gets suspicious.’

Tochi said nothing.

‘I respect you, bhaji,’ Randeep said. ‘Can’t you help me?’

On Ecclesall Road the roadworks still hadn’t finished and the street was all headlights and banked-up snow. Randeep pulled his woolly hat lower over his ears and marched through. Tarlochan only had on his jeans and a shirt which kept belling in the wind. His jeans had no pockets, as if they’d been torn, and his hands looked raw-white

with cold, like the claws of some sea creature.

‘Next time I will insist you borrow my gloves,’ Randeep said. ‘You can have them. I have two pairs.’

As they passed the turn-off for the Botanical Gardens, Randeep pointed. ‘That’s where Avtar bhaji’s second job is. Through the gardens and carry on straight.’

‘Whose garden is it?’

‘No one’s. Everyone’s. Maybe the government’s. But they’re pretty. I always think it’s like we have the city, then the gardens, then the countryside.’ He nodded towards the hills, made smoothly charcoal by the night. ‘Shall we go there one day? To the countryside?’

‘How many apneh work with your friend?’

Privately, Randeep felt ‘apneh’ was perhaps a little too far, given their background. ‘A few, but no one else from the house. You looking for a second job too?’

He didn’t say anything. Instead he turned sharp left down a road, his head bent low. Randeep yelled his name, then ran to catch up.

‘Police,’ Tochi said, still walking.

Randeep turned round and saw the blue lights revolving by. ‘No visa, then.’

‘I guess not.’

‘How did you get here? Ship or truck?’

‘On your mother’s cunt.’

Randeep stared glumly into a dark coffee-shop window. It didn’t seem to matter how hard he tried.

‘Sorry,’ Tochi said. He looked annoyed with himself.

‘I’m on a marriage visa.’ Randeep expected a reaction but got none. ‘I got married,’ he went on, aware he was starting to blather. ‘To a girl. She came over to Panjab. From London. But she’s here now. In Sheffield, I mean.’

‘So why not live with her?’

‘She’s Sikhni. But I’m not that bothered, if I’m honest with you, bhaji. I’m going to take some clothes over soon but that’s it. It’s just one year, get my stamp, pay her the money, get the divorce, then bring my parents and sisters over. It’s all agreed with Narinderji.’ And he wished he’d not said her name. He felt like he’d revealed something of himself.

They bought milk, flour, bread, potatoes and toilet roll and went back to the house. Others were returning with their milk and shopping too, and it all got piled into the fridge, done for another week.

*

Randeep took a step back from the door and looked up to the window. The light was on. He rang the doorbell again and this time heard feet on the stairs and Narinderji appeared on the other side of the thick glass – ‘I’m coming, I’m coming’ – and let him in.

‘Sorry I was in the middle of my paat.’

‘I didn’t realize,’ Randeep said, following her up to the flat.

With each step his suitcase hit the side of his leg, and, as he entered, the gurbani was still playing. She hadn’t changed anything much. It was all very plain. The single plain

brown leather settee. A plain tablecloth. The bulb was still without its shade. Only the blackout curtains looked new. A pressure cooker was whistling on the stove, and the whole worktop was a rich green pasture of herbs. In the corner, between the window and her bedroom door, she'd created a shrine: some kind of wooden plinth swathed in a gold-tasselled ramallah, and on top of this both a brass kandha and a picture each of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind. In front of the plinth, on a cushion, her gutka lay open, bound in orange cloth, and beside that a stereo player. The gurbani began to fade out and the CD clicked mournfully off. Randeep set his case by the settee.

'How have you been?'

'I'm getting used to it.' Her hands were clasped loosely over her long black cardigan.

'You are getting to know your way around?'

'Yes. Thank you.'

'At least the weather is getting a smidgen better now. I thought the snow would never stop.'

She gave a tiny smile but said nothing. Randeep wondered if she just wanted him to hurry up and leave again. He knelt before his case and thumbed the silver dials until the thing snapped open.

'Well, as I said on the phone, I've brought some clothes and things for you to keep here.'

He draped a pair of matching shirts across the creased rump of the settee, along with some black trousers and starched blue jeans, all still on their bent wire hangers. He took a white carrier bag tied in a knot at the top and left this on the table. 'Shaving cream, aftershave, that kind of thing. And also some underwear,' he added in the casual manner he'd practised on the way down. Then he reached back into his suitcase and handed her a slim red felt album. 'And these are the photographs I think we – you – should hang up.'

He watched her palming through the pages. The first few were taken on their wedding day, in a gurdwara outside his city of Chandigarh. The later ones showed them enjoying themselves, laughing in a Florentine garden, choosing gifts at a market. 'They look believable to me,' she said.

'Vakeelji sorted it all out. He said sometimes they ask to see where we went on holiday.' He sidestepped saying 'honeymoon'. 'There are dates on the back.'

'Are there stamps on our passports?'

'It's all taken care of.'

Suddenly, her nose wrinkled and she held the album face-out towards him: the two of them posing in a busy restaurant, his arm around her waist.

'Vakeelji said there have to be signs of – intimacy.' He'd looked past her as he'd uttered the word.

'I don't care what Vakeelji said.' She shut the album and dropped it onto the settee. 'This isn't what I agreed to.'

He felt himself getting riled, as if discarding the photos in some way reflected her feelings towards him. 'Look, can't we just do what Vakeelji said? I'm the one with everything to lose here.'

'I've put a lot at stake too.'

'Yes. I'm certain you have. And I'm very thankful for all you're doing. I'm sorry if

that isn't clear. We won't use the photos.'

The silence seemed calculated, forcing her to relent.

'Most are fine to use,' she said, and he nodded and retrieved the album.

'I only hope we've got enough. I'm hearing rumours of raids.'

There was a sort of frozen alarm in her face which thawed to incomprehension.

'You think this place will be raided? By who?'

'It's just people at work talking. And there are always rumours. But it's better to be prepared. Maybe I should come and live here?' he said, testing the water a little.

The shock of the suggestion seemed to force her mouth to open.

'I was not being serious.'

'It's too small. And the weather,' she said, randomly.

'I understand completely,' he said, layering smiles over his disappointment. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so warm in a house, with food smelling as good as that on the cooker.

She made to walk him to the door.

'Shall I help you with this first? It's not fair to leave you to pack it all away.' Delay tactics. She said she'd do it later. That it wasn't a problem. Reluctantly, Randeep followed her down the stairs. As she opened the door he took the notes out of his pocket and handed them to her.

'Another month,' she said. 'The year will be over before we know it.'

'Yes!' he replied, shaking his head, as if amazed how quickly the time was passing, when really it seemed to him that each new week took on the span of an entire age.

After he'd gone, she collapsed onto the armrest of the settee, face hidden. This was too hard. This was too much to give. What had she got herself into? She lifted her head out of her arm and was met with the images of her gurus. They spoke to her, reminding her that she always knew it was going to be hard, that doing the right thing is never the easy choice, but to remember that Waheguru is her ship and He would bear her safely across. She felt Him beside her, and felt her resolve return, as if the blood was pumping more thickly through her body.

She fetched from the drawer the map she'd picked up from the station and zoned in on her street. The surrounding areas didn't sound like places she wanted to visit: Rawmarsh, Pitsmoor, Crosspool. Burngreave. Killamarsh. They sounded so angry, these northern places, like they wanted to do you harm.

Across the city, Randeep lay on his mattress. Everyone had eaten early and gone to sleep, tired out from a whole muddy week of shovelling up and levelling out cement. No one had even mentioned his second visit to the wife. He replayed their conversation and was more or less pleased with how it had gone. They seemed to understand each other and if the year carried on like that everything would be fine. He was hopeful of that. He heard the downstairs door go and the kitchen beads jangling. Probably Avtar would stay in the kitchen for an hour, eating, studying, counting how much money he had, or didn't have. Randeep wouldn't join him. The last few times he had gone downstairs he'd got the impression he was only getting in the way.

Rain pattered against the glass. He turned his head towards Tochi. Yesterday, Tochi had moved his mattress out from under the window and turned it at a right angle, so he

and Randeep now lay parallel to each other, the door at their feet. Randeep guessed it was so he could sleep facing the wall. His boots were crossed at the ankles and were the only part of him that poked out from under the blanket. Randeep's blanket. Which he'd not even been thanked for.

'Bhaji, are you awake?'

Nothing.

'Bhaji?'

'What?'

Randeep didn't know what. He hadn't had a conversation planned. 'I can't sleep.' Then, a minute or so later, 'This is strange, isn't it?'

'Go to sleep.'

'I mean, when you were a kid, did you ever think you'd be working in Sheffield, in England, and living in a house like this? I'd never even heard of Sheffield.' There was silence and Randeep asked, 'Do you still have people back home?'

Tochi didn't reply. The rain seemed to be plashing harder and Randeep drew his blanket up around his neck.

'Bhaji?'

'What?'

'I like hearing the rain outside.'

A pause, and then Tochi: 'Me too.'

2. TOCHI: AUTORIDER

Tarlochan Kumar was bent double under the last huge sack of fodder. He shook it into the buffalo trough and moved away as the animals nosed hungrily forward. He was seventeen; it was his fourth year in Panjab, his third with this family. He'd miss the place.

He crouched by the pump at the side of his hut and washed his arms, soaping off the grass and sweat. Then he changed into a clean white kurta pyjama he'd that morning left to dry on a branch. As he made his way to the big house, the sunset streaked the horizon.

The solid iron double gate was closed and its blue rivets still hot to touch. Inside, in the courtyard, his sahib sat cross-legged on his menjha, speaking to a local usurer. The sahib's wife was napping beside him, her head flopped back over the love seat, and on the floor their daughter crushed herbs in a small ceramic mortar. Once the usurer was dismissed, Tochi knocked on the metal gate and was invited in.

'How many times?' the sahib said. 'Treat this place like your home.' He was in a good mood, which was something.

'Sorry, sahib,' Tochi said.

He noticed the wife half open her eyes and tap her foot twice against her daughter's back. The girl lifted her chunni up over her head, screening her face from Tochi.

'I have to go home, sahib. My papa is not well. I got a call yesterday.'

His sahib uncrossed his legs so just his toes touched the floor. The taut hairy ropes of the menjha had striped deep red marks over his feet. He watched them fade. 'It's the height of the season. You could not have picked a worse time.'

'I know.'

'Why are you chamaars so unreliable?'

Tochi said nothing.

'How ill is he? Will he not get better?'

'Both his arms are gone.'

The wife clucked her tongue in sympathy and muttered a waheguru.

'What colours God shows us,' his sahib said. 'You understand I'll have to get someone else. I can't keep your job for you.'

'I know.'

Tochi nodded, turned to leave.

'Don't forget your food,' the memsahib said.

He thanked her and picked up the thali of leftovers on his way out.