

The summer months passed, hot and fume-filled, the air ferrying around spicy waves of shit and diesel. Even the monsoon, when it finally came, gave little respite, and by September Randeep was still wearing his thinnest cotton shirts. He turned up the wall fan and went back to the clothes he'd laid out on his bed. There was a knock on the door behind him.

'We bought you something,' his mother said, moving to reveal it. A suitcase: brown, shiny, expensive-looking leather. A red bow around its middle. She put a hand to his damp back. The fan made her chunni all fluttery over her head. 'So tall you've got these days,' and then: 'Let's pack together.'

The next morning at Delhi International Airport Avtar spotted Lakhpreet in the departures terminal, standing around with her family. Though they spoke every Sunday, and had been on the phone last night for a full two hours, this was the first time he'd seen her since she took him to the lawyer. She seemed anxious, her gaze darting, trying not to look as if she were searching him out. They'd agreed not to meet each other's eyes today, and definitely not to talk: it was too risky, she'd said.

'But I talk to unmarried girls all the time,' he'd replied, joked, though neither of them felt like laughing.

Her brother, Randeep, was dressed much more smartly than him. Shirt, tie, trousers. Even the kid's suitcase had a fucking bow tie. Avtar adjusted his pen to conceal the fact that his shirt pocket was missing its button, then pointed out to his mother that Auntie was over there.

The two families met, the mothers embracing, commiserating, reassuring one another – and, therefore, themselves – that God willing all would work out well for the two boys. Again – because she had already made several phone calls over the summer – Avtar's mother pressed her thanks on Mrs Sanghera. It was so very, very kind of them to let Avtar stay with Randeep and his massiji in London.

'Please, pehnji, you are embarrassing me. And my sister's London house is very big. It is zero trouble for them.'

Avoiding Lakhpreet, Avtar moved to Randeep and extended his hand. 'I used to see you sometimes. In the block. Just hanging around looking lost,' Avtar added, laughing in what he hoped was a friendly way.

Randeep smiled miserably. Everything about his long, skinny frame – shoulders sloping in, feet crossed shyly – suggested an innocent view of the world.

'Have you been on a plane before?' Avtar asked.

Mrs Sanghera interjected. 'We used to fly all the time. With Randeep's father's postings. We even went to Colombo once. But Randeep was very small then. You probably don't remember, do you, beita?'

'It's my first time,' Avtar said. 'So you can help me, na?'

At this the boy smiled more openly, showing his large, straight teeth.

They checked in their luggage, anxiously showing their visas and passports to the sour-faced man behind the counter. At the security gates the guard advised that it was strictly passengers only beyond this point.

'Tell Papa not to worry,' Avtar said, embracing his tearful mother. 'It's all going to be fine. I promise.'

He looked across and saw Randeep stroking his sister's hair. She was crying against his shoulder. 'I love you, too,' he said, but still she wasn't letting go.

'Don't be silly, Baby,' Mrs Sanghera said, pulling her daughter away. 'This isn't like you.'

On the plane, whenever he closed his eyes, Avtar kept seeing Lakhpreet's face, tears rolling down. How helpless he'd felt standing there. He sighed. It was for the best, he reminded himself. Just think how much he'd make. Save. He'd save so much in a year. In fact, he'd have a savings pile, he decided, and add to it every month. Before he knew it, their lives would have turned round. He allowed himself a smile at the thought of Mrs Sanghera's face as he married her daughter. And Randeep's. Though Avtar doubted Lakhpreet's brother would be that bothered. He seemed pretty reserved, not at all like his sister, and it was hard to believe he was the elder, even if only by a year.

'So. You're a married man?' Avtar said.

There was a ripple of confusion down the boy's face, tiny movements that finished in a slight parting of his mouth. 'Yeah. I suppose so.'

'You don't sound so sure?' Avtar smiled.

'No, no. I am. A married man,' he repeated, almost to himself. Randeep felt a strange dissonance, how the bald fact of it made him instantly adult, and yet their handling of it all, of his life, was like a regression to childhood. He couldn't work it out. He felt too young to be married, though. He felt too young to be anything. 'She's a kind person.'

'Yeah. A real gutkawalli,' Avtar said, repeating Lakhpreet's description.

'Hmm? How do you know?'

'Your mother said. To mine,' and Avtar turned to the window, telling himself to be more careful next time.

At Heathrow, a short woman with a frazzled look approached them. Her salwaar kameez was a plain cranberry, and her widow-white chunni covered her full grey head.

Randeep took the lady in his arms. 'Massiji. Sat sri akal.'

'Welcome, beita.' She had a soft voice. She held his face and pulled it down to kiss his forehead. 'You had no trouble?'

'None. This is Avtar bhaji. My friend.'

Avtar touched her feet, but she seemed unused to this and mixed up her blessings.

'Where's Jimmy bhaji?' Randeep asked, looking around. 'I thought he was coming.'

'Oh, something came up. But he'll be at home. They're both looking forward to seeing their cousin.'

She lived in Ilford, in a small semi on the straight edge of a keyhole-shaped cul-de-sac. There was a mean black hatchback with a phat exhaust on the drive and behind this she parked her grey, spluttering metal bucket of a motor. Home, she said, as if amazed to have made it back in one piece. She held the front door open while they wheeled their cases over the step and found

themselves immediately in the living room. Two lime leather sofas and a massive TV dwarfed the space. There were video consoles, too, and boxes of computer games, a clutch of keypads tangling about the carpet. An archway led to the kitchen and at the table sat a young man hunched over his bowl of cereal. Long shorts, gym vest. A buzz cut and a goatee. Glassy studs in both lobes.

'Jimmy bhaji! How are you?' Randeep paused at the table, waiting for Jimmy bhaji to jump to his feet at seeing his cousin after so many years. Jimmy remained sitting. He looked up and with his spoon still in his hand nodded at Randeep.

'Hey, man. Welcome to England. I forgot Mum said someone was visiting for a bit.'

Randeep smiled, a little chastened.

'This your first time? To England?'

'Ji.'

'Well, wrap up warm. You know what they say about England.'

A door closed somewhere above and from a staircase partially obscured by the archway a girl – a woman – entered the room. She wore denim shorts over thick black leggings, and an old grey T-shirt. Her vast frizz of crunchy-looking curls was mushroomed high up on her head, fountain-like, and earplugs emerged from her neckline to noodle about her chest.

She looked at Massiji and Avtar, and then at Randeep. 'Oh, hi.'

'Pehnji? I didn't recognize you.'

'It's Aki,' she said, with emphasis.

'Sorry.' He tried again: 'I can't believe it's been, how long, more than ten years since we were all together? Do you remember when we milked those cows and how it went all over us? We talk about that all the time.'

She gazed at him, then glanced at Jimmy and the two of them exchanged smiles. Abruptly, she turned to Massiji. 'I'm going for a jog and then to Lauren's. I probably won't be back tonight.'

'Akaljot, we agreed. I told you.'

'Sorry, Mummy dearest. It's her birthday.' Then to Randeep: 'Enjoy your stay.'

She left via the back door, fixing her earplugs in as she went. Then Jimmy pushed his chair back, screeching it along the linoleum, and dumped his dishes into the sink. He patted the pockets of his shorts, checking for keys, said *laters* to Randeep and whoever the other freshie was and followed his sister out. The glass panel in the door rattled as it closed. Randeep turned to his massi and smiled in an effort to convey that he wasn't offended. But Massiji was looking out of the window, altogether embarrassed.

She tried to give them her room – the children have college, you see, they need their sleep, otherwise absolutely they would have given up their rooms for you – but the boys insisted they'd be fine on the settees in the front room. 'Please, Massiji, it's much more comfortable than we are used to.'

The next morning, rooting in his suitcase, Avtar found the manila folder of student stuff Vakeelji had given him. He recited a short prayer in front of the Guru Nanak calendar hanging in the kitchen and set off to enrol. In his hand he had an old Tube map Massiji had found and over which she'd penned in careful blue Panjabi a list of directions Avtar was to make sure he followed. She didn't want him getting lost in that big city.

Even so, it was long past two o'clock when he passed under the grey concrete frame of Edgware Station and looked around for some helpful street sign. He was exhausted, and late: the ticket-wallah on the Underground had sent him off towards Edgware Road, not Edgware, and hours seemed to pass before he found a Panjabi-looking man willing to explain that Avtar would have to buy another ticket because he needed to be in another part of London altogether. Thankfully, the friendly man demonstrated how to use the ticket machines, which saved Avtar having to queue at the counter again.

He walked straight on, towards what looked like a major road, and kept to the right-hand side of the pavement. He reminded himself to ask Massiji about changing up some money and to then give her some for letting him call home. They were fine, his parents had said. Pleased he'd arrived safely, his father added, a little formally. They weren't used to speaking to their son in this way – generally, without a real reason for the call – so it was a short conversation, the main thrust being that Avtar wasn't to worry about them. He was to concentrate on making something of himself in England now God had blessed him with this opportunity. To that end, Avtar allowed himself a little optimism. The trains had come when the electronic signs had said they would. The guard hadn't expected money to point him in the right direction. Cars were only driven on roads and only in nice long columns. Even the air was a clear and uniform blue. All the signs of a well-run country. A fair country. A country that helps its people. A country that might even help him.

A brown signboard read 'Coll. of NW London' and indicated the first left at the big grassy roundabout up ahead. He wondered how to cross the road. Grey railings lined the kerbside, and it was surely against the law to jump them. He tailed a woman with wheatish hair, hoping she'd show the way, but at the roundabout she followed the road as it curved off and Avtar was left behind. Cars flowed round as if in a deliberate rush to fill in any gaps. He returned to the railings. Perhaps they were low precisely so that people who needed to cross the road could do so. Maybe it wasn't illegal at all. He secured the folder into the back of his black trousers and, with one foot lifted to the top of the railing, jumped over. The cars were so close. Drivers glanced confusedly over and one or two pointed at the ground, mouthing words. He hoped that now he'd made clear his intention the traffic might stop, but there seemed to be no sign of that. He ventured a foot forward, then took it back as a white van came roaring down. He was breathing hard. He looked about again: nothing. No traffic lights. He had no chance. He waited. When the moment came he felt the cold of the railings leave his body and he was running as hard as he could. The road felt coarse under his thin soles. He could feel his folder coming loose from his trousers and as he reached behind to hold it in place a long brassy horn sounded. Avtar looked over his shoulder. The cars were coming. He wouldn't make it, and as he launched towards the central mound of the roundabout his foot gave and he felt one of his shoes slip off. All he could do was squeeze between the black-and-white arrow signs and clamber onto the grassy circle. Safe at last, he covered his ears. He felt stupid and angry and through the legs of the arrow signs saw his poor shoe being flipped about like a fish.

About an hour later, a beautiful yellow-haired girl smiled at Avtar as if she'd been waiting the whole day just for him to walk into the college registration office. She looked like one of those white girls that used to come on the television, selling Sunilk or Amla Shampoo. He managed a weak smile and tentatively presented his folder. He hoped he'd removed all the grass stains.

'Welcome to North-West,' she said, unclipping the folder, going through his papers. 'Computing with Security Systems. I hear that's a good course.'

'Thank you,' Avtar said, just about understanding.

She asked him where he was from and he said India, and then she said they had him down as making his own accommodation arrangements, and he said that, yes, that was true.

'Not a long way, I hope?'

'Ilford?' He showed her the address Massiji had written down for him.

'Lots of early starts if you want to make your nine o'clocks, then!' She laughed, which permitted Avtar to laugh too.

She photostatted his visa and passport and Avtar watched her filing the copies into a metal cabinet. She handed him various things: maps, a student union application form, an events listing, his timetable, a pass with his name and picture on it – to give him access to the Mathematical Sciences building, she explained. All this he gathered into his folder, thanking her, keen to leave before they reneged and shipped him back home.

'There is a strong college Indian Students' Society, which does a lot of good work helping students adjust to – ' she struggled for the word. She seemed to want to avoid saying *England* – 'a new approach. They're still open. It's just down the corridor if you're interested.'

He thanked her again, inadvertently bowing his head a little, and turned to leave. He couldn't believe it had been so easy. No interview, no questioning, no police. At the exit, he thanked her once more, only to catch her staring at the cracked heels of his naked feet. He felt suddenly embarrassed and, clearly, so did she.

'It's just down the corridor,' she said again, pointing.

The corridor – an open-air walkway, really – was a low corrugated roof protecting a slabbed concrete floor. To his left were doors and classrooms, while the right opened onto a half-empty car park. There were several squat buildings: Materials and Metallurgy, Blocks 3F to 4B, the Tony Baker Building. So this was a real college. He imagined impossibly clever people in spectacles behind each of those doors, being groomed for a rich and employed future. And here he was, amongst them. If his parents could see him now. Behind him, a voice called out, 'Hello?' An apna, Avtar knew, before he'd even turned around. A plumpish middle-aged Indian, in fact, in woolly, dark-coloured clothes. His round glasses balanced on top of his shaved bald-grey head.

'Ji?' Avtar said.

'Foreign students should come see us.'

Avtar tracked back and followed the man into a classroom plastered floor to ceiling with detailed maps of India and huge images of students on elephants. Across the wall ran a banner: *NWL IndiSoc Back to Roots Annual*. The desks were arranged into a horseshoe, as if for a meeting. The man sat down and started pulling out great sheaves of paper from a nearby cabinet.

'First day? . . . Please sit.'

Avtar didn't.

'I'm Dr Amarjit Singh Cheema. General Secretary of the International Society here at NWL. Of which IndiSoc is one part. We offer foreign students support and guidance. Language courses. Visa advice. Accommodation tips. Pastoral care. Et cetera et cetera.'

Finally, the doctor seemed to find his papers and slapped them on the desk and looked up at Avtar.

'We have an excellent mentoring programme.'

Avtar nodded, smiled. He wanted to get out of here. This man was an Indian and a doctor to boot. He'd work out everything. 'I'll come tomorrow, thank you.'

There was a pause, and something like a question mark appeared in the man's face. Avtar could feel himself being studied, filleted.

'The annual fee is very reasonable,' the doctor said, but the tone of his voice seemed to convey something altogether different.

'Where are you from?' he asked, switching to Panjabi.

'Amritsar.'

'Your elders?'

'Nijjar.'

The man's face softened pleasantly. 'My mother's people are from there. So you're Doabi?'

Avtar nodded, said ji, Chachaji, and the doctor laughed.

'Nice, very nice.'

He put the lid on his pen and closed the door and told Avtar to sit, and this time he did.

'How much did it cost you?'

Avtar looked down to his knuckles.

'Listen, I'm Indian. I might have been born here but I'm Indian and I want the people of my country to prosper.'

So Avtar told him and the doctor nodded and asked Avtar what course he was doing and whether he intended on actually doing any of it or if he was just going to disappear like most of them did.

'I'm here to work.'

'But there is no work. It's drying up. *Pfft!*'

'I'll find something.'

'You kids . . .' He sighed, and, removing his glasses, rested his chin on interlocked hands. 'Work, by all means. But you'll be in a much stronger position if you also pass your first year. Then the college will protect you. But if you fail . . . Well, the college will kick you out and you'll have no choice but to disappear. And for how long can you really hide?' He advised Avtar to keep up with the course. He might not be able to make the lectures – he understood that – but he should definitely improve his English and get the textbooks from the library: 'They're free. Think of the long term, Nijjara. If you leave here with a diploma, just think what you could do back home. If you're lucky, you could even stay and bring your family over. You shouldn't waste this chance.'

They had a cup of tea – with cloves and fennel and elaichi – and the doctor listened as Avtar told him the story of how his grandparents had moved from tiny Nijjar to Amritsar city. Until recently, his papa used to take the family back there every summer. Avtar had always liked the bull races best.

'Do they still happen?' the doctor exclaimed. 'Ha! My mother still talks about them. You should come to our house. Mataji will light up when she knows someone from her village is here.'

'How often do you go back, sir?' Avtar asked.

'Me? Oh no. no. no. I've never been. I've always wanted to. but with one thing and another . . . And the kids weren't ever

interested.'

'Life is busy here,' Avtar offered.

The doctor made an agreeable sound and his gaze shifted away from Avtar. For a long while he stared at the large bookcases beside the whiteboard, at the ordered ranks of books upon books upon books. A lifetime of them. He looked back at Avtar and smiled sadly.

Avtar received by post three waxy-paged and thickly dog-eared computing texts. Dr Cheema had also included books on learning English, with accompanying CDs. Attached to the package was a note saying that Avtar was to remember their chat and be sure to visit him and his family at their home once he was settled in. Avtar folded the note and slipped it into an elasticated pouch on the inside of his suitcase. He couldn't imagine someone being as helpful to a newcomer in his own country. He ran his hand over one of the textbooks, over the laminated image of lightning bolts forking wildly out from a computer screen. He was sitting at the kitchen table in Massiji's house. Randeep was sleeping a few feet away on the sofa. He opened to the first page and began to read.

He studied for two hours every morning, rarely getting further than a few paragraphs. By seven, Massiji would be downstairs preparing for her shift at the 24-hour supermarket. She'd make them a breakfast of paratha with aachaar, and foil-wrap some more to keep them going for the day. Not long after, they tidied away their blankets and left the house too, before Jimmy bhaji and Aki pehnji woke up.

Doctor Cheema had been right: work really was drying up. In two weeks the closest they'd come to finding anything was a half-hearted promise from a Muslim cash-and-carry owner who said he'd keep them in mind for the Christmas rush. They'd already exhausted the streets of Ilford, Barnet and Poplar in their search, and following a tip from an aunty-type shopkeeper they'd even spent two days traipsing around Southall and Ealing, and then Hounslow, looking for some phantom gurdwara she said was being built.

'She must've misunderstood,' Avtar said, as they got off the bus at Ilford.

They waited on the concourse, on a bench, until they were certain Massiji would be home. Randeep seemed withdrawn. Avtar wondered if it was his cousins, and how they were always avoiding him. Or maybe it was his father. Last night, on the cheap mobile phone Massiji had bought them, Lakhpreet said that he'd had 'an episode'. Should he ask Randeep about it? It might help. In the event, Randeep got there first.

'Your father's quite old, isn't he? I remember him now. Total white hair. Very slow on the stairs.'

'That's him,' Avtar said, a little irked at the description.

'A nice man. He made the bus driver wait for me once because my suitcase was heavy.'

Avtar smiled into his jacket, imagining the scene. 'Yeah. He'd do that.'

Randeep turned, stared. 'You miss him,' he diagnosed.

'Oh, I miss everything. Why?' he went on, passing it over, 'Do you miss your father?'

Randeep looked away, blinking, and Avtar regretted the question.

The sun had almost set, and they watched as another busload set out from the concourse.

'Any paratha left?' Randeep asked.

Avtar showed him the foil balled up in his fist. 'Have you called those numbers Vakeel Sahib gave you?'

'There was only one,' Randeep said. 'It's too far.'

'Where?'

'He said Scotland.'

'How far's that?'

Randeep shrugged. Avtar walked over to the fag-holed timetable on the lamppost. *Birmingham. Bristol. Derby. Edinburgh. Glasgow. Gravesend. Leeds. Manchester. Newcastle. Wolverhampton.* But no Scotland.

'It's not on there,' he said, sitting back down.

'Because it's too far.'

'But if that's where the work is . . .'

They waited another half an hour and returned to the house. The daughter, Aki, was in the kitchen, pouring hot water from a kettle into a white plastic pot. It looked like noodles.

'We have noodles in India, too,' Randeep said.

She frowned, nodded, sat down to eat. Randeep wondered if it would be rude to ask if they might have some. Probably, yes, but not as rude as not offering some in the first place. Perhaps it was the effect of being brought up without a father. She glanced across to him and abruptly got to her feet and went upstairs, taking her noodle pot with her and muttering something about Pakis always fucking staring.

Massiji arrived late, with a paper bag of courgettes which she stewed into a quick sabzi for the boys. They ate two, three, four rotis, and for dessert a thickened-up bowl of milky semiya.

'All that walking around must make you hungry.'

'It tastes so good. Like home.'

'Better than home,' Avtar said.

'Bas karo. I'm happy simply to have children to cook this for.'

Jimmy came thundering down the stairs in his tan stud-rind boots and reached for his leather jacket.

'Are you going out, too?' his mother said, in a voice disappointed and exasperated.

'Just to the pub. Won't be long.'

'Your sister's already gone. Why don't you two spend some time with your cousin and Avtar? They look for work all day and have to sit here getting bored by me all night.'

Randeep protested – they weren't bored, Massiji, that wasn't . . .

'They're eating,' Jimmy said, as if they weren't sitting just across the room.

'They've finished,' Massiji said, and there was a strained look on Jimmy's face as he failed to summon a comeback.

Randeep and Avtar stood awkwardly at the bar, holding pints of cola up by their necks while Jimmy shot pool with his friends. Aki had been there too, but led her friends out as soon as she saw the boys enter. 'PMS,' Jimmy had said and Randeep had looked at Avtar, who'd shrugged.

Avtar wondered if this place was like that 1771 club in Jalandhar, with its secret upstairs gambling room. It didn't seem to be. He couldn't see any stairs, for one thing. Just lots of tables and around the tables lots of friends and couples of all different colours laughing and drinking. Women laughing and drinking. Indian women freely laughing and drinking. He imagined some impossible future in which he and Lakhpreet were settled with good jobs in Ilford and coming here together after a long week at work. The thought was funny. He sipped his drink.

'I'd never let my sisters come here,' Randeep said, because this was horrible. This was dirty and vulgar and he could feel the smoke sinking into his clothes. He was glad Jimmy had told him not to wear the tie.

A young black man appeared beside Randeep at the bar, waving a note to get the barman's attention. Kaleh, Massiji said, were everywhere in Ilford, and the first time the boys saw one walking towards them they'd fallen silent, until the man passed by and Randeep whispered how frightening they looked. But he'd never seen one up close, right here beside him, like now. Their skin was so smooth, he thought. Not a blemish, no variation in tone, as if a machine had played some part in it all. He wondered how it would feel to touch. And that hair too. Like it had been stitched onto his head with silver thread. The man turned towards Randeep, a hard look in his eye. Randeep smiled, tight-lipped, edging a little closer to Avtar. Secretly, he watched the black man pay for his drink and rejoin his black friends at another pool table.

'They're fast, hain na? All the good runners are kaleh. Do they have their own language? Like ours is Panjabi?'

Avtar said he didn't know, though they seemed to be speaking English.

'Look how smooth their skin is. Why is that?'

Jimmy left his game of pool to ask if they needed a top-up. 'Sure you don't want a knock?'

Randeep asked if he knew any kaleh and what they spoke and ate and why their skin was so smooth.

'Black don't crack. E-vo-loo-shun, innit. Thought Mum said you were clever?'

'What are they like?'

'Like?'

The black man bounded over, his eyes bulging monstrously. 'You got some beef with me, man?' He was pointing, his face inches away.

Randeep lurched back, shaking his head.

'You dotting me for time. Dot me to ma face.' He stepped closer. 'To ma fuckin' face.'

Avtar moved Randeep behind him, protecting the kid, and Jimmy placed a hand on the man's shoulder. 'He's fresh man, fresh. Lights out.'

'Nang that. This Simon sidepart simpleton . . . What, we taxed your fucking Co-op?'

'Allow it, nigger. He's learning. The rents were freshening up one day gone. Yours and mine. Same ends now, though, right? Same fucking drum. Right?'

A pause, then a chin-jut. 'Standard, standard.'

'Hectic,' Jimmy said, emphasizing the syllables. He turned his back to the man and slurped the foam from his beer. This seemed to be some sort of message because the black man nodded and he and Jimmy touched fists, which Randeep thought must be an agreement to fight later.

On the walk home, Randeep was still shaking, his lips trembling. 'I'm just cold.'

'I don't know why you freshies stare so much, man. Might be all right back home but it's proper rude here, you know? People get really offended.'

'Sorry, bhaji.'

'Allow it. And don't look so . . . so defensive all the time. It gives you guys away like shit in a shoe. The way you lot stand close to the edge of the platform, eyes fixed on where the train's coming from. The way you quickly take a look at everyone on the bus as you walk down the aisle. The way you stand so straight, as if your ankles are tied together. Spot you guys a mile off. Just chill,' he finished, drawing out the word.

The boys nodded, not really questioning why these were things they ought to be trying to hide. Avtar had thought it was his clothes, his hairstyle, his sockless feet that had given his foreignness away to Dr Cheema. But it seemed alongside the cosmetic changes there was a whole system of other things to correct.

All night he heard Randeep rustling about on the other settee: smacking his pillows, throwing his blankets on and off, sometimes facing the room, sometimes not.

'Arré, these things happen, yaar. Don't dwell. Go to sleep. And for God's sake let me sleep as well.'

'It's nothing to do with that. I'm hot-cold. I might not be well.'

Avtar sighed and brought the blanket over his head.

'I think I will ring that Scotland number tomorrow,' he heard Randeep say.

Somehow, Avtar kicked the blankets off at five o'clock for his two hours of study. He sat on a dining chair, the plastic clammy against his thighs, and set about untangling the wires of his headphones. He'd do an hour of Better English and then an hour of his course.

The sky was turning light grey and Avtar was still muttering along to his CD, as Aki came through the front door. He lifted away his headphones and let them hang around his neck. She'd been saying something to him.

'Hahn ji?'

There was a liquid look in her face, as if she was struggling to coordinate eyes, mouth and brain, and – Avtar now noticed – her feet seemed to be constantly adjusting themselves. He felt an immediate rush of disgust.

'I said, I suppose you think I'm bad.'

'Ji?'

'Bad. Do you think I'm bad? Do you think I'm nothing but a gorafied cow?'

Avtar said nothing. He'd probably not said five words to her in the time he'd been here. It wasn't his place.

'Well, fuck you. Fuck you, you freshie fucks.' She took a step forward, one steadying hand on the wall. Half her face was in shadow. 'Fuck you freeloaders. You come here expecting us to wait on you. What, because you're family?' She reeled back. 'Where the fuck was you when my dad died, hey? Where was "family" then?' She adopted a different voice. 'Oh, sorry, that's right. Because it's my mother, she has to deal with it on her own. Because it's a woman, she's not allowed to turn to her family. Well, fuck you.' She made shakily for the stairs, then stopped. 'I'll tell you who was here for us. My friends. They helped us. Were here

for us. Got us back on our feet. The same people want me to stop hanging out with. Because she's got the same fucked-up idea of family that you've all got. But I tell her. I tell her, the next time we're on our knees it ain't gonna be the Indian lot that come to help. It'll be my friends again. Think of that. Think of that.' She snorted, looked away. 'You ain't got a fucking scooby,' she ended, quietly, and perhaps tearfully, though Avtar couldn't be sure. She climbed the stairs, creaking her way up, and seconds later a door slammed shut.

Avtar looked down at his inked-up hands, then across to the settee, where he knew Randeep was lying awake under the blanket.

At the newsagent's on the High Street they asked the Guju youth behind the counter to help them top up their phone. Then they found a bench down the side of Woolworths and Randeep folded out the blue chit with the Scottish number on it. He dialled and put the phone to his ear.

'What do I say?' he asked.

'Say you've just landed in England with a marriage visa and that Harchand Vakeel Sahib said they'd give you work. Don't tell them your name yet. Give a fake one.'

He half hoped no one would answer. But they did. 'Hello? Hello. Who is this? . . . My na—? . . . I've just landed with a marriage visa and Harchand Vakeelji Sahib said you'd give me work . . . Chandigarh, uncle . . . Amritsar . . . Yes, on marriage, uncle.' A slow grin spread across Randeep's face. 'Yes, ji, I'm Randeep Sanghera. That's me.'

It turned out that Vakeelji had already sent word of them to this Scottish uncle. He'd been waiting for them to call. In fact, he'd been saying to his wife only last night that he was going to call Harchand bhaji and say his men hadn't been in touch yet and did they actually make it over OK.

'But is there work?' Avtar cut in.

'He says so. He promised to call back later today.'

All afternoon he was checking the phone, or Avtar was asking him to check it. Then, as the high street filled with kids slouching home from school, the mobile rang and the Scottish uncle said there wasn't anything in Glasgow or Aberdeen or Newcastle, but they weren't to worry because there were plenty of other contacts he had to try. The main reason he was calling was to ask if they had National Insurance and City and Guilds cards, and if not, to make sure they had some passport-sized photographs handy, along with photocopies of their visas and passports. The boys went back to the house for their passports and visas and then back to the Guju youth in the newsagent's to ask where they could get photostats. He laughed and said, here, pass them to him and he'd photocopy them in the back. I mean, not as if you're faujis or anything, is it, he said with a wink. They found a photo booth in the chemist across the street, but didn't have enough pounds and decided to wait until tomorrow before exchanging what rupees they had left. They returned to Massiji's, Randeep excited at the prospect of work despite Avtar's warning that they shouldn't get their hopes up.

'What kind of work do you think it might be?' Randeep asked. The night had come round again, and they were under their blankets on the settees.

'You're the one who spoke to him, yaar.'

'I didn't ask. Sorry.'

Avtar frowned. He wished he'd stop saying sorry all the time. 'Shop work, maybe.'

Randeep nodded in the dark. That would be all right. He'd hoped for something better, something software- or consultancy-related, but at least shop work would be nice and clean and easy.

The mobile vibrated hard against the glass top of the table, scurrying towards the edge. Randeep lurched for it – 'It's him!' – and put it to his ear. 'Hello?' He listened for a long while. Avtar came and knelt beside him. 'Tomorrow?' Randeep said, and looked at Avtar, who nodded, urging Randeep to accept whatever the offer was, whenever it was. A little later Randeep said thank you, uncle, sat sri akal, and closed his phone.

'There's work?' Avtar asked, shaking Randeep's knee.

Randeep nodded. 'One of his relatives. He has work in a city called Sheffield.' Randeep paused. 'I've got to be there tomorrow at one o'clock.'

Avtar withdrew his hands into his lap. He understood. 'Oh.'

'He said there was only work for one. So you go. I'll find work here.'

'Don't be stupid. That fat lawyer gave you the contact.'

'But where will you stay?' he said, then tried to backtrack. 'Of course, Massiji won't mind—'

Avtar shook his head. 'I'll be fine.'

Avtar and Massiji came to St Pancras to see him off. He seemed quiet, as if thinking of what might lie ahead.

'Don't be worried,' Avtar said.

'I'm not, bhaji. I'll manage. This is the world we live in now. But I do wish you were coming with me. It's been really nice having someone to talk to.'

Avtar looked away, hiding his face because, overnight, he'd decided that this parting was actually a blessing in disguise. The boy relied too much on him. Exchanging money, approaching strangers, buying things – in all these it had somehow come to pass that Avtar would take the lead, even with his poorer English. Yes, it was definitely a blessing. It would force the boy to grow up. And Avtar could forget about him and concentrate on looking after himself. He only had six weeks before Pocket Bhai was expecting the first of the repayments. God willing, work would come.

'If I find work for you there will you come?' Randeep asked.

Avtar laughed. 'I'll come swimming in boiling waters if that's where the work is.'

Massiji passed Randeep a food parcel for the journey and some money, which he tried to resist. 'Just take it,' she said. 'And if there are any problems you come straight back, acha?'

He pushed against the turnstile and onto the platform, waving from the door then stepping up into the carriage, walking through, lugging his shiny leather suitcase behind him, and, as Jimmy bhaji had advised, not staring at any of the other passengers.

The train juddered out of the station and into the mechanical sprawl of London: cranes, pulleys, industrial lifts; then suburbs, the charmless wet platforms of one outpost after another. Only when they reached a station called Leicester did Randeep experience

a change in his spirits. He was used to nice things, nice surroundings, and here were flat green fields, cows, palm-sized villages in the far distance. The view grew more beautiful still when, some two hours from London, the landscape changed again: hills, tumbling clouds, a church with a strangely twisted spire. He smiled. It was all so – he thought hard – so civilized. An image came to mind, of his father before the illness, still writing reports at his desk while the rest of the family slept. It was a time when he thought his father could withstand anything; an innocent time whose return he pined for. He put Massiji's food parcel aside and by the time the train pulled into Sheffield, thirty-five minutes late, he still hadn't touched it.

The station impressed him. It wasn't as draughty as the London ones, and seemed cleaner, airier. This Sheffield must be a good city. He wondered why he'd never heard of it. As he studied the electronic departure boards, he saw someone by the payphone, holding a piece of cardboard bearing Randeep's name. He was a short man with a goatee, receding spiked-up hair, and a busy, impatient look about him. Randeep took up his suitcase.

'Virender bhaji?'

The man stopped his whistling. 'Randeep?' He screwed up the cardboard and threw it over his shoulder. They shook hands. 'Good trip?'

'I'm really happy to be here. What a beautiful city you have.'

Virender looked surprised. 'Hold that thought.'

The van ride took them out of the city and onto elevated roads that wound through narrow, boarded-up, wretched-looking streets.

'Mostly clearance at the moment,' Virender was saying. 'Decluttering sites, blah de blah. But I've got my eye on a new contract soon. A hotel, fingers crossed.'

'I have a friend who came with me if you need more help.'

Virender bhaji ignored him. Perhaps he heard this a lot. 'You'll be all right digging up rocks and shit, yeah?' He reached over and shook Randeep's shoulder. 'Put some muscle on those bones! You're like a stick! Ronny the stick!'

They parked outside a large Victorian house with an overgrown, bushy front garden. The curtains were drawn haphazardly and giant cobwebs hammocked above the door. Virender knocked, twice, loudly.

'One of these days I'll remember my keys.' He kicked the door. 'Come on, you lazy chimps.'

The handle shook, and the door was at last opened by a sleepy, unshaven man with long, loose hair. His red mesh vest stretched tightly over his gut, which was as large as the belly of a heavily pregnant woman.

'Still asleep, Gurps?' Virender said, pushing past. 'Won't earn your millions like that, now, will you?'

Randeep nodded at the man and followed Virender into the front room. There were mattresses, grey sheets crumpled on them, and the wallpaper was torn in several places, revealing the pink underneath. It wasn't too bad, Randeep tried to tell himself, and wondered which bed was his.

'This is Gurpreet,' Virender said. The long-haired man raised an elbow to the doorframe. He looked older, unfriendly. Randeep said *sat sri akal*.

'Where's the others?' Virender asked.

'Asleep. Out,' Gurpreet said.

'Anyway –' turning to Randeep – 'your room's upstairs. At the very top. You're lucky. You've got your own space. I've put a mattress and shit in there already.'

He said he'd call later about work tomorrow but in the meantime he needed Randeep to come back outside and sign some forms.

'You got your visa, yeah?'

'Ji.'

Gurpreet let out a forlorn little laugh. 'Everyone's got a visa.'

'Should've paid a bit more, then, shouldn't you?'

Randeep spent the rest of the afternoon in his room, up two flights and at the end of the landing. He wiped his suitcase down with dampened toilet paper and stored it on top of the single-door wardrobe. He moved the mattress to the wall, so the sun wouldn't wake him up in the morning, and aired the powder-blue blanket that had come with it. Then he stood at the window, texting Narinderji his new address and details, looking out at this new world. He hadn't realized they were so high up. That there were so many hills.

He crept downstairs in the early evening, at the sound of voices and laughter. There were loads of them packed into the kitchen, more than he had expected. Eight, nine, ten . . . Where did they all sleep? Most ignored him. One or two asked where he was from, how he got here. Randeep explained that he'd been staying in London with his massi but had to come up here for work.

'My chacha's son was the same,' someone said. 'Went from Uzbekistan all the way to Hull until he found a job. He's back home now. Idiot got caught in a raid.'

Gurpreet's voice came over the top. 'He's got a visa, the boy has. Not a deadhead fauji like us lot.'

The background chatter sank as swiftly as water down a plughole. 'You a scooter?' someone asked.

'I'm on a marriage visa.'

There were whoops and cheers. His shoulders were rubbed. *You've hit the jackpot, they said. Lottery nikhel gey.* 'Arré, janaab, you don't even need to work. One year and all your dreams come true.'

Gurpreet thrust a plate into Randeep's hand. 'Welcome to England. Maybe you'll bring us all some luck.'

It took two of them to convey the steel vat of food into the front room and steady it on a three-legged stool. Gurpreet invited Randeep forward. You first, he said. Randeep thanked him, and smiled hard to conceal how revolting he found it all. The tomatoey streaks on his plate that hadn't been washed clean. The flies in the room. Even the tips of his cutlery were slick with some sort of green jam. He took up the large spoon and moved it through the grey mixture. He couldn't tell what it was. It looked like nothing he was used to. This was just a grey-yellow slurry, the odd carrot and pea. He shook a small amount onto his plate and held the spoon out to Gurpreet. But Gurpreet said he had to have more.

'Don't be shy. You're the guest today,' and Gurpreet hurled down two huge ladlefuls of the stuff onto Randeep's plate and sent him away with a couple of chapattis.

He didn't want to appear ungrateful. He sat on the plastic trim of the mattress, plate balanced on his knees, and told himself he had to finish it. But he couldn't. The chapattis were like wet cardboard and the sabzi had a gritty, slimy, sludgy texture, and all this seemed somehow to connect with the notion that there were things crawling out from the carpet and up his ankles. He started to

sweat. He looked across to Gurpreet who was smiling at him, encouraging. Randeep smiled back. He tried one more mouthful, forcing his lips to close around his fingers and take it all in. He managed a few seconds of chewing before he felt his insides contract, refuse. He clamped his hand over his mouth, but the vomit seeped between his fingers and down onto his lap.

*

The work was a few miles away in a place called Catcliffe. An old building had been demolished and the ground had to be prepared for a new one. They were split into groups. Some were dispatched with orders to find all the intact bricks and pile them to one side, so they could later be sold. Some had to work the JCBs and clear the rubble and topsoil. And some, like Randeep, had to gather the boulders and wheel them to the waiting yellow skips. He'd been given a pair of worn-looking boots, and thick gloves for handling the stones, but could still only manage one rock at a time, and it became almost comical how often he had to stop the barrow and turn the thing round. The rocks were so big they had to be rolled up a laddered plank leaning against the skip.

'My grandmother could go faster,' the guy who was rolling said.

'Sorry,' Randeep replied and trudged back with his barrow.

At the end of the week he got his wages from Vinny and went to the supermarket to buy a plate, a knife and fork and spoon, and a bar of soap. That evening, he came down into the kitchen holding his purchases by his side, hoping no one would notice. But Gurpreet was dishing out and as soon as he took hold of Randeep's clean white plate he looked up.

'I see. So what we have isn't good enough for you?'

'It's not that, bhaji. You saw how I was sick. My stomach is just very sensitive.'

'O-ho! He is just very sensitive! Did you hear that, faujio? And I suppose you think the rest of us are barbarians compared to you?'

'I'm sorry. I'll take it back. I'm sorry.'

'No, no. If the prince is sensitive, then we must respect that.' He shook the brown porridge from the spoon and onto the bright white centre of the plate and handed it back to Randeep. 'Enjoy.'

No one spoke to him during the meal. Afterwards, he cleaned his plate and spoon and went to lie on his mattress in his room. He called Avtar but it went to voicemail. He didn't know how he was going to survive a year. Maybe if he asked Vinnyji if there was somewhere else he could live? He could say he'd be happy to take a pay cut. He drifted off to sleep, still in his boots.

He did ask Vinnyji if there was alternative accommodation, catching him on his own before he drove off one morning.

'Look, I sympathize, mate. You like the finer things. My missus is the same. If it ain't Gucci I get no smoochy. Know what I'm saying? But –' he shrugged – 'it's one in one out. The other house is full and, to be honest, it's best to have everyone in one place. Easier.'

Randeep listened miserably, but as he listened he remembered his friend Michael. 'Vinnyji, how far is Doncaster?'

'I ain't picking you up from fucking Doncaster.'

'Could I live there? I have a friend there. Could I live with him?'

Vinny sighed and said he supposed he could live on the fucking moon if he wanted as long as he arrived to work on time.

'So I can move there? With my friend?'

'Like I said, just be here on time, every time.'

Before dinner, he called Michael. He'd rung him so often Randeep could picture perfectly the telephone number printed below the address in the office filebook. Someone answered. 'Yes?'

'Michael? Is that you? It's me. Randeep. Your friend from India. I've just arrived in England. In Sheffield.'

He couldn't be quite clear how much the old man had understood. But definitely Randeep had said he'd like to come over tonight and definitely Michael had replied that he looked forward to seeing him.

He lifted his suitcase down from the cupboard and had made it as far as the front door when Gurpreet entered the hallway and asked where he thought he was sneaking off to.

'Nowhere, bhaji. My friend called and asked me to visit him.'

'So you're taking all your clothes?'

'It might be a little permanent.'

The taxi from the station dropped him off outside a pebble-dashed bungalow, at a flame-red gate almost hidden in its privet hedge. A light was on in the window. Randeep wheeled his suitcase to the door, ringing the bell, and had to wait a good few minutes before he heard the lock turn, and even then the door stayed on its chain.

'Yes?'

'Michael? Oh, it's good to meet you at last. This is great.'

He was seated on a comfy plaid armchair by a three-bar heater glowing blue. There were an oppressive number of family photographs on the walls and the window ledges, the side tables and mantelpiece. Black-and-white images of Michael in his uniform, of Michael and his late wife – Janice, Randeep remembered – and colour photos as well, of children slurping ice cream or grinning on their bicycles.

'I wasn't expecting visitors until you called,' Michael said, coming in from the kitchen with a glass of milk. He was a slightly hunched man with a silver comb-over, his face a network of deep wrinkles connecting the soft nodes that were his mouth, nose and ears. His left eye didn't open fully. Several times he had to ask Randeep to speak up.

'I said, I remember you telling me the story of you and Balwant Singh.'

'Oh, yes, Billy.' Michael made a sympathetic noise. 'He was a good one. An engineer, you know. He had a girl waiting to marry him back in the Punjab. Don't think he'd ever clapped eyes on her, mind. One of those arranged jobbies. Is that what you're here for?'

'No, sir. Too young for that. I'm here to work only.'

'Because there's plenty of them knocking about Donny. Your sort. And a young chappie like you won't have any trouble to start a-courting.'

'Sir, actually, I have a girlfriend back home waiting for me, too.'

'Have you seen her, though?'

Randeep asked if he might remove his jacket – *to get more comfortable, sir*. When he came back from the cloakroom, Michael

was waiting at the frosted-glass cabinet, beckoning Randeep over.

'My grandchildren.' He went through their names, ages, how far they lived, what they were like. 'They all take after their nana, if you ask me. Bright as butterflies, the lot of them.'

Randeep suggested that he – Randeep – make them both something to eat. Michael said he'd eaten. 'But you help yourself.'

He found some sort of pie in the fridge and a tin of baked beans and he heated this all up in the microwave. As long as he kept making himself useful, Randeep thought, waiting for his food to cook. Maybe then Michael would let him stay. He hoped so. It would make all the difference, knowing he had a cosy home to come back to, that he'd never have to spend an evening with Gurpreet again. He could suggest a walk to the park one evening next week, or to the cinema, even, to watch an old wartime film.

He returned to the front room, hot plate in hand. Michael was rousing awake the television. He wanted to watch the news and for the next half an hour the two of them sat there quite companion-ably: Randeep, for once, enjoying his meal, while Michael wielded his remote at the screen and swore at the flaming Tories.

After the news came the weather, and the bearded man with the map said they expected a mild, dry day tomorrow, with only a small chance of showers.

'Maybe when I come back from work I can take you to the park. For some fresh air.'

'That's kind of you. I'd enjoy that.'

'And I also want to talk about rent. I insist. What sort of payment would you like for all this?'

'Rent? You staying?'

The front door opened and a man started backing into the room. 'Sorry, Dad, the pigeons took the arse-end of forever. I tried calling but you must've been fast on.' He wore a fluorescent raincoat, though it wasn't raining, and was dragging over the doorstep some sort of trolley covered in tartan. Only when he rested the trolley against the wall and turned round and pulled off his hood did he see Randeep sitting in the armchair.

'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you had company.'

Randeep stood and offered his hand. He tried to sound assured. 'I'm Randeep Sanghera. A friend of Michael's. From India.'

The man – 'Philip,' he said, accepting the hand – looked to his father. 'I didn't know you had friends in India.'

'Many a thing that many a man knows not many about.'

Philip unzipped his raincoat, slowly, with an air of deliberation. His light-blond hair was so wispy that his pink scalp showed through, and when he spoke his whole face seemed taken over by the twin avalanches of his fleshy cheeks. 'Been in the country long? Holiday, is it?'

'No, sir, I'm here to work. I work in construction. Building.'

'Oh, nice. I'm in the medical profession myself. Thirty-two years this August just gone. We see a lot of you lot. Builders.' He turned to his father. 'How did you two become friends?'

'On the telephone, weren't it?'

Randeep confirmed that it was. 'I used to work as a claims officer in India and one day I called your father and we became very friendly. He's a very kind man. You're lucky,' he added.

'The telephone?' Philip said, confused, or maybe suspicious.

'I helped your father with his claim,' Randeep went on. 'I did my best.'

The man was staring at Randeep's suitcase, stowed neatly beside the cabinet. 'How long are you visiting Dad for?'

'Oh, Philip, that's no way to treat a guest in our country. He only landed today, the poor bugger.'

Randeep moved to collect the dishes. 'I'll clean all this up.' His hands were shaking.

'Is that my washing?' Michael asked brightly, nodding towards the trolley.

Randeep washed the dishes, including the pans and mugs collected in the sink from earlier in the day, then carried in Michael's clothes from the trolley and folded them into neat piles on the small Formica table. All the while, he could hear Michael's son asking what the hell was going on, Dad? *How could you be so gullible? . . . For the love of God, tell me you haven't given him your bank details? . . . Of course he can't stay here!*

Shyly, Randeep re-entered the room. 'Sir, please don't send me away. I understand your concern. Really, I do. But I want you to know that I mean your father no harm. I'll pay rent. I'm from a good family. My father works in government.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Singh. Truly, I am. But this just isn't on. I know in your culture guests can come and live willy-nilly, but that's just not how we do things. Perhaps that's all to the bad, but it is how it is. If you don't have a bed for tonight then by all means you're welcome to stay, but I'd be grateful if you'd respect my wishes and find somewhere else tomorrow.'

'Oh, Philip . . .'

'I'm sorry, Dad. He seems like a very nice boy but I couldn't forgive myself if something happened to you.'

Randeep said he understood. He took his jacket from the cupboard, picked up his suitcase and thanked Michael for the meal. He tried to give him a few pounds for the pie and beans, but neither Michael nor Philip would hear of it. Instead, Philip drove Randeep to the station and helped him catch the last train back to Sheffield.

*

'Why are you so bhanchod slow?' the guy at the skip said, as Randeep upturned another barrowload at the foot of the ladder. 'It'll take a whole other week like this.' His name was Rishi, a fair-skinned and good-looking boy from Srinagar. Perhaps five or six years older than Randeep, he had a reputation for causing trouble.

'They're heavy,' Randeep said. 'I'm all on my own.'

Rishi snorted, saying that wasn't his problem, and on the van ride home he told Gurpreet that Randeep had been complaining, that he said he was having to work harder than everyone else.

'I never said that,' Randeep said, shaking his head fast. 'I didn't.'

Gurpreet smiled. Randeep's fear seemed to be satisfaction enough.

He stayed in his room that evening, reassuring himself that one day he would be reunited with his family, his father; that the loneliness he was feeling would not be for ever. When he was sure everyone had gone to bed, he took his laundry to the bathroom, filled the tub with a few inches of tepid water, and started scrubbing the clothes with soap. He was on his knees, leaning over, and aching from the day's work. He was determined. Then a noise started up, a sound like an angry bull trapped beneath the bath. Randeep froze. It was getting louder, closer: the others would wake. Gurpreet would wake. Panicking, he pulled out the plug.

The noise stopped, only for a green sewage to gurgle up from below. He watched it circulate and make a mess of everything. He called Avtar, who answered, sleepy-voiced, but confirmed that, no, he hadn't found any work, let alone work they could do together. And then it was five o'clock and his alarm was going and he was sure he'd rather have been dead.

One in one out, Randeep kept thinking, as he wheeled to and fro. That's what Vinny had said. One in one out. At lunchtime, with everyone else gathered by the van, sharing round the aachaar, he approached the plank ladder propped against the skip. He loosened the knots around the middle two rungs. Not so loose that they fell on touch, but loose enough that they might collapse under pressure. Then he went round the back of the skip and continued on to the van to collect his own lunchbox. He wasn't sure what he was doing. He convinced himself he was helping a friend.

'You're getting faster,' Rishi said in his nasal voice.

It was the first barrowload after lunch. Randeep tipped out the rocks at the foot of the ladder and started back down the slope. Maybe it wouldn't work. Please, God, don't let it work. He'd not made it halfway down – a significant crack, the sound of thick wood snapping, a scream. He turned around. The ladder and the rock had fallen away and Rishi had crumpled to the ground, thrashing his fists as his foot lay twisted oddly on itself. The others relinquished their spades and released their drills and ran to gather round, while Randeep stood there, shocked, almost wondering if he really had done it.

Later, when Vinny bhaji dropped them off at the house, Randeep hung back and asked what would happen to Rishi bhaji. He wanted to get in first – it wouldn't be long before everyone started advocating some brother or cousin or friend.

'Maybe he'll learn his lesson now, yeah? Maybe he'll spend less time prattling about and more paying attention to his job. Let that be a lesson to you all. Meantime, I'll get my cousin Manny to take a look at his foot. Didn't look pretty, though, did it?'

Randeep shook his head.

'Puts me in a bit of a posish though.'

Randeep waited.

'I'll need to find another one of you chumps. Smartish. Don't suppose you've got a cousin breaknecking it across the Channel as we speak, by any chance?'

Randeep told him that he had a bhaji, Avtar, who'd come with him, but he'd left him in Ilford because there was only work here for one of them.

'Visa?'

'Ji.'

'Marriage? Holiday?'

'Student.'

Vinny shook his head. 'Been burnt by enough scooters in my time. Lying, argumentative. Always quoting their fucking rights.'

'Bhaji, I promise. He will work very hard. You have my word.'