

*Iqbal Hussain*

GHOST TOWN

When you're a child, you think you'll be friends with the girl next door for always. You'll never leave the bubble of your primary school. Summers last a lifetime.

But, from an early age, I was aware of the nature of change. Every few years, my mother, like a hermit crab in search of the perfect shell, would make us move house. We didn't stray far, working our way around the Lower Audley neighbourhood in Blackburn, Lancashire. From the Victorian gloom of 10 Pilkington Street, we ventured canalside to 5 Coronation Street, with its coal fires and sash windows. These period features were wasted on Mother, who just wanted a fire she could light with a twist of a dial and windows that didn't let in draughts. In less than a year, we had decamped to the 1950s modernity of 7 Baines Street.

In its heyday, Blackburn was at the epicentre of the global cotton industry and Lower Audley's terraces housed generations of factory and mill workers. My father, along with others from his village in Pakistan, came over in the 1960s to man the looms and thread the shuttles in the still-working mills. By the time I was ten, the last of the mills had stopped production, the giant buildings finally silent, extinct, like dinosaurs made of brick.

What none of us saw coming was change on an even more devastating scale. As the 1980s drew to a close, the local authorities deemed Lower Audley unfit for habitation. Years of neglect meant that once proud houses were now shadows of their former selves. Yawning holes in roofs, crumbling brickwork, rotten windows, inadequate facilities, too many people living in too little space – the writing was on the wall, yet it still came as a shock. The council served a compulsory purchase order on the entire area. Lower Audley was to be demolished, and we had a year to move out.

As my eldest brother finished translating the letter for my parents, the only sounds in the room were the hissing of the gas fire and the ticking of the starburst clock on the wall above. We would be moving house again, but this time it would not be of Mother's choosing. She unfurled herself off the pouffe and returned to her kitchen domain, where she began making the evening's meal with much clattering of pans. Father carefully folded the letter and put it away in his suitcase of important documentation.

In the coming weeks, Mother busied herself with her Pfaff, rustling up curtains for the windows and floral covers for the sofa. Father carried on fixing people's geysers and boilers and anything else he could turn his hand to. The letter was not mentioned again.

With each month that passed, neighbours began to move away. We six children accompanied Mother on house-calls to say goodbye to outgoing families, where samosas were eaten and promises made to visit, before they climbed into their Bedford vans and estate cars and vanished out of our lives.

As the neighbourhood emptied, street corners grew fuller with dumped mattresses, wonky-legged furniture and half-open suitcases spilling out brightly coloured salwar kameez outfits. Windows were bricked up and front doors entombed in metal shutters, with 'Do Not Enter' notices plastered across them.

When our next-door neighbours, the Khans, moved out, we spent the day in hushed silence, scared to unsettle the strange air that came in the wake of their going. A few days later, I snuck into their house through the back door, which had been left open, but there was little joy in exploring empty rooms without Shaheeda and her family bringing them alive.

With autumn turning to winter, the wind tugged at the bare trees. It whistled through the broken windows, missing fanlights and half-ajar doors of empty properties. Doors banged shut in the middle of the night, rousing us from already uneasy dreams. My sisters refused to stay in the house on their own, claiming the Khans' house was haunted. I saw a tramp shuffling round its now-vacated rooms, like a ghost traversing a once-familiar house. I stopped playing in our back yard, uncomfortable with

who – or what – might pop their head up over the adjoining wall.

As the streets became quieter, with fewer people and cars, other sounds took over. The wail of fire engines became a familiar refrain at all times of day and night, as did the crash and tinkle of breaking glass. Flames blazed and crackled in back yards. Strange bangs would echo through the air, with no discernible cause.

One by one, as households left, the glowing lights behind curtained windows became extinguished. Streetlamps shone on, but when their bulbs popped or had a stone lobbed at them, they were no longer replaced. We'd sprint past the dark stretches in case a bogeyman leapt out and dragged us inside.

It was not until the bulldozers rolled in that we moved out. While Mother locked herself away in her bedroom, singing her beloved Bollywood songs for comfort, the rest of us went through the familiar routines of packing our lives away. We were off to Higher Audley, to a newly built council house. Even though it was bigger and more splendid than any of the houses before, with the smell of virgin carpet and blinding white walls, the house lacked a soul. We didn't know anyone and the desire to build a new community had gone. We had left our lives behind in the bricks and cobbles that were being torn down and ripped up.

Today, Lower Audley has been literally wiped off the map. The locality is no more, despite the clumps of posh Brookside-style houses that replaced the two-up-two-downs. It is impossible to visualise the once familiar streets – where there were houses, there are now paths; where there were roads, there are now green spaces. The only constant is the canal. Each time I visit my mum and I walk past the old neighbourhood, I remain on the perimeter, unwilling to enter the warren of streets. I am a stranger in my own past.

With the might of an army, that single page letter decimated a whole community. I would spend many years mourning what had passed and what might have been.

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