

Finding Me, Finding You

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When I was five, mummy leaved me. I cried and cried. Mummy telled me to be a big boy. I goed after her, but the white lady holded my hand.

The lady gived me a picture of a hen. “Can you copy that, luv?”

My hen looked like a cat. I throwed my pencil. A boy with blue eyes picked it up and gave it back to me. I started crying.

The lady aksed me if I had brothers or sisters. I sayed their names in her ear. She goed out the room. She comed back – with Shaheen! My chair fallled over. I runned to Shaheen and hugged her and cried and cried.

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When I was 10, I read voraciously, from Enid Blyton and E Nesbit to Philippa Pearce and Peter Dickinson. The fictional worlds were far removed from my own: a Pakistani household in a two-up two-down in the cobbled streets of a Northern town. I was the only reader in a family of three children, the others content to live in reality.

The rows of terraced houses had once homed mill workers. Now they were filled with fast-growing Asian families and an increasingly depleted White working class. My father worked as a weaver at one of the last remaining mills. Keen to prove to himself and those

back home that this was a land of plenty, he worked more than he rested. We would get to know him anew each time our paths crossed.

Perhaps to make up for his absence, my mother smothered us with love. She plied us with favourite foods: samosas, biryani, chicken curry, pakoras. As the youngest, I received a double portion of everything – and scorn from my siblings.

They were golden years: we roamed the streets without supervision; we rolled down grassy banks, somehow avoiding splashing into the canal; we played tig, sticky toffee, Mr Wolf and a hundred other games.

For the teachers at the local Church of England primary school, it must have been a challenge to educate we children of factory-workers and illiterate housewives.

The formidable Miss Zimmerman, who looked like “the dark one” from ABBA, forbade us from speaking Punjabi or Urdu at school. She flung her chalk at anyone not paying attention, and whacked a size-nine pump across our backsides for more serious mishaps. It was only later I realised Miss Zimmerman’s tough love, emphasis on manners and desire to improve how we spoke meant we were better prepared for life and society. Her glassy eyes on our last day suggested we had changed her world, too.

When David joined, mid-term, he doubled the number of white pupils in the class. With his biscuit-coloured hair, freckles and green eyes, he was an exotic creature in our midst. I scrutinised him, trying to work out who and what he was. When he looked back, I turned away, uncharacteristically shy.

Sporty and popular, David didn't mind my geeky ways, which was as much a shock to me as it was to the other boys. He would come find me in the playground, rescuing me from my pitiful pleas to the girls to let me join their skipping games. I'd show him how to turn a blade of grass into a musical instrument, or how to juggle with three balls. He'd demonstrate karate moves or teach me Australian swear words.

When he went back to Melbourne, he took a part of me away with him.

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When I was 15, I ditched my goodie-two-shoes ways. I became a "disruptive influence", often ending up in detention for giving backchat to teachers. I stopped putting my hand up and I failed to do my homework. I tried hanging around with the "hard" kids, but they saw right through me and walked away from the smoking shed, leaving me with just the fumes from their cigarettes.

It was a summer of riots, with police patrols regularly deployed outside the school. When they weren't there, you risked a gauntlet of skinheads, which meant literally going round the houses over the football pitch to avoid them. The teachers seemed oblivious to the racial tensions both in and out of school, despite every wall covered in an NF logo.

I didn't have to pretend to be hopeless at PE. My brother had been an all-rounder, as the sports teacher regularly reminded me, as though I was purposely misleading him with my own lack of sporting prowess. I got used to being in the final two to be picked, my humiliation compounded by losing out to the boy with

the glass eye.

The only saving grace was community service, once a week. I chose Parkview, a private hospital in the Lancashire countryside. Our afternoons there coincided with those of a school from the posh part of town. Over the weeks, I found myself pushing wheelchairs with a boy called Richard. We would stroll around the gardens, like two Victorian nannies, each with our charges.

Richard spoke nicely. He had smartly cut hair. He wore trousers not jeans, and shoes not trainers. He knew about astronomy and science. I could talk to him without him staring at me as if I had a second head. Engrossed, we'd end up almost missing the coaches that whisked us back to our own worlds.

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When I was 20, I had a picture of Linda Lusardi on one wall of my student room and Jane Seymour on the other. From the smirks these elicited from visiting friends, I had clearly chosen the wrong poster girls.

I was adept at confusing others, albeit unknowingly. Anita from the student house next door began popping round with Bombay Mix or a home-made curry. I'd offer her a mug of tea and a Jammy Dodger in return. We would sit on the bed, watching *Neighbours*. Each time Anita put her mug on the table and picked it up again, she moved incrementally closer. By the time she was within touching distance, the jolly theme tune would start up and signal an end to the visit. After several weeks, both visits and snacks dried up. She ended up dating the captain of the rugby team.

Then there was Karen. Our relationship was strictly academic. Karen had a thing for James and his giant teeth. James preferred "Irish Clare", despite a rampant perm that reminded me of a poodle.

Karen was equally unable to help me with my own love life, not least because I was still trying to work it out myself.

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When I was 25, I moved to Manor Park, with Matthew. Older than me by four years, Matthew was light years ahead in emotional stability.

We danced at Club Kali (“For Asian men and their admirers”). It was like a school disco, with a sparsely decorated room and a dodgy collection of blinking lights. In a further echo of school, the floor was a half-and-half mix of brown and white faces, only this time the two groups liked each other. As DJ Ritu spun Bollywood hits, Matthew and I would throw bhangra moves in our waistcoats, flirting with the sari-clad drag queens.

Matthew’s mum and dad treated us as if we were a regular couple. I was sorry I couldn’t do the same for Matthew, as my parents, siblings and the entire culture behind them would never see sexuality as anything other than a problem. Our relationship was conducted with the blinds open or closed depending on who was looking in.

The cracks appeared before the second year was out. With such high expectations and promises, I felt trapped. Dishonesty crept into the bedroom. I convinced myself they were just “little flings”. Long talks became a regular feature of our weekends. The increasing emotional wear on both of us turned the final year into a blur of make-ups and break-ups, before the final cleaving.

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When he was 30, Imran, from Manor Park, focussed on his career as a journalist. Would it be tricky to find love in the largely female environment of young women’s magazines, we asked?

“It’s not ideal,” admitted Imran, “but you do get the odd chap. Not that it’s a good idea to mix business and pleasure.”

What about the Internet? “I’m still figuring it out, but it’s definitely made things easier. I’ve had a number of short relationships,” he told us. “Three months here, six months there. So that’s something.”

It remains to be seen how the romantic year pans out for this hopeful singleton. *Next week: my best friend slept with my boyfriend while I watched TV downstairs.*

There was John, the Tin Tin-lookalike who enjoyed the thrill of the chase but who shut down the minute I said “I love you”.

Alex, the music teacher, dazzled me with his smile and muscled chest. During an evening of country dancing, his friends told me how happy I had made him. So happy that, after two months, we broke up: a limpid parting of ways, with neither of us able or willing to keep the spark alive.

Ryan took drugs and frequented the Black Cap every weekend. Canadian by birth, he insisted on speaking with the mangled vowels of an old Etonian. While dabbing another anti-ageing serum on his forehead, he wouldn’t think twice about leering at some young buck walking past. “Nice arse!”

Finally, there was Harry. Full of anger and mistrust, his handsome exterior belied a paranoid and controlling interior. The crunch came when I apparently did something so heinous he couldn’t even tell me what it was. He announced the break-up via answerphone: “You KNOW what you did! You and are you shitty little friends are welcome to each other. Fuck off!” A second message, left a minute later: “And bring my keys back!”

I pressed Delete and binned the keys.

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When I was 35, viví en Buenos Aires por seis meses. Julian got a job there and I joined him on sabbatical. The jacaranda-lined streets were a world away from the cobbled streets of my childhood.

A natural linguist, Julian picked up the language within weeks. When new friends came for dinner, they would start off in English but soon slide into Spanish. I became the befuddled elderly relative in the room, catching one word in ten, nodding my head and maintaining a smile on my face.

After two years, Julian got posted to Miami for a further two years. Not wanting to stand in the way of his career, I visualised the joyful scenes that would ensue when he came back.

But there wasn't to be a happy ending. The time apart had driven a wedge between us, and our ever-diverging paths over the four years meant that by the end he and I no longer spoke the same language. We had left behind more than just our hearts in Argentina: we had also sacrificed our relationship.

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When I was 40, my sister rang to say my father was in hospital.

While changing trains at Crewe, I got a text from her, meant for my brother, saying the funeral might be delayed depending on when the hospital released the body. She sent a flurry of apologetic follow-up messages but I was too busy throwing up on the platform.

We three children consoled each other in the living room, gathered around my mum. I went to the mosque for the first time since I was a child. Mourners gave their condolences as I sat, cross-legged, reciting prayers, counting them out with an ever-growing pile of date stones.

With the cemetery shut for the evening, my father got to spend a final night in the mosque he so loved. He remained as unknown to me by the end as he had when I was a child.

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When I was 45, after half a lifetime, hidden away in an unlikely meeting place online, I found him: my very own David. The hole in my heart slowly mended.

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