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Excerpt from The Intended

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Abstract

Whenever he came to my room, he no longer scrutinized the wallpaper or floor for evidence of stains and dirt. What used to be quick, hostile visits, ameliorated only by my handing over the rent, became leisurely affairs: Mr Ali, face drawn, eyes softened with grief, sitting on my bed talking endlessly about his family. The thickness of his accent and his frequent lapses into Urdu meant it was difficult to follow him, but I was a model of patience, listening intently, nodding sympathetically, breaking out with the odd apostrophe as if his suffering was also mine. Although largely bored by his stories, I affected an interest since it put him under an obligation to me. For the first time I had some control over him, so that I could negotiate late payment of the rent because I had spent some of it on food or a book that week.

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His sister, apparently, had been sick for a year; no one knew why. A widow, she lived with her childless sister and brother-in-law in a remote village, the three of them growing old together, scraping a living by collecting fire-wood and selling it to the villagers. This accounted for her stoop, for she had spent the last twenty-five years bending to pick up pieces of wood. Mr Ali, thousands of miles away in London, was the family's saviour, he sent ten pounds home regularly (my rent money) - enough to feed the three of them for the month. When he heard about her illness he posted an extra ten pounds with which they took her to the nearest doctor, some thirty miles away by bus. The doctor took the ten pounds, examined her, drew blood, inspected it under a microscope, tested her urine sample and finally pronounced her merely fatigued by old age. He gave her a capsule containing about ten differently coloured pills, each of them slightly mildewed, then sent her away. She took ten days rest and one pill a day, at the end of which she felt strong again, getting up on the eleventh day from her bed to collect firewood. On the twelfth day, the same pains started again and continued until Mr Ali sent, three months later, an air ticket so that she could travel to England to rest, eat good food and be looked after by Mrs Ali.

She was my companion in the late hours when she would come upstairs to the toilet adjoining my room and spend an hour there

coughing and vomiting. I was awakened by the violence of each upheaval and the groans that followed. I pushed open the toilet door to see her leaning against the wall, dazed and weakened. 'Are you all right?' I asked impotently. She looked at me and summoned up a few words in Urdu. I brought her a glass of water, not knowing what else to do. She took it in her frail hand and swallowed, some of the water running down her mouth and neck. I went away, but could not sleep, feeling the pain in her body and my utter inability to comfort her. Each night, just after midnight, she hauled herself upstairs to the toilet to vomit, and in the intervals I offered her water, orange juice or milk. I always held her hand, and supported her as she returned to her bed. No words passed between us, but a dependency developed as between mother and son, the dying and the living. I stopped going to bed at midnight, reading late into the night, waiting for the sound of footsteps creaking the stairs. I needed her to come upstairs, to continue the relationship, and missed her on those few occasions when she broke the routine, lying awake in my bed wondering desperately whether she had died. Mr Ali was extremely grateful for my late-night vigilance. Whereas previously he had chided me for staying up late and urging me to stop reading and go to bed to save on his electricity bill, now he positively encouraged my studies. I no longer had to contemplate candles, or an oil lamp such as lit the house of my grandmother in Albion Village, to finish off essays. I began to feel sorry for him as I watched his spirit crumbling, his old character of parsimony and bullying undermined by his sister's sickness.

'All for nothing, all this for nothing,' he said on a visit to my room the night after his sister was taken to hospital by ambulance. It was about eight in the evening, I was just about to sit down to eat some food when there was a sudden commotion downstairs, doors opening and slamming and Mrs Ali shouting at the top of her voice. After a few minutes the doorbell rang. I peeped out of my door to see two men in blue uniforms enter, bearing a stretcher. I rushed downstairs, following them into the living-room, where the sister lay crumpled in a ball of bloodied clothing, breathing heavily, moaning. They put her on the stretcher whilst Mrs Ali rushed around, collecting things in a bag, a towel, sari, toothbrush, and Mr Ali stood by the door immobilized by grief and watched them take her out and slide her into the ambulance. As she left through the front door, she looked up, recognized me, tried to raise her hand as if to signal something, to say something, but the men were in a hurry, they put her hand back under the blanket and silenced her with a 'There! there! you'll be all right dear! There's a good girl, don't wear yourself out, we'll soon get you back on your feet,' whilst I looked into her eyes and smiled weakly as

if to reassure her that the two strangers were kindly and at the same time telling her goodbye forever.

'All this for nothing,' he repeated in a mournful voice, gesturing to the walls, the ceiling, the floor. 'Twelve years I come here, work, save, work, buy house, paint, put new window in, new roof, dig up garden, plant vegetables like back home, like farming, all come to nothing.' It was Friday, rent day, but he had come up to mourn not to collect his dues. When I took out the ten pound note and gave it to him, he held it for a moment, then put it down on the table. 'Money no good for me now, nothing,' he said, obsessed by his sister's illness. He looked at my feet. 'Buy new shoe, how can you walk down road with thing like that?' and he put the note in my hand, his face suddenly glowing with kindness and friendship. 'How your mother and father don't pity you and send things for you?' he asked. He suddenly wanted to find out about my family, as if to drown his own sense of doom.

'What you want to do when you leave school?' he wanted to know.

'Go to university, become a doctor, or a lawyer.'

'Then what?'

'I'm not sure ... help people, make money, buy a car, buy a house, get married.' He listened intently as I sketched a vague future.

'Then what?'

There was a long silence in which I tried to imagine the substance of life to come whilst he drifted off into thoughts about his sister's coming death, the funeral arrangements, the gathering of the family, the telephone calls, telegrams, the burial in Balham Cemetery, the drugged sleeping that night and the waking up to horrible cold sunlight, to the echoes of yesterday's prayers and the ritual of shaving, brushing, dressing in mournful clothes to visit the grave for months to come, stopping in at the florists at the top of the road for a fresh wreath, boarding the train and bearing your distress in total privacy in the crowded compartment, unfamiliar people reading newspapers, books, chewing sweets, chatting, no one knowing, and you boxed in your own grief, like a coffin. You look around and wonder how many have felt the same, have suffered the loss or are about to and you want to reach out to them, to share something, you don't know exactly what, and to say something which even in your broken English and Paki accent would touch them and inspire responses. Of course you don't. Instead you sit there wedged between strangers, looking at your hands, your feet, fingering your tie, until the train disgorges you onto the platform, all the time wondering why we must live as we die, alone, by ourselves. A bus takes you to the cemetery, which is packed with graves, thousands of headstones and concrete mounds, each marking the spot of someone whom you're never seen and never will and each a

stranger to the body beside them. You come to your portion of this vast unknown earth where your sister lies, and spend an hour there crying to yourself, arranging flowers, reading the English words on the headstone for the hundredth time, by now totally fluent in the deciphering of the words.

I fancied that my own immortality was secured by the verse on her tombstone for when Mr Ali was faced with the problem of an appropriate inscription, it was me he approached to compose a set of words. 'Something that will last,' he said, 'tell her story, that people will forever see what my sister was, and my family.' Joseph's obsession with nothingness came back to me. It was puzzling to conceive how an illiterate peasant woman – draped in rags all her life, next to nothing, who could barely get a visa to enter England, coughing all over her entry forms and the immigration officer at Heathrow so that he moved back slightly from his pillar-shaped desk where he stood like a sentinel, still not escaping the thin spray of blood and spittle, and stamped her passport quickly to get rid of her unpleasant presence – was transformed by death, so that now she was moving freely above clouds, seeing with an astronaut's eye the eeriness of the earth beneath, the blue wash of ocean tides, the green and gold splashes of forests and deserts, the spread of land without boundaries except for gleaming rivers and mountains, and when she looked up, a billion lanterns hanging from the dome of space in a carnival of lights. All the mysteries which hurt our minds yielded up their secrets to her. The mathematics, physics, chemistry and geology of the whole universe she calculated in an instant, she who once could only count according to the number of fingers and toes, wrapping ten twigs at a time in string, each bundle to be sold for one rupee each. Now her all-seeing eye traced the hidden underground stream, found the ideal site for the village well, when before she and her brethren dug forlornly in the dust; she discovered a mine of diamond-laden rocks only half a mile from her hut, enough to buy wheat to feed the whole province for the rest of the century. And her mouth, shrivelled with age, barely consolidating some remaining teeth, could now utter the most fluent songs, could quote from a thousand books of literature at will, could speak innumerable languages. For a few daydreaming moments I envied her genius before it all became too foolish to contemplate and the echoes of her vomiting brought me down to earth. The house was silent now that she had gone and the nights lonely. Two weeks in hospital, a flurry of activities downstairs as Mr and Mrs Ali came and went with plastic bags stuffed with samosas, chapatis, fruit, clean clothing, until the telephone rang one afternoon and a cry broke from Mr Ali, a howl that dropped all pretence to civilization and surrendered to pure instinct. It was during a

commercial break, and I turned down the volume on the television and stared mindlessly at the screen, Mr Ali's grief imparting a desolation to the Andrex toilet rolls being advertised by a dog, followed by the meat that nine out of ten cats preferred. I was confused, no longer knowing what mattered. The programme was resumed, some politicians arguing with violent bias about the steep rise of inflation, its dire effects, the bottom dropping out of markets, the plunge into unemployment, loss of prestige, the nation falling apart – none of which mattered any more to Mr Ali who, seized by a sense of loneliness, sobbed automatically, almost objectively.



David Dabydeen