Dragons in E.8

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Abstract
I'm waiting to see my social worker in her office. It makes me angry when she's late, because she's supposed to be working not doing me a favour. Here she is. Sandra. She's just been up Ridley Road market to do her shopping and she got stuck on the one-way system up there. She apologises to me as a matter of course. Manners are important to Sandra. When I was little I remember a story I read about a girl who never said 'please' and 'thank-you'. Her aunt who came to visit cut big 'P' and 'Q' letters from card and pinned them on her pinafore everytime the girl forgot. In the end the dress was so covered up with 'P's' and 'Q's' that the girl finally realised how to be well brought up.

This serial is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol17/iss3/12
ATIMA SRIVASTAVA

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I’m waiting to see my social worker in her office. It makes me angry when she’s late, because she’s supposed to be working not doing me a favour. Here she is. Sandra. She’s just been up Ridley Road market to do her shopping and she got stuck on the one-way system up there. She apologises to me as a matter of course. Manners are important to Sandra. When I was little I remember a story I read about a girl who never said ‘please’ and ‘thank-you’. Her aunt who came to visit cut big ‘P’ and ‘Q’ letters from card and pinned them on her pinafore everytime the girl forgot. In the end the dress was so covered up with ‘P’ s and ‘Q’ s that the girl finally realised how to be well brought up. Not dragged up like me.

‘Why do you always put yourself down?’ asks Sandra, really concerned. She really wants to know. She wants the key to understanding people like me. But she doesn’t understand. When I say things like that it’s a private joke with myself, because I’m saying what she’s thinking way back in her head. But when that’s true, and there’s a hundred Sandra’s thinking it, then it touches me and I sort of think it’s true as well.

You’ve got to have killer instinct in Hackney if you’re driving. The one-way paranoia we used to call it. Round there no-one cares what side of the road they’re on. You just have to drive like everyone else, like you’ve only got your destination in mind. I’ve said that to her before. That you can learn it, you don’t have to be born and bred in Hackney for it. I’m sure she thinks black people were born knowing how to sing, dance and cause traffic jams. Mind you, there’s no rush in NW3 so I suppose she’s not used to it.

Ridley Road is very good for fruit and veg though. And vegetables you never saw before. Plus when I got my hair permed, I used to buy the Curl Activator from there, that all the black girls used. There’s so many shops down that road that just sell black hair products and nasty bleaches for lightening the skin. Beats me why some black want to be white. My pink stain never did me much good.

Why am I thinking about Hackney when I’m supposed to be talking about something else? I’m always doing that these days. Just going off onto a different subject. It’s like my head is so full of things, I have to keep pushing them out to make room.

I’d been living on the Down’s Estate for a few months when Fliss and Rob moved in downstairs. It wasn’t really my flat, Barry’s name was on
the tenancy. He’d asked me to move in after we’d been going out together for about six months. I was working at an old people’s home and he was despatch riding. He was good to me and we had some laughs together. We were high up and there was no lift but you got used to the stairs after a while. Anyway, there were stairs where my mum and dad lived. They had a lift, but it was always broken. Like the weather, it was another thing everyone liked to moan about. It was time for me to move out from there anyway. All those people with no future got on my nerves.

Fliss was short for Felicity. I was hanging out of the balcony watching them move into the flats on a Saturday afternoon. Barry had just pulled up on the Kawasaki and he was chatting to them in the empty courtyard and car park, that was also the kid’s playground.

We helped them with their boxes and carrier bags. The Council hadn’t bothered to let a lot of the flats there, so it was no wonder that squatters were moving in. Fliss and Rob had pink hair and wore leather jackets with writing sprayed on, but they seemed o.k.

We’d been redecorating our place and I’d made some big cushions for the floor. Rob and Barry got stuck into bike conversation so I started to tell Fliss about what I’d been doing on the flat. She didn’t seem very impressed, but we were drinking coffee and rolling joints and making friends. By opening time we were all a bit stoned, so we took them to our local. They had been at college together, but they said it was a load of crap. Rob was looking for work and Barry’s firm needed a rider so that was that. Fliss was a painter and wasn’t bothered if she had a day job or not. She felt it would interfere with the creative process.

I worked for three days a week, so some afternoons I’d go downstairs to chat with Fliss. I was surprised that even after a month their flat was still full of carrier bags and boxes of stuff just sitting around. There was a big double mattress on the floor with a duvet. The walls still had peeling wallpaper. She’d bought a rug for the floor that even my Mum’s dog would not have slept on. All round there were oil paints and brushes, cigarette packets and cooking foil, tins of half finished baked beans and dead matches. There were lots of Fliss’s paintings around the place, with paint buttered on with knives, that didn’t look like anything.

She was alright Fliss, but her pose bored me at times. You could tell by her look that she had money, yet she pretended to be poor. I wondered what the people who had lived there for years thought about them. Most of them just put up with it I suppose.

You could tell Fliss had never lived around West Indian people before, because she went out of her way to make friends with as many as she could. Especially the rastas who sold grass. The old black people would sometimes kiss their teeth as we passed them on the stairs. I felt embarrassed because Fliss was wearing a t-shirt with a tit hanging out of a rip. I think she thought I was a bit square for keeping the flat clean and wearing clothes that didn’t make a statement. But I think she knew
we were ordinary and that’s why she talked to us.

It was strange how gradually but somehow the estate became divided up into those people who had lived there for years, and the new people. Most of them were white political activists or art students looking for life. They had come running from detached housing and fitted kitchens that their neighbours wanted to run to. I suppose I thought I was smart because I had them all sussed, the losers and the winners.

There used to be some good parties in those flats. Word of mouth in the corridors and so many people you could hardly breathe. Dope, and marble cake and fried chicken in the kitchen. People bringing their kids, dancing with them. Even the parties changed. The music was different and not so thick with smoke. Grass would still go round, but now there were five pound notes rolled up to snort white lines, pieces of silver foil to chase dragons with ...

I knew where they were coming from. How they were slumming it with the working classes. I might not have had their education but at least I knew how to pay my rent legally. Once I was telling Fliss about the old dears I worked with. About having to take them to the toilet, waiting on them to remember their train of thought ... She said it sounded ‘gross’. She said that word a lot. She also said ‘wicked’ if she liked something, like she’d heard the black kids say. There was no talking to Barry about it. He was so keen, so impressed by their rebellion.

‘What’s so good about working class people?’ He challenged me one day. ‘They’re ignorant and prejudiced. My dad he’ll work and die driving that train for London Transport for what? He’s never been on a plane or had a dream beyond four walls.’ I knew what he meant but it upset me and I felt like he was betraying me, my mum and dad, our lot ...

Still, it was better than talking to next door who was always moaning. Fliss had some good books in her flat all still in boxes. She was out of it most of the time but I didn’t mind just looking through the art books, while she spent two hours spiking her hair up with Palmolive soap. I got all interested in surrealism, and even went to the library to find out more. Maybe to the others it was a joke, but it felt fine to look up things for myself. On my day off I went to a Surrealist exhibition in the West End and used my old UB40 to get in free. I tagged along with a tour, eavesdropping as the guide explained the significance of ants in Dali’s work. It wasn’t important or necessary just interesting. I bought some postcards for the old dears which they put up on the notice board. The one I bought for Fliss was still in its paperbag on the floor. She was sitting in front of her canvas chewing her brush. She said she took smack to help de-structure her work.

She wasn’t really interested in the exhibition. I remember she was shocked I didn’t drink or smoke cigarettes. I didn’t quite fit her image about working class people wasting their lives. Well I suppose I did in the end.
I did get to know Sonia next door after a while. It wasn’t surprising she was so miserable. She was on her own with a kid and her boyfriend ‘the governmen’ man’ as she called him, came round when he felt like it. According to Sonia everything belonged to the ‘governmen’. She says, ‘I’m off to my governmen’ bed now’ or ‘sit down on the governmen’ chair love’, mimicking her old mum who always used that expression in Trinidad. Sometimes I didn’t know whether she meant the social security snooper or her boyfriend. Her daughter Tamla and me would always hoot with laughter sitting side by side in front of the telly. One night the governmen’ man cancelled by phone at the last minute. I was going to babysit and me and Tamla had spent the whole afternoon plaiting Sonia’s hair for the occasion. Tamla was six and she taught me how to make thin plaits and wax them carefully at the ends. Two hundred plaits! We were more upset than Sonia. ‘Well you know how governmen’ is’ she said to cheer us up ‘they screw you when they feel like it’. She winked across at me to see if I had got the double meaning. Tamla knew too, but she always let her mum think that she didn’t, she always looked after her like that. I used to think when I had a kid, I wanted it to be just like Tamla.

I hadn’t seen much of Fliss and Rob for a few months but Barry saw them all the time. They always seemed to be sharing a private joke.

I still went to the library once a week and one day I met Stafford who lived upstairs, in there. He was a graphic designer and unlike his younger brother Harold who was a rastafarian, he dressed in smart tailored jackets. Sometimes I’d lie in bed waiting for Barry to get in from downstairs and I’d hear Stafford come in at four or sometimes five in the morning. They shared a room and he’d always wake Harold with his noise. They’d argue and bang about, wake up the other flats. They were the best of friends really but their lifestyles were quite different. I thought Stafford was quite tasty but when he took out blonde women to nightclubs, they weren’t women like me. ‘Rich white tarts who like being seen with forbidden fruit’ said Sonia with contempt. I would lie and imagine them because we never saw any of them. Stafford never brought anyone home.

Harold was different. He’d taken to visiting me and usually he would just sit quietly watching T.V. while I did chores or read a book. Sometimes we’d talk. Although he didn’t say much, I knew he liked being there and that was fine with me too. I hardly saw Barry these days anyway and when I did he was always talking about Fliss and Rob. If Fliss ever came upstairs, Harold would make some excuse and leave. Unlike me, he was too proud to even smoke her dope. Meanwhile, I was beginning to suspect that Barry was doing smack. We never really got round to talking about it and my attitude was that if someone didn’t want to tell you something, then I didn’t want to know.

Sometimes Fliss and Rob would come back from Marks and Spencers loaded down with carrier bags full of food. We all ate like kings for a
week on Chicken Kiev and Beef Bourguignon. Fliss said I should try it, it was easy. But I said I wouldn’t shoplift, because my mum had got nicked for stealing half a pound of butter from Waitrose. It never mattered if those things were true, they loved it. It made them feel guilty for not having to steal necessities. They wanted so much to appear poor and yet the reality made them swallow uncomfortably, it was true though. I used to think screw them for everything, their conscience and their money. My fridge was full of prawns, ham, pate and strawberries. Barry said I was wicked, and I should be grateful to them because they had been good to us. He also said that I should just admit that I was jealous. I felt sad and wondered if he was right, and also if he’d stopped loving me.

Around the time I started taking smack, Hackney was on the crest of a change. I remember watching black women putting out the washing, gapping at the distant houses in the streets. Prices were going through the roof. ‘For Sale’ signs were sprouting up in the grottiest road. In the streets all the new shops were rubbing shoulders with the rough trade. Next to the Greek shop was a vegetarian Indian restaurant that looked like a wine bar. Next to the useful Hoover parts shop was a useless kite shop and a designer jewellery shop that also sold one-off furniture. Our local was under new management. They knocked the pool room down and turned it into what looked like a greenhouse. It was called the conservatory, and there were books on the shelves. There were no fruit machines and the beer tasted like water Barry said. The Socialist Workers’ Party had their meetings there on Tuesday nights. Once a month they would purchase marijuana from the old black guys who still drank in there. The Yuppies didn’t socialise in Hackney, they just got their cars broken into. The ones who mingled were the do-gooders, the revolutionaries, the ‘artistes’ ...

Harold and Stafford lived with their old dad. Their mum had died two years ago just before we moved in. I took some Beef Bourguignon up for them and told their dad I’d cooked it, because he wouldn’t have approved of stolen goods. I could hardly get inside the door because five suitcases were piled up in the hall. I thought they were going somewhere. But Harold explained they just hadn’t touched anything since their mum died. Squeezing past into the front room I saw 3D Christ hanging over the mantelpiece, looking down on the countless glass fishes that you get in Ridley Road for 50p. All neatly arranged on different coloured crocheted mats. Everything shrouded in dust. It made me think of all the important, sentimental clutter that people collect in their life, that just becomes stuff when you die. I suppose she was always packed, always ready for the day she would leave for that place she had abandoned for England, but of course she never went. Fliss was laughing about it. She said their flat was ‘tacky’. Funny how the only thing about black people she liked were the drugs and the music. I nearly told her that her paintings were the nastiest things I’d ever seen.
But suddenly everything seemed empty to me that day. Peoples’ dreams and hopes, their aimless existence, the government man screwing you when he felt like it, half a pound of butter becoming a criminal record. And I thought I heard laughter and champagne glasses clinking in the luxury conversions. And just out of earshot, up in the tower blocks, someone was cleaning toilets ...

The four of us were sitting in, listening to music and it was raining outside. That was the day I first had smack. Just smoked it. That’s what the silver foil was about. I watched Rob burn the precious white powder and pass me a tube to inhale it with. I hadn’t realised the three of them had been doing it for the last few months. Well I thought, why not, I’ll try it.

It was the best feeling I’d ever had. I didn’t feel anxious, or angry or scared. It was better than smoking dope because you didn’t feel paranoid. I hugged Barry as though I hadn’t seen him for ages. We all had a laugh. In fact we were all laughing so much I can’t even remember what the joke was or who it was on. I thought it was alright to smoke it anyway, but jacking up was disgusting. I’d never do that. I was far too sensible.

It was coming up for two years we’d lived on the Downs. Smack was cheaper than speed those days and it was a small price to pay for the way you felt. Pistachio nuts were really cheap in the Indian shop and the bloke told me it was because there was a war on between Iran and Iraq. So it had become a cheap import. Smack came from there, so I reckoned it was probably also a good earner for some government who was shipping it out by the car load. I was feeling fine as I strolled past Hackney front line, digesting two of London’s cheapest imports.

All the tower blocks looked like a fairy tale with pink clouds behind them. The air hung heavy with diesel and the sound of distant walkers, but it felt like another planet. I was on top of the world.

There was a phone box. About a dozen mean looking rastas were congregating around it. It was their business hot line. It was dusk and I was smiling as I walked past. I had nothing anyone could steal, just well being. There was a row of shops there that all hated each other. The kebab place hated the Chinese takeaway hated the Indian shop hated the West Indians. And they all hated the Jews because they got there first and done well and moved to Golders Green. Well not hate, professional rivalry you could call it. After all they were all in the same boat.

One night the four of us went to a kebab place on Green Lanes. Three in the morning and the place was packed. Some old men were playing cards in the back room with the video on, drinking turkish coffee. In the restaurant proper Stavros was talking to us. We always called him that even though his name was Mustapha because we couldn’t pronounce it. He was saying how he watched the Cypriots move up the Piccadilly line. They started at Finsbury Park with rented accommodation then moved to Arnos Grove where they had a semi
and a thriving business. By the time they'd arrived, two houses and respect, they'd made it to Cockfosters. There was an Irish man playing guitar and singing country and western, really badly but no-one cared. I just laughed and laughed because I felt like a citizen of the world.

I was in my own private carriage, reserved first class. Everyone was out there engaged in the battle of life. Trapped by the very rituals that promised to set them free. Working like dogs so they could relax, being unhappy so that they could be happy. All waiting for a receipt for their good behaviour.

I was lying about it but I was jacking up then. Well it was getting expensive and you need much less if you shoot it straight into your blood. You learn it really easy. Finding a vein, slapping it to attention before feeding it. So easy to feel good.

The four of us spent nearly all of our time together. I lost my job around then because I could never get up in time. And I would lose patience with them when it wasn't fair to. The old folk needed someone reliable, so I was a bad bet for them. Well that was alright. I managed to get some cleaning jobs in Stoke Newington. That was a turn up. I'd always promised myself I'd never clean other people's houses, like my mum had done because she wanted a better life for me. And I could feel Fliss looking down her nose at me for it. But, I needed the money didn't I?

Days just passed by. Sometimes I'd go into a panic if I thought we couldn't afford to get some more stuff but Fliss and Rob always had some. So I suppose I had been wicked about her after all. Occasionally I'd suspect Barry had brought some for himself without sharing it with me, and we'd row about it.

You don't get addicted just like that, whatever the adverts tell you. It sort of creeps up behind you like a stranger and before you know it, it's like your bloody guardian angel looking over your shoulder, checking every move, every thought you have. Anyway I get pissed off when people say you're not with it when you're smacked out. I know what's going on around me. And what I close my mind to isn't worth knowing because it's bullshit. The trouble with people like Sandra is that they're into the bullshit, making sense of it from the books they've read. I know more about it than she does, I could do her job. But who am I kidding? No I couldn't, because I'm sick, and she's all I've got to help me get better.

Sonia said she didn't want me babysitting the kid anymore. She probably thought I was a bit of a health hazzard, I must have had a government health warning across my face. I could hardly get out of bed in the mornings so I didn't care. At the time I thought she had front to get annoyed with me talking about smack all the time, but it was alright for her to go on about trying to give up cigarettes.

The people on the estate didn't rate us much. They thought we were dirty. They probably had as much scorn for me as I had for Fliss and Rob. And yet, in life you make strange bedfellows don't you?
A lot of things happened around that time. What kept me and Barry together was something ugly, when it should have been something beautiful. It had nothing to do with the smack. I forgot my pills and lost so much weight that my insides were all messed up. First I didn’t have a period for a few months and then all this blood came out, staining the sheets accusingly. The cramps were so bad I thought I was going to die. I didn’t dare go to the clinic in case they did a blood test. All this blood came out. And somewhere inside that mess there was a shredded, feeble little life.

Harold still came round sometimes but I hardly noticed him I was so out of my head. My stomach hurt. The old men looked sideways at me as I staggered downstairs in the middle of the afternoon. I felt bad. I wanted to just feel alright but I felt bad, and dirty like a rubbish bag. There was nothing to talk about. I just took some more stuff so I didn’t have to think about it, so I would feel alright. There was nothing to do was there? It was all over.

One night the phone rang. It was Harold. We all started to talk on the phone, telling him to come over because we were having a party, yeah! The four of us were sprawled out around our flat, having eaten the last of the food. The sink was full of dirty dishes and cigarette ends. The record had finished but no one cared to move the hesitating needle back. I suddenly missed the quietness of Harold and I really wanted him to come over.

Then I realised he wasn’t talking in his usual Jamaican accent. He was talking like me, fast and scared. He said he was at Stoke Newington Police Station. He’d been picked up, and he wanted me to come and get him. He must have been really desperate to call me. So I went, even though the others said ‘wow what a downer’.

By the time I got there the police looked like wild animals to me. I’d had a hit before I left the flat to see me through the ordeal. As if it was me that had been beaten up. I strung some words together to the man behind the desk, gave him my address and all the rest of it. Finally they let Harold go, as we left the station, a police man sniggered ‘nigger’s tart’.

On the street Harold said nothing, we walked and I had no idea of what happened. As the free night air hit my face, I realised I had just been in a police station with heroin running around my blood stream. I started to laugh because I felt very brave and clever. Harold looked at me as though I was the most pathetic person he’d ever seen. I was so wrapped up in myself and thinking how ungrateful he was for my rescue that I never even noticed he was walking with a limp. That night I felt I’d let Harold down in a way, but I couldn’t think straight. I felt ashamed but I didn’t know of what.

The next night we got nicked. They burst into the flat like a movie, four policemen. They’d been watching Rob for ages. They found everything. I remember the plastic bags they put the pieces of foil, the tubes, the works, into. The evidence. The four of us got bundled into a
car. Lights came on but no one really noticed or cared. A few flats double locked their doors. We were screeching down the one-way paranoia and it was just another night in Hackney ...

I wanted to talk about class to Sandra, but it's not on her agenda today. There was one policeman at the nick who loved his job. He was ordinary, like me. Done well for himself. But it was like his slip was showing. The little man who tugged his forelock at gentry was still inside his head directing the class traffic. So he pushed me into a cell saying 'Get in there you slag'. All that gold dripping was from Fliss's neck as she started to blubber in front of him like a kid. And he said 'What's a nice girl like you doing with this scum?' They let her go a couple of hours later after her dad came down to the police station sounding his aitches.

We weren't so lucky of course. Fifty grams is a lot and with the scales, Barry and Rob got done for dealing. They let me off with a caution. I sold them a fast story about being led on by my boyfriend and having to stay with him after I'd had a miscarriage because I was too scared to leave. The solicitor from Legal Aid was great.

It was all rotten though. All the ducking and diving just to save myself. I felt like my life wasn't mine, it was just a defence. Like all the shit that had happened to me was just a strategy to get myself off the hook. I did visit Barry a few times but it was hard to get visiting orders if you weren't married, and his mum refused to talk to me. He started writing me letters addressed to Mrs. Barry Watkins and that made me laugh. There he was inside, getting his methadone script, being forced to come off, and dreaming. He thought he could lean on me, when I was falling apart. It was no good, it had all gone bad between us. We never saw Fliss again. I had to give up the flat and move back in with my parents and see Sandra once a week.

She says I'm hostile against people. That I use my hostility against rich people as a crutch. She says I feel displaced and that I need to integrate myself back into society in a meaningful way. She says I need to talk about my feelings around the miscarriage.

What she means is I'm fucked up by life, by smack. I think she's probably right, but everyone's fucked up. It just depends what side of the table you're sitting. All I have to do is follow the rules and then I'll get better. She's pinning letters cut of card on my pinafore. I've got to leave aside all my thoughts and sadness and just concentrate on getting better. I miss the Downs and Tamla and Harold. But I don't suppose I was anything to them. Just another face that passed through. They don't need me to survive. And I look around my mum's flat and I wonder if I might have been happy if I'd settled for what was expected of me. I miss Fliss too in a way because there was a lot of similarity between us now I think about it. We were both trying to be different, trying to be someone. Only my mum's still cleaning and my dad's still unemployed. Fliss did send me a Christmas card saying she was working at her dad's firm. She never mentioned smack or her address.
Today I'm thinking about getting better. I'm thinking about all the things I could do. I can't blame Fliss or Sandra because I'm a mess. I could be one of those people out there who makes choices about what they want to do in life.

Sometimes I do start to cry, because it's no good planning tomorrows because I won't do any of these things. At the worst I'll end up being addicted to methadone and at best I'll end up dead. When I'm feeling positive I do think I'll stop, but then I get my script and I don't know. I just feel different.

After a while I couldn't be bothered to go to the toilet everytime I wanted to jack up so I just did it in the living room. Mum and dad were watching Eastenders in their slippers and I just stuck the needle into my arm.

My dad goes mad, but he won't throw me out. My mum starts crying but I don't know what to do. It feels bigger than me, this thing. And I feel so bad, so low if I haven't got any.

In the morning I get up, have breakfast and I really hate smack. I hate getting under my dad's feet as he sits sadly watching the afternoon T.V. smoking himself to death. I hate being here and making them ashamed. I give myself lots of good reasons for stopping. I'd like to hear Stafford coming in late at night waking up the other flats. But I wasn't happy then either. I was always wondering where Barry was. How funny, then I was angry because he was doing smack and now I'm angry because he's managing to come off it.

But I want to start thinking about the future instead of thinking about smack all the time. I watch T.V. and by the afternoon I want some and I forget about my resolve because I'm another person now and I want some. Sometimes I sell my script of methadone for smack. It's so hard because it's so easy. The physical urge overrides everything and even the idea of being so weak, so addicted, doesn't stop me wanting.

There's nothing left to say now. I just wanted to write down something about myself because I'm sure I'm going to die soon. It's for my dad so that he knows I did nearly turn out alright and that none of it is his fault. It's for someone who very nearly existed inside me. And it's for Harold and Tamla because I liked them even though I never really fitted in. It's also for Sandra because I never seemed to be able to answer her questions. I can't tell her exactly which day I took smack or why. You'll have to go somewhere else to find those answers. Maybe your books or television documentaries will tell you why people become heroin addicts.