

PROLOGUE — ASIAN TRADER

You learn to expect certain questions in this business. Like ‘Are you on the phone?’ And ‘Do you have any bags?’ And ‘Where are the eggs?’ And ‘Why are you always on the phone?’ And ‘Could I have a bag for the eggs when you’re off the phone?’

But there is one query that comes up more often than any other: ‘Are you open?’ A pet irritation for many shop owners, given that they probably wouldn’t choose to wake up at 4 a.m. seven days a week to stand in front of a fag stand unless they were *actually trading*. But in the case of Bains Stores, it’s a valid query. An advert in the window for a discontinued chocolate bar suggests the shop may have closed in 1994. The security shutters are often stuck a quarter open, adding to the general air of dilapidation. A push or kick of the door triggers something which is more ‘grating alarm’ than ‘tinkling shop bell’.

We could, frankly, make more of an effort. But, believe me, your entrepreneurial spirit would also be blunted if the tower block opposite your shop had been demolished to make way for an estate of eco-homes that failed, continually, to be built. If a long-standing non-compete arrangement with Buy Express, a nearby Indian superstore, meant you could not stock alcohol, lottery tickets, or other material which might make Bains Stores a financially viable concern. If you had to spend fifteen hours a day being patronised (‘You. Speak. EXCELLENT. English’); having your name mutilated (‘Ar-jan, is it? Mind if I call you Andy?’); dealing with people paying for Mars bars with £20 notes; giving detailed

directions to surly motorists who buy nothing in return; dishing out copies of *Asian Babes* to shameless septuagenarians; smiling serenely as locals openly refer to your establishment as ‘the Paki shop’; serving people who turn up in their slippers and pyjamas and sometimes even less; being told you’re ‘posh’ because you pronounce ‘crips’ as ‘crisps’; being called a ‘smelly Paki’ by people reeking of booze and wee; and dealing with seemingly endless chit-chat.

My God, the chit-chat. ‘Ow bin ya? Bostin day, ay it? It ay stop raining in yonks. Weren’t the Blues good yesterday? Soz, yow must be a Wolves man. I’d kill for a kipper tie. Bostin’ carrier bags, these. Tararabit, cocka, see yow tomorra.’

It seems that while war may be 90 per cent waiting around, retail is 90 per cent mindless small talk. And despite what the term may imply, there is nothing minor about the long-term effects. If you spend your waking hours talking to people who get their news from the *Daily Star* and talkSPORT, pass most of your day discussing nothing more substantial than the weather and the price of things (which, let’s face it, is all customers over a certain age want to talk about), you slowly begin to feel like you don’t exist. Your local Asian shopkeeper will, whether he wants to or not, work out so much about you – which way you vote (from your newspaper); whether you might get lucky tonight (from those emergency condoms) – but I bet you can relate nothing of his biography in return.

At least nothing beyond the eye-rolling clichés of a man arriving in Britain with just £5 in his pocket, who sets up shop to avoid the racial prejudice of the job market, and builds a business through the Asian predilection for family slave labour and tax avoidance. One of the most onerous things about my father’s passing was that when the local newspaper he sold and delivered for nearly five decades devoted some column inches to his death, it couldn’t come up with much beyond ‘hard-working immigrant’ and

prologue – asian trader

'self-made'. 'Everyone on the Victoria Road in Blakenfields seemed to have a tale about their newsagent,' claimed the journalist, before singularly failing to produce any tales whatsoever.

He could have been anyone. Or no one. And that's the thing, if you're Asian and happen to run a shop, you are anyone. Or no one. There are few more stereotypical things you can do as an Asian man, few more profound ways of wiping out your character and individuality, short of becoming a doctor, that is. Or fixing computers for a living. Or writing a book about arranged marriages.

I struggle with these generalisations. On the one hand, they clearly apply to lots of Asians, and they are a useful way of highlighting broad truths. But on the other, they are reductive and sap us of any hope of personality or individuality. To stand behind the counter of a shop as an Indian man is to face a barrage of expectations and assumptions, with people assuming you are richer than you are ('Bet you'll be a millionaire soon'); more ambitious than you are (the plural is misleading: there has never been more than one Bains Stores); or cleverer than you are ('Guess you'd be a doctor back home').

It goes the other way too, of course. To some of my customers, sometimes those on benefits, I am a parasite, somehow sapping British resources and bleeding the public dry. To others, often Indian ones, I am a physical illustration to their children of what will happen if they don't work hard enough at school ('You wanna end up loik that?'). Then there are the ones for whom I am a raghead who wants to impose sharia law on Britain, and who, in his spare time, grooms white girls for exploitation.

The sexual predator thing is a recent development and I didn't, at first, make a connection between the insults occasionally hurled in my direction and the headlines passing over my counter. After all, the gangs reportedly grooming young white girls are based in the north, and I am in the West Midlands; most of the offenders

are Pakistani, and I am of Punjabi Indian heritage; and while some of the perpetrators run takeaway and taxi firms, I run a newsagent. To be honest, I barely blinked the first time I was called 'a dirty Paki pervert' – if memory serves, by a teenager who had just tried to buy a pornographic magazine. You get used to being called all sorts of things in this business and one tends not to dwell on the semi-coherent rantings of people so dim that they are seemingly unaware of the existence of the internet, which offers mountains of free porn.

Moreover, it's difficult to tally shop life with sex, in any way whatsoever. There are certain places that bristle with sexual tension: libraries, Tube carriages on hot days. But your Asian corner shop, reserved for the purchase of emergency milk and Rizlas, is not one of them. Occasionally some gross individual will make a sexual remark to my mother while buying bread ('Nice baps') or when paying by credit card ('Want me to push it in, eh?'), but, in general, the sexual invisibility is just another aspect of the overall invisibility of the Asian shopkeeper.

The penny only really dropped the morning I found graffiti declaring 'TALEBAN PEEDO' on our semi-functioning shutters. The realisation wasn't a cheerful one. We Asian blokes have never exactly been at an advantage in the sex game, our undesirability reflected in statistics from dating websites which show that, along with black women, Indian men are among the least popular demographic groups, no doubt a victim of the endless, though obviously entirely groundless, insinuations about penis size.

I remember once talking to an Aussie girl in a nightclub in Bombay, her surveying the crowded dancefloor and moaning at length about the seediness and lecherousness of Indian men, seemingly oblivious to the fact that I was one too. In the end, I pointed it out. Her response? 'You international Indians are different.' But are we? I'm not so sure. Reading the papers, it sometimes feels as if the world sees all brown men as perverts. It's enough to

prologue – asian trader

make you miss the days when we were just invisible. Enough, even, to make you want to give up selling the newspapers that plant and perpetuate the stereotypes in the first place.

Indeed, sometimes, given that we are for many customers the only interaction they have with multiculturalism, I think the Asian shopkeepers of Britain should cut out the middle man and present themselves to be questioned directly by the great British public. To spend, perhaps, a day or an afternoon a year answering not queries about the location of eggs and the quality of plastic bags, but serious questions about our religion and culture.

At least, I would welcome the opportunity to explain that a Sikh is not the same thing as a Muslim. That while I did once sign up for medical school, I was until recently working as a graphic designer in London. That while I have a white girlfriend, Freya, my fiancée, she is an adult, and we met in the most boring, conventional way possible, through work.

For what it's worth, the life of the Indian man who originally set up this newsagent was not a cliché either. Admittedly, Mr Bains came to Britain with no more than a shilling in his pocket. But he wasn't, as was often the case with Asian entrepreneurs, driven into retail by racism. When he arrived in Wolverhampton in 1955, aged forty-nine, an Asian immigrant was a relatively rare thing, and if a white person ever accosted him on the street, it was usually to ask if they could stroke his luxuriant beard.

The sole survivor of a family butchered during Partition, he regarded Britain, if anything, as a haven of racial tolerance, and when in 1958 he took over number 64, Victoria Road, he did not do the predictable thing and start catering to his own people. He took it over determined to run it as it had been run for more than thirty years by Geoffrey Walker. A place where brown paper and string was used for wrapping produce. Where fresh bread was flogged over a marble counter, and where customers could rely on being served by someone who knew their name and would,

on occasion, let them buy something on tick. By far the best thing you could have said to him was that walking into his store felt like stepping back in time.

As it happens, my father's life was not as clichéd as it may first seem either. In his way, he fought to be an individual, to be seen for who he was. And I know the post-mortem report says it was a heart attack that sent him plummeting on to the shop floor that evening, that he died of 'natural causes', with people of South Asian origin being statistically susceptible to heart disease, a certain proportion being afflicted by a particular gene mutation which almost guarantees heart problems. But not everything can be explained by demographics and generalities.

I — HAIRDRESSERS' JOURNAL

Wolverhampton stood in the county of Staffordshire in the 1960s, not in the West Midlands. It was a town, rather than a city. And Victoria Road, cutting from the centre of Wolvo, or Wolves, into what was then open countryside, was more commonly known as 'Wog Row' by locals, owing to an experiment in mass immigration which, while it had not yet led to Asian men being feared and ridiculed as paedophiles, had nevertheless resulted in white residents forming associations to exclude black and Asian syndicates from buying houses in certain areas, and election leaflets openly drawing 'links' between the arrival of immigrants and cases of leprosy.

Mr Bains had, in short, been proved wrong about the appetite of Wulfrunians for racial tolerance. He had also slowly accepted that running a grocer's as Mr Walker had done, using paper and string for wrapping things, selling bacon and even biscuits in terms of weight, was a mistake. The format was outdated. The fact was Walker had sold up at just the right time, with several nearby light engineering factories closing down and the abolition of resale price maintenance, which had protected margins.

Though these calamities would pale into insignificance with the emergence of illness – the initial symptoms so slight that not even Mr Bains noticed them. His young wife in India, who penned long letters begging for money and protesting about having been abandoned with two young daughters among a hostile extended family in Delhi, began to complain that the handwriting in his short

responses was getting smaller and smaller – to the point of illegibility. He became so softly spoken that he had to routinely repeat what he had said, a process that led to him castigating his 39-year-old assistant for being hard of hearing.

Bill Hinton, whom Bains had inherited with the shop along with a large quantity of unsellable Wellington boots, and the idea of flogging butter and flour under his own label, did not take the criticism well. Which was quite something, given that he was routinely stealing from his boss. The sweets that he chomped upon all day, which Mr Bains had assumed were treatment for some kind of gastric disorder, were actually a symptom of his dishonesty. He was under-ringing, routinely charging customers the full price for products, registering a lower price on the till, each empty sweet wrapper representing a unit of cash. The overall contents of his pockets served as a physical reminder of how much money to remove from the till when his boss wasn't looking.

The revelation, when it came, was almost as devastating for Bains as the diagnosis, and when he reported Hinton's thieving to the police, and they let him off without even a warning, he sank into a depression. He was not a young man any more, had squandered all the money he had made during three years of foundry work, and now, just as his body began packing up, having missed out on his daughters' childhoods, he had nothing to show for it.

Little did he know, as he complained to Patwant Dhanda, a local foundry worker and activist, who had turned up in his shop and offered to raise the issue with the relevant police commissioner on behalf of the Indian Workers' Association, that his luck was about to change. Accounts vary about what happened, but at some point during this meeting, as Dhanda snacked on horseradishes plucked from the shop's indoor wire rack without suggestion of payment, and as he attempted to bond with Bains over their common experience of Partition, Bains took on this impetuous

25-year-old man, who was less than half his age and twice his size, as his assistant. And together, they transformed the shop into a newsagent.

The basic idea was that doing so would give them reason to open longer hours, and they did, serving many of the area's immigrant workers as late as 11 p.m., opening every day, resolutely ignoring the garage owner next door, who was fond of remarking, 'The Lord made the Earth in six days, you won't make a fortune in seven.' They also thought that stocking a wide range of publications, everything from *Birds* to *Penthouse*, would expand the range of their customers, and they installed a hatch into the front of the shop to attract passing factory workers, so they could pick up their papers on the way to work. At the same time they fitted an outdoor wood rack for fruit and vegetables, delivered groceries when necessary, changed everything short of succumbing to modern notions of self-service (Bains believed in the personal touch) or promotion (there was no sign out front, his thinking being that it would be called the 'ration-wallah' by his compatriots, or the 'Paki shop' by non-compatriots, whatever the frontispiece declared).

It worked. By the time we join him in early 1968, Bains is running the most successful retail outlet on the road; he has helped Dhanda set up a shop nearby, on condition that they will not compete in the same specialist trades; he has hired a new assistant, Tanvir Banga, a 27-year-old Chamar boy whose family has worked for his wife's family for decades; and he has finally been able to pay for his wife and daughters to join him in England. Though the slow and reduced movements, the muscular stiffness, the loss of balance, and the tremor are so debilitating at sixty-two that Mr Bains is confined to bed, unable to feed or dress himself, and reduced to running the shop by barking directions down the stairwell.

The task of looking after him normally falls to his family or

to Baljit Kaur, a diminutive pensioner from down the street, and from down the road in Mrs Bains' home village in the Punjab, who provides the service in exchange for her weekly groceries. But tonight, as he does twice a week, Dhanda has charged himself with his care. Sitting next to his friend and mentor, he massages his legs, feeds him a few crumbs of each laddoo he chomps through, informs him about trade at his new drapery store, reads out headlines from various Punjabi newspapers, and brings Mr Bains up to date with the activities of the ever-expanding Indian Workers' Association, which is currently preoccupied with the case of Tarsem Singh Sandhu, a Wolverhampton bus driver fired for returning to work from a three-week illness in a beard and turban.

'We're planning a march,' he says, oblivious to the irony of a clean-shaven, un-turbanned Sikh taking up the cause. 'We're billing it as a general appeal for religious freedom. Local Council of Churches might join us. Could be the biggest march in town since World War II. Six thousand people.'

Downstairs, as Wolverhampton's answer to Malcolm X continues to brief Mr Bains, in what would be the front room if number 64 were a private residence like the other 250 terraced houses on the road, Mrs Bains, a thin, pale-skinned woman of about forty-five, is cleaning up after a busy day in the shop. She straightens goods which customers have picked up and thrown back untidily, wipes down surfaces inked with the paw prints of schoolchildren popping in for crisps and lemonade, the coloured glass bangles on her wrists tinkling as she dusts the wooden box she needs to stand on in order to operate the bacon slicer. Small pox scars dot her face, her prematurely thinning black hair is tied back in a bun, and, as she gets down on to the floor to sweep it with a dustpan and brush, her breasts squeeze between her knees, threatening to tumble out.

Her modesty would normally be protected by a chuni, but she has just used it to mop up a spillage, while her green apron has

been requisitioned tonight by her eldest daughter Kamaljit, who is standing over a stove in the kitchen cooking keema. The lamb comes from the butcher on a nearby corner; the greens have come from the front of the shop; the salwar kameez Kamaljit is wearing underneath the apron has been made from material purchased from Mr Dhanda's drapery shop; and the concoction on the gas stove simmers, as does the chef. The evening meal used to be a task she split with her sister, but ever since she left school, the housework, to her resentment, has become entirely her responsibility, while her pampered, spoilt, precocious, baby sister . . .

. . . well, her baby sister would normally be catching up on homework, or making new suits and dresses for Mr Dhanda, or, in her capacity as the most literate person in the shop, filling in forms or going over paperwork. But tonight she is standing in the living room, which the family call the 'baithak', located between the shopfront and the kitchen, playing a role in an unusual scene. Tanvir is sitting in a chair, old newspapers laid out at his bare feet, a bath towel tucked into his shirt collar, while Surinder, in an adaptation of her school uniform (she changes from a skirt into trousers for the journey to and from school), hovers behind him, brandishing her mother's sewing scissors in one hand, some handwritten notes in the other, her lips pursed in concentration.

Tanvir has proved himself so indispensable in the shop that he now has a bedroom in the house, or, at least, a bedroom full of all the excess stock for which there isn't room in the basement, with a corner cleared for a mattress on the floor. And after five years in England he no longer has the fresh immigrant's tendency of comparing everything to life back home. But there are still some Indian habits he can't shed – such as overuse of the '-ing' form ('I am working in shop') and the farmer's disinclination to spend money on anything that doesn't serve a clear practical purpose. The things he considers an extravagance include: shoes

(he prefers to walk barefoot or in chappals); toothbrushes (he cleans his teeth with the same tree bark he would use for the task in the Punjab); and, when he learns that Surinder trims her father's hair, barbers too.

Surinder recoils at the suggestion. The idea of being in close physical proximity to Tanvir's shoulders, fingering his greasy hair, making chit-chat in his painfully bad English, is about as appetising as plunging a hand down the bowl of the outside loo. But the request plays on her mind. She has never had her own hair cut – being obliged to keep it long, trailing behind her in a ponytail – but her favourite pastime as a girl, during her heady pre-pubescent days of freedom, was hanging out at Maureen's hairdressing salon next door. Cutting her father's hair is the only aspect of his nursing that she actually enjoys, and she has in recent months become a devoted, albeit surreptitious, reader of the *Hairdressers' Journal*.

Magazines are, as far as Surinder is concerned, the only perk of growing up in a shop. Her schoolmates imagine her gorging each night on slabs of Dairy Milk. But the sweets which line the walls of the shop, and the chocolates displayed in the glass cabinet counter, are just as much of a treat for her as for most girls, owing to her mother's obsession with her girls staying slim for their future husbands. Surinder does, however, get to intersperse library books with *Bunty*, and in recent months she has moved on to more adult fare, chief among which is the professional journal delivered once a fortnight for the salon next door.

The news pages are of no interest. Surinder doesn't care, for instance, that the National Hairdressers' Federation is considering banning the press from its annual general meeting. But she loves the full-colour adverts and the long feature articles on how to make yourself resemble celebrities. She must have read the item about Elizabeth Taylor forty times before giving the magazine up. Just holding the *Hairdressers' Journal* makes her feel sophisticated

and metropolitan, and soon after Tanvir made his request she notices that the magazine also featured regular step-by-step guides to men's hairstyles.

One week, for instance, there is an extensive item on a hairstyle called 'the Wentworth', which she, in spite of herself, pictures on Tanvir, but dismisses on the grounds that it is aimed, judging by the headline, at a 'mature' man of about forty, and 'men of higher status'. Tanvir is twenty-seven and, being a lower-caste Chamar, is certainly no man of status. Conversely, the following week she discounts an article on a hairstyle aimed at 'the Young Male Client', on the grounds that Tanvir isn't young, will probably never 'work in a large office', and doesn't, as the piece expounds, 'like pop records, dancing and generally having fun'. Tanvir works in a shop and the only time he seems to be having fun is when he's stocktaking.

But then she spots an article entitled 'How a Continental Master Styles a Head', a step-by-step guide to how 'one of Germany's top stylists, Heinz Krethen of Cologne' achieves a new kind of cut aimed at twenty-something young men, so when Tanvir, sporting a lopsided bouffant, once again whines about the tedium and expense of haircuts ('I am not having time to do all this work, as well as going to barbers in town'), she finds herself offering to help him out. She has made salwar kameezes and English dresses for payment from Mr Dhanda, designing her own patterns, becoming a master at estimating yardage and box-pleated bodices. Surely a new hairstyle couldn't be much different?

Surinder approaches the enterprise with high precision. She copies out the instructions from the magazine by hand, so as to minimise the chance of Maureen complaining that her subscription has been rifled through. She lays used newspapers on the floor, to protect the plastic Dandycord mat, and puts out her tools on the foldaway dining table. Among them: a pot of Brylcreem and two plastic combs, which are normally to be found in the letter

rack underneath the mirror in the hallway upstairs, permanently clogged with long black hairs.

She begins, as instructed, by 'examining the general growth style' (wild), and 'special features of the hairline and crown' (receding). Then, having combed his fringe flat on to his forehead, avoiding the patches of acne, she snips a quarter of an inch off the edge. The texture of his hair surprises her: her father's is wispy and feathery and white. But Tanvir's is thick and black. She wonders briefly what her hair would feel like to someone running their fingers through it, but then remembers who she is with and flinches. Tanvir flinches in response.

'Keep still,' she snaps in Punjabi. Tanvir is older than Surinder, but she cannot help being brusque with him. 'Do you want me to have your ear off?'

She reads the next set of instructions out to herself, under her breath, and follows them to the letter. She starts cutting at the nape in order to get the basic shape of the back. She makes sectional partings across the head, cutting each section individually to reduce bulk and length, and is congratulating herself on how well it's going when she realises she doesn't understand a single sentence of what comes next, under the heading of 'stage eight'.

'Attend to the neckline with the hair-cutting machine; taper out.'

She doesn't have a machine but can improvise, but what on earth does 'taper out' mean? Does it involve a measuring tape?

'Using the dryer, apply the air stream against the natural root-growth tendency.'

There is no hairdryer in the house, owing to Mrs Bains' conviction that, like drinking unsweetened tea, or doing embroidery in the evenings, they induce illness and disease. But *natural root-growth tendency*? Tanvir's thick hair seems to grow in every direction.

'Brush movement, applied all over the head, will give the desired amount of lift.'

Lift? Brush movement? What? Like copying down maths equations from a blackboard, she has somehow managed to transcribe it all without taking any of it in. She skips stage eight for stage nine. Which she then skips for stage ten. Soon she is hacking at Tanvir's hair in the manner her mother occasionally employs when tackling the privet hedge in the back garden. Then, suddenly, she is confronted by a patch of bare scalp on the crown of Tanvir's head. The sight of it makes her gasp, and freeze, like her father sometimes does when being guided out of bed towards the bathroom.

'Teek taak?' asks Tanvir.

She coughs. Has the patch always been there? Or has she created it? She steps across the room to consult the original magazine, hoping for advice or guidance. But all she discovers is the unhelpful news that 'the square Bob in Vidal Sassoon's salon this spring will have the back hair falling short and the sides about one-and-a-half inches longer than the back'.

Her voice wobbles. 'Just finishing up.'

This 'finishing up' takes the form of Surinder attempting to comb hair over the bald spot, and, when this fails, cutting all of Tanvir's hair short – her feverish logic being that if the overall length is reduced, the spot won't be so visible. It doesn't work.

The final paragraph of the article read: 'When Heinz has finished treating a head, there is not a hair out of place.' But Tanvir looks like he has just undergone electro-convulsive therapy, his hair having fallen out at the points the electrodes were attached. In silhouette he resembles a kind of startled owl. And then suddenly Kamaljit walks into the room. Her eyes are watering from chopping onions, her apron is padded with flour. She looks horrified.

'Kiddha?' smiles Tanvir. And then in cringy English: 'How does it looking?'

Standing opposite each other, you wouldn't think the girls were

related. Aged eighteen and fifteen, they have both been in England now for four years, but while Surinder is fair and slim, Kamaljit is dark and stout. While the elder sister wears prescription spectacles, the younger surveys the scene with bright clear eyes. Struggling to stay composed, blaming her tears of mirth on the onion fumes drifting in from the kitchen, Surinder removes the towel from Tanvir's shoulders, hands over a comb and instructs him to inspect the results of her handiwork in the upstairs mirror. As he trots off to do so, she remarks, half to herself, half to Kamaljit, 'Well, Tanvir might need a shit down when he sees that.'

The remark is a reference to one of Tanvir's famous malapropisms, which form much of the banter between Surinder and the paper boys, others including 'Both of you three over there'; and 'Let's go see the backside.' But Kamaljit refuses to be amused.

'When did you become such a witch?' she asks in Punjabi.

Surinder laughs in reply, and only registers Kamaljit's seriousness when she is met with a glare. It wasn't long ago that they would tease Tanvir together. In a home where the stock is out of bounds, where they have to take turns to open the shop at 4 a.m., are expected to conceal the existence of secondary sexual characteristics with baggy salwar kameezes and chunis draped around arms and shoulders, it is the only thing that comes close to amusement. But Kamaljit has recently been suffering from an extended bout of humourlessness.

She continues in Punjabi. 'Do you even know what day it is?'

It takes a moment or two for Surinder to work out that she is referring to their mother's belief that it is bad luck to wash, let alone cut, hair on Tuesdays. Mrs Bains was full of such superstitions. Never leave one shoe lying on another; lamps should be extinguished with a wave of the hand, not blown out; cooked food that is unused during a solar eclipse should be given away or thrown out, because it has become impure. But this is the first time she has heard Kamaljit utter such words and it earns her a

dismissive tut. It feels like it was only yesterday that the sisters were making models and castles out of mud, playing in the courtyard of their family's Delhi home. Now she is bossing her around like an auntie.

Kamaljit continues sanctimoniously. 'Do you know how hard he works for us? We are the closest thing he has to family in Bilyat and all you ever do is mock him. You just think you're better than everyone else, don't you?'

Mrs Bains had given Surinder a version of the same speech when she had overheard her daughter address Tanvir without a respectful 'ji'. That time Surinder, while chewing the end of her hair, apologised. But she isn't going to take the same from her sister.

'You are not my mother.' Surinder stiffens. Her large brown eyes narrow, and she straightens up in a way that highlights that she is taller than her sister, despite being younger. 'Do you think Mum doesn't know I was cutting his hair?'

A yelp from upstairs.

'You've not got away with this,' warns Kamaljit as she runs up to assist Tanvir. 'You've gone too far this time.'

The sisters had shared a bedroom since arriving from India. The mahogany wardrobe they inherited was so old that you almost expected a gas mask to fall out when you opened the doors, and, with suitcases and bits of stock taking up so much space, there was room for just one bed. But after Delhi, where the girls had lived, eaten and slept with their mother in a single room, it had felt like a palace.

It was through this window, directly above the shopfront, that they had whiled away hours watching customers come and go during their first few months in Britain. And it was in this room that the sisters would stretch long loops of elastic between the bed legs and wardrobe stand, jumping over the parallel lines,

turning round, crossing their legs, raising the height of the elastic until it became too hard, or until they got told off for disrupting the customers in the shop below with their thudding. At night they snuggled up against each other for warmth, telling each other stories, sometimes waking up in each other's arms.

However, by 1968, these were just memories and the room was sharply regimented. They shared a kitchen side table, which had been customised to vaguely resemble a dressing table, but the girls now had a single bed each and both had a suitcase for storage. Both of their sides of the room were identical in size and shape, except for the fact that while Kamaljit's area was pristine, Surinder's was a mess. The elder girl kept her space free to perform nightly prayers cross-legged on the floor. Surinder could manage only the first four lines of the Japji Sahib in the original Gurmukhi, and would add the Lord's Prayer on to the end of it by way of compensation and apology, but Kamaljit knew the whole of it off by heart. Surinder's space, meanwhile, was littered with unwashed clothes, draft dress and salwar designs, cut-out-and-keep posters she was not allowed to put up on her wall, library books and various magazines she had squirrelled away from the shop downstairs.

It was a constant source of mystery and bemusement to everyone who knew Surinder that someone who was so physically composed could be so untidy. Kamaljit had learnt to live with it, just as Surinder had learnt to cope with Kamaljit's snoring. But by the time Kamaljit came upstairs that evening she was still so annoyed with her sister that on entering she pronounced, 'This room is a rubbish tip,' grabbed a school skirt from the floor and shoved it into the cupboard.

Surinder, half looking up from her novel, moaned under her breath. Tanvir had turned up to dinner in a turban that Kamaljit had helped him tie: less the immaculate contraption Mr Bains wore in the portraits displayed around the house, and more the untidy

length of cloth Gandhi famously refused to remove during legal assignment in South Africa. Surinder might have risen above the comedy of the scene had Mrs Bains not picked up on his appearance and launched into one of her monologues, telling everyone about how handsome Mr Bains had looked in his turban when she first met him on his wedding day in 1949, how her late father, the becharar, preferred a loose-style turban not dissimilar to Tanvir's, how the worst thing about her husband's escape from what became Pakistan was that he had to cut his hair short and trim his beard, Muslim style, for safety. Getting into her stride, she bemoaned that the most upsetting thing about Mr Bains' illness was that he had to have his hair cut again, this time for reasons of hygiene, bewailed the fact that Sikh men arriving in the Midlands were chopping off their kes, getting rid of their turbans in order to get jobs in factories and the bus department, and exclaimed how thrilling it was, in turn, that some Sikhs like Mr Dhanda were fighting for the right to practise their religion in Britain. How much she wished, she concluded, her thali of food now totally cold, that she had time to join the pro-turban march that Dhanda was organising.

Throughout, Tanvir stared into the middle distance. Kamaljit glared at her sister, and Surinder fought to contain her giggles – overt laughter, or 'showing your teeth' as her mother put it, not being allowed, along with make-up, unsupervised contact with male strangers and, for some reason, leaving home at a quarter to the hour.

However, there was no trace of a smile an hour later when, upstairs, Kamaljit did the unthinkable and, crossing the invisible line dividing the room, began tidying away some of Surinder's other belongings. The younger sister watched in disbelief as Kamaljit picked up a pair of her used socks and put them into a laundry basket, started making a pile of used newspapers, stacked her Brontë on to her library editions of Austen and held up a

copy of *Jackie* with the words: 'Have you taken this from the shop?'

'I'm going to put it back,' said Surinder, feeling a hint of embarrassment that the cover featured a topless sunbathing man. 'I always put everything back.'

Kamaljit ignored her and continued shuffling through the detritus on the floor. Next, she brandished a copy of *Woman*. 'And this?' She put it under her arm. Then, a copy of *Vogue*. 'I'm taking them back down.'

Before Surinder could even think of what to say, Kamaljit was storming out of the room. The younger girl had slipped out of bed and was primed for confrontation by the time she returned, but Surinder barely managed a word of protest before Kamaljit pronounced, 'By the way, you'll be leaving school in the summer.' Turning her back to her little sister, Kamaljit began removing her glass bangles in preparation for bed. 'Straight after your exams. I heard Mum and Dad talking and they are looking for boys. For *both* of us.'