

THE FARE

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Naz had been waiting. The clock clicked forward, timing the day, his fare. Rain traced lines between the droplets on the windscreen, tugging each one down. The wipers swept forward, then back. He checked his watch; the fare was for four-thirty. He wanted to finish by six. He was hungry. He hadn't eaten for nine hours. He didn't like getting up before it was light to eat. It didn't suit him. The days were longer with no food.

He hoped the boy would eat tonight. It had been nine days now. He could see the heat inside his son as it rose to his skin in sweat. But his eyes were still quiet, looking beyond them to somewhere else. The hospital was clean, white and efficient, and it frightened him. The single room surrounded them, hushed.

He needed to finish. Time to eat. Time to visit.

He turned the engine on. A light in the hallway of the house caught him before he could drive the car away. Then the door opened and a man ran from the doorway down the path to the waiting cab.

A rush of cold air filled the car as the man clambered into the back seat. He was out of breath, his coat ruffled up. Naz watched the man as he tried to settle himself and his briefcase into the seat. The man took off his glasses to wipe the steam and rain from the lenses. He peered into the front, up at the mirror, his eyes squinting with the effort.

‘Crickhowell House.’

The man spoke with an accent that Naz found difficult.

‘Sorry, say again.’

‘The Assembly building.’

‘Ah, no problem. The bay, yes.’

The man just nodded and turned to face away from the mirror.

Naz concentrated on the traffic ahead as he pulled wide into Cathedral Road. The cars were lined tight, nudging each other out of the city for the weekend. This was a city that dozed through the evenings, only coming awake for a brief few hours between eleven and three, alcohol lowering its inhibitions. It pulled tight to itself during the day. The churches still blistered the city, still calling to it through empty pews. There wasn’t enough here yet to break with its past.

Naz had lived in Manchester. It was a real city, full of people, full of the swirl of imagination. There were secret places in that city. Even for him, there were places to drink, to meet women. It was OK to pay for it then. He was a single man. There were necessities he couldn’t ignore. He could remember his male friends on the streets at home, holding hands. Frustration dripping between them and not a woman in sight. Death and marriage had saved him from that.

His father had always expected him to give in and come home. The old man was still expecting his son’s defeat when he cut into his leg with a cleaver. An accident but still death. Naz had looked for the memory, searched through its corners, even though it couldn’t be his. The street thick with the smell of meat. The gutters running with rats and the crows ready to pick scraps from the bones. The panic for a taxi. The blood pouring from the severed artery as his father had seen it pour from so many dying animals, knowing he was dying. Naz had escaped that. His father had died in a taxi on the way to hospital.

The youngest son, he was allowed a chance, a chance to

become himself. His brothers had paid for a marriage then. Sure he wasn't coming back. Insuring against him coming back. A proper respectable girl. A good name. Her family lived in Cardiff. They were cousins of a cousin. He would have to move from Manchester. Too many memories, connections for a man about to marry. It was another city, a smaller city.

There were fewer cars going back into the city. It was a straight run, Cathedral Road, Riverside, Grangetown, Butetown, Docks. He could see the faces and houses change colour as he followed the river to the sea.

The man in the back shuffled the papers in his briefcase. He caught Naz looking at him in the mirror and smiled unsurely back.

'I'm late.'

Naz smiled. 'Can't go any faster. The traffic.'

'No, don't suppose you can.' He looked forlorn.

'Important meeting?'

The man looked as if he didn't quite understand the question.

'At the Assembly?' prompted Naz.

'No, not really. A commission.'

'You're an important man?'

The man straightened himself in the back seat. He looked to see if Naz was mocking him. It was a straight question.

'Er, no, I don't suppose I am.'

'What's the rush then?'

The man looked away. He watched the river rush below him and the space where there had once been factories now filled with cleared land. A sign marked the opportunity: 'Open to offers!'

The radio crackled through. Naz picked it up. A voice told him he had another call at the university. He could go home then. Narine would be waiting for him. She had been at the

hospital for days. They allowed her to sleep there at first. Waiting. But she couldn't sleep and she just spent the nights staring out across the lights that marked the limits of the city. Naz liked the view from the ward. It was the only thing he liked about the hospital. At nights he could see the towns on the far side of the estuary and imagine what it would be like living there. Anywhere but here, now, while his dreams struggled through in the bed beneath him. It was a strange country, this. A country trying to find its way. There was nothing he could see that wasn't just smaller than Manchester.

He had taken Narine, the boy and the baby out to the coast last summer. The little boy had played in the waves as if they were something new and unique, especially provided for him. Narine had prepared dahl and chappattis which they ate on a rug placed over the sand. He could feel the stares; unease or novelty, he couldn't be sure. He tried to ignore them. The beach was packed with children, kites, dogs, sandcastles, the debris of a day out. Naz had been filled with the wealth of summer, the God-willing luck that had provided him with a wife and child. Narine couldn't swim, but she went into the water in her suit. The boy had played with the ball, and the waves had played with him. It had been a good day. He would be a father again in the spring, but that was a long way back through the winter now.

The traffic lights held him on the corner of Bute and James Street. An ambulance streaked past. Blue lights flooding the cab. The man in the back leaned over to get a better look at the road.

'I didn't think it was going to be like this?'

Naz looked up at the mirror to see the man's face. Lines of stress seemed to have cut into him.

'It's the time of night.'

'No, not the traffic. The city, this country. I don't understand it.'

The lights allowed the car to move forward. Naz checked his watch.

‘What time is your meeting?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

The man seemed to collapse back into himself.

‘It is your country?’

‘Yes, but I can’t escape from it.’ The man struggled in his pockets for money.

The edifice of the Assembly building rose out of the rain. It was spotlighted but seemed unsure of itself on the stage in this new half-country.

Naz pulled the car into a lay-by opposite the building. Four pounds forty was displayed on the clock. The man handed him a five pound note. Naz knew he would require change.

‘Can I have a receipt, please?’

Naz scribbled the amount on the back of a card. His writing had never been as good as his speech, but he was OK on the numbers. The man pocketed his change and the receipt. He got out of the cab and shut the door. Naz pulled the car back onto the road and headed into town.

He didn’t like calls at the university. They were usually students. There were too many students in the city. The city swelled with them every October, gorging itself on their easy money. But by December he was tired of their jokes, their endless enthusiasm and the way they threw up in his car. Today was the last day of term. He kept up with these events. He used them to mark his time in the city. Six years now. Six years with a new wife and now two children. The first one was a boy, that was good. The next a girl. That was good also but maybe more expensive. Still he loved girls and the way she opened her eyes to him. He would earn enough money. He would be successful in this city. His father-in-law had offered to lend him some money to start a business. It was good to be in business. In business for yourself. He knew

about the cars. There would be younger men keen to work longer hours as the city expanded. He wouldn't be a younger man much longer. Then he would need to make a business.

The car pushed itself along the flyover that cut back into the centre of the city. The road rose steeply, soaring above the railway line and the units that lined its route out to the east. From the top the city was all briefly visible before the road crashed into the walls of the prison and the horizon reduced itself to streets again. The traffic slowed him again at the law courts. He wasn't sure if the fare would still be waiting at the university. People called through then forgot about it.

The students reminded him. There had been a ripple of meningitis cases last winter. He had seen their faces in *The Echo*. Bright, young, hopeful, dead. It took them so quickly. A few days of coughs and headaches and then a sharp coma. There had been a man working in a restaurant he had heard about, a Hindu. He was working on Monday night, in hospital by Tuesday. He had only lasted two days. There was a picture of him behind the counter in the restaurant. A big smiling man. The boy was a fighter. A strong boy. He could feel the determination in his arms as he clambered around his shoulders, mouthing words in two languages. It had been too many days, the dark days of winter in the city. He called back into the radio. He was signing off for the night. There was a brief complaint from the operator on the far side of the call. Then he put the handset down.

A month ago he had followed the cars to the cemetery. They had been given a plot out in Ely, a few miles to the west of the city. The graves were new. They had been cut deeply into the soft Welsh loam. Each new mound, a life ending out here, many miles from the start in a dusty village on the Indus plain, or the crumbling walls of Lahore or Karachi. The cities themselves had changed their names, as if able to disown their children. They couldn't return to a place that no longer

existed. They had cut themselves off and would now be the first to die in this new place where it rained through the long winters. He had thought of their hopes. Many of the graves carried pictures of them as young men. Faded, overexposed pictures of dark men in poor new suits, eager for a go at the world. Most had thought they would go back.

They had listened solemnly in the mosque off Crwys Road. The walls dripped with the sounds of his childhood and the cool mornings in Peshawar before the sun got too high. The time to work. His father had been keen on education, avoided politics. The future was commerce.

The new mosque had been a factory, making clothes. They bought it with donations and optimism. He never attended much himself. The community was growing. He could buy Halal meat now and vegetables he hadn't seen since he left Manchester. His wife bought clothes from people who could speak Urdu.

The meat was good but to be avoided in memory of his father. But it was there, fresh and available. They had some strength now, numbers, a community. The boy would be starting school in a year. He would learn English properly then.

There were casualties. His closest friend ran a chip shop in Llanrumney and was living with a woman called Ruth. He had given up the cars. He was too old for the abuse and the girls who wouldn't pay you and the men who simply walked away. He would trust in Allah, he had claimed, and now he was sending money to a woman he had married and living with one he hadn't. But Naz couldn't leave the faith. It was part of him. The inscription above the door convinced him. Allah is good. Allah is great. And indeed he had been. But now, with his son at the hospital, he wasn't so sure. The little boy had committed no sin, but then he remembered his own nights on the riverside in Manchester.

He drove the car along Richmond Road, across the junction. The lights favouring his flight. He pulled up at number forty-

seven Mackintosh Place. The lights were on in the front room. He could feel the tension in his fingers as he cut the engine and opened the car door. The door to his house was ajar; he could smell the good smells of cooking flood through him. He found Narine in the kitchen. She was sitting at the table slumped over, her head resting. He touched her hair. She stood up and folded into him. He knew his daughter was being cared for; he knew the boy had gone.