

‘In her strongest novel to date, Ayisha Malik finds the **humour** and **humanity** in the interplay between faith and family’

NIKESH SHUKLA

‘**Witty, insightful**, and shot through with pathos . . . this book is **laugh-out-loud funny**, but is so much more than that. It challenges our preconceptions and our prejudices about what it means to be British in today’s world. It’s Malik’s best work to date and, more importantly, for me it’s **the standout book of the year**’

ABIR MUKHERJEE

‘A **witty meditation** on race politics, **what it means to be British**, and the complexities of personal identity . . . With laugh-out-loud moments of absurdist comedy, poignant observations of human nature, and philosophical musings on the wisdom and nature of ‘fitting in’, this is Malik’s best work to date. **Satirical, controversial, knowing and essential**’

VASEEM KHAN

‘Simmering with **tenderness, charm** and **warmth** . . . a gorgeous, deeply relevant book that is bound to ruffle a fair few feathers, but the right feathers, and for the right reasons’

CAROLINE O’DONOGHUE

‘An intimate village dramedy and a study of the nature of grief, faith and belonging. This wonderful novel will **make you laugh, make you cry** and **leave a mark on you long after you’ve finished reading it**’

SARAH SHAFFI

**This is an uncorrected manuscript proof. Please do not quote for publication until verified with the finished book. This proof is for promotional purposes and review by the recipient and may not be used for any other purpose. Any duplication, sale or distribution to the public is a violation of law.**

## THIS GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND

Mrs Sakheena Hasham has a final request. On her deathbed she reaches for her only son's hand and – instead of whispering her final prayers – gives him a task. Bilal must return to his West Country village and: 'Build them a mosque, *beta*. Build them a mosque'.

Babbel's End is a very long way from their Birmingham roots, but for years Bilal and his wife Mariam have plodded along, fairly content, as much part of their sleepy rural community as anybody else. All that is about to change.

Mariam is horrified by Bilal's mission. Outrage sweeps the village. Battle lines are drawn and everyone must decide what they stand for.

How will Bilal choose between honouring his beloved mum's last wish, his marriage, his identity and preserving what is held dear in the place he calls home?

**This sharp-eyed, witty and deeply moving novel by the exceptionally talented Ayisha Malik explores some of the most important questions of our time. What does it mean to be British? Who gets to decide where we belong? And what would we fight to protect?**

Ayisha Malik is a British Muslim born and raised in South London. She holds a First Class MA in Creative Writing. She was a WHSmith Fresh Talent Pick and contributed to the anthology *A Change is Gonna Come*: short stories and poems by BAME authors. Ayisha is also the ghost writer for Great British Bake Off winner, Nadiya Hussain.

*Also by Ayisha Malik*

Sofia Khan is Not Obligated  
The Other Half of Happiness

THIS GREEN  
AND PLEASANT  
LAND

*Ayisha Malik*

**ZAFFRE**

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by

ZAFFRE

80-81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE

[www.zaffrebooks.co.uk](http://www.zaffrebooks.co.uk)

Copyright © Ayisha Malik, 2019

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic,  
mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the  
prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Ayisha Malik to be identified as Author of this  
work has been asserted by her in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and  
incidents are either the products of the author's  
imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to  
actual persons, living or dead, or actual  
events is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is  
available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-785-76754-8

Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-785-76752-4

*also available as an ebook*

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Zaffre is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK

[www.bonnierbooks.co.uk](http://www.bonnierbooks.co.uk)

[www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk](http://www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk)

*For my babies, Zayyan and Saffah Adam  
I hope the house of God lives in your heart  
wherever you go*

*And for my great friend, Clara Nelson, who creates a  
community no matter where she is.*

## PROLOGUE

**S**AKEENA HASHAM HAD THE ability to linger in a person's psyche like a vaguely traumatic experience. For sixty-three years she'd been the rare combination of practicality and hopefulness, reality and dreams. Her dreams, unfortunately, hadn't quite worked out. Real life had cast shadows over the rainbows she'd wanted to chase when she first left Rawalpindi, Pakistan, for Birmingham all those years ago.

Now, she was lying in the ultimate shadow of death. She clutched her son, Bilal's, hand with her own slight and withered one, squinting at him before raising her hand to his face.

'*Beta,*' she said. Her boy was in her home, once more, enclosed within the patterned walls, treading the green



carpet she'd had for too many years. 'Maybe grow a beard?' she whispered hopefully.

He took a deep breath, pursed his lips and nodded.

Bilal looked too polished for this place. His wife, Mariam, sitting in the chair in the corner clearly knew it, the way her sharp eyes darted around, taking in the surroundings. *Well, to hell with her!* What did Mariam know about struggle and sacrifice? What did even Bilal know? Rukhsana sat on her other side, wiping the tears from her eyes with her *dupatta* and Sakeena wished, amongst many other things, that her younger sister wouldn't give way to her tears so often.

'Bilal has forgotten everything I taught him,' whispered Sakeena to Rukhsana. 'Who wears a suit to visit their dying mother?'

Rukhsana burst into sobs.

'You will look after your *khala*?' said Sakeena to Bilal. 'The way I have looked after her?'

Bilal swallowed hard and glanced at his wife.

'Yes, Ammi. Of course.'

Next was the tricky part, but since when did trickiness bother Sakeena? She was about to give her son the task she knew would bring him back to the most important thing in life: faith. It was ridiculous the way he'd abandoned everything about it when he moved to that absurd village, Babel's End, eight years ago. He'd been determined to open up an accountancy firm. As if numbers were more important than God. Well, he might be successful now, but still. What a decision! Didn't he think

about the significance of living in a place that hinted at the end of something? She was no fatalist but even she had her limits.

She sighed inwardly – Bilal never did think about the important things like symbolism. To think she had cultivated forty years of her life with her son in this multi-coloured city. For *him*! She'd not have him be the only brown face for miles: as conspicuous as he was invisible. And she wasn't illiberal – she'd made sure from the beginning that Bilal had a mix of friends, unlike other children who were encouraged to 'keep to their kind'. No, she made cucumber sandwiches for his white friends and jerk chicken for the black ones. If he'd brought any Chinese or Japanese friends home then she'd have made noodles or sushi, or whatever it was they ate. She had noticed Bilal's cheeks redden at her culturally presumptive ways, but she was his mother – she knew what he needed, even when he didn't.

When her husband had left her in the first year of their marriage she knew she would have to make sense of things on her own; to *understand*. Understanding, her local imam had told her, was the key to everything. Especially the afterlife. Which was puzzling because how could you understand something you'd never experienced?

Sakeena stared at her son with a hint of wonder: 'Who are you?' she asked finally.

Bilal looked stricken and glanced at Mariam again as if *she* would have the answer.

'Ammi,' said Mariam, stepping forward to hold her

dying mother-in-law's hands. 'He's your son. Remember?'

Sakeena waved at her as if swatting a fly. Then, straddling life and death, Sakeena's vision became clouded by a black fuzz instead of the light she'd always anticipated.

'Listen to me,' she said urgently.

Bilal's head jerked and she noticed his eyes settle on her locked cabinet. She found salvation in faith, her son found it in the medicine cabinet.

'Remember the grave,' she said.

'She's not making sense,' said Bilal, looking at Mariam.

He'd had that look when she'd first dug a grave-shaped hole in her backyard and then proceeded to lie in it every night. 'How can you really live if you don't think of dying?' she had told him then.

She'd steeled herself against the sense of claustrophobia, imagining the dirt being thrown over her, the inevitability of leaving things – leaving Bilal – behind, and how in death nothing would matter but the good she might have done in her life.

'Ammi,' Bilal had said, looking at her lying in the ground. 'You could contemplate death without being six-feet under. This isn't method dying.'

*Hain?* There was no method to dying. But she could concede that it was the penultimate act. *Understanding.* It could skip oceans and bloodlines.

'Listen to me,' she said now, bringing herself back to the present, holding Bilal's hand with all the strength she could muster. His hand felt so powerful in that moment she was heartbroken that she would never feel it again.

This was the final hour we were all, one day, heading towards. Except she was catapulting and, quite frankly, it was making her sick. Namely because no-one was catapulting with her. She felt a pang of regret that she hadn't lived in a way contrary to death.

How had all these years passed her by?

She had so much to say about so many things. Now that it was her last chance, why weren't these thoughts manifesting into words?

She glimpsed the faint outline of what could be a dark figure, looming in the doorway. This wasn't the time to panic. Death was, quite literally, at her door and there was one last job she had as Bilal's mother. She'd even forsake the time it took to say the first kalima prayer when dying. Because, yes, death is solitary but life shouldn't be – because Bilal's life wasn't just his own – it was everyone he came in contact with. If he didn't know who *he* was then how would others *really* know him? *Understand* him?

'What have we done here?' she said.

Bilal leaned forward, a frown creasing his brow. If he would just lean in a little further, she could kiss the high forehead that had always given him a perpetual look of surprise. Sakeena blinked back the shadows only to have her vision hindered by spots of white light. She gripped Bilal's arm, no longer able to see her baby boy properly.

'Who will know and understand that we're meant to make life better for each other.'

'Ammi,' said Bilal. 'It's okay, I'm here. Don't panic.'

His voice broke and she was relieved to see there were

tears in his eyes. Perhaps he regretted not coming back home sooner? Maybe he was sorry that their last game of backgammon was probably over three years ago? Perhaps, watching her slip away, he'd understand why she'd chosen to lie in her own grave.

'Build them a mosque, *beta*. Build them a mosque,' she said.

'Get the doctor, Mariam,' Bilal said. 'Quick.'

Mariam rushed out of the room.

'*Ya Allah*,' came Rukhsana's voice, who muttered prayers under her breath, blowing them over Sakeena.

Bilal looked at his *khala*, agitated. 'Can't that wait?'

'Show these people our Islam,' Sakeena continued, urgently.

'Sshh,' he urged, tears now falling freely down his face.

She hadn't loved life in the way she'd seen others love it – she had simply made the most of what she had – but in this moment, looking at her son, she didn't want to leave it.

'This isn't the time to shush,' she said, her heart cracking, along with her voice. 'This is the time to *speak*. You must guide yourself to goodness, *beta*. And everyone around you. Like those Christian missionaries,' she said.

'Missionaries?' he replied, bewildered.

She reached up to Bilal's face, the boy for whom she could forsake saying the kalima because she'd die the way she'd lived; doing what was best for him.

'Babbel's End,' she said, unable to hide the contempt from her voice – remembering the village green and rolling

hills, the bustling main street with its cobbled pavements and Victorian lamp posts, its two churches (how excessive!), the way the sun would glisten on the water as all those white, white people walked their dogs on the pebbled beach nearby in their wellies and big coats. What kind of people went to the beach in the middle of winter? Then she imagined a minaret, soaring in the midst of all of this, the call to prayer drowning out the noise of all the barking dogs, and the idea brought her that ever elusive sense of contentment (which, to Sakeena's mind, was superior to happiness). She smiled, a tear in her eye, thinking of how sad endings could be but also of the hope you could leave behind. 'Babbel's End,' she repeated, harnessing her last breath . . . 'is your Africa.'

And she was gone.



So, Bilal was left with his guilt and grief, and the Arabic prayer his mum had been unable to say, on his lips for the first time since he could remember.



Because when something dies, you never know what else is coming to life.

## CHAPTER ONE

‘SO, JENNY WILL EMAIL about the latrine in the lay-by and Pankhurst, you’ll keep a tally of the cheese factory lorries driving up and down our roads,’ said Shelley Hawking with a deep sigh. ‘Make no difference to our village, indeed. Two years they’ve accosted us with their incessant noise.’

There was a grumble of assent around the village hall. Bilal loosened his Paul Smith tie, undoing the top button of his now damp, white shirt. He looked around to see if there were any more windows they could open. The unusually hot August day after three days of non-stop rain was made only more oppressive by the length of the parish council meeting’s agenda. It almost made him impatient.

Harry Marsh flicked Bilal’s arm with the agenda, which

he'd put to use by fanning himself. 'Armageddon,' he whispered with a grin.

'We've all agreed to Sunny Hill School's bake-sale and a participant's fee for each pub quiz to raise more money to fix St. Swithun's church bell, yes? We've only £2376 to go to meet our £10,000 target,' added Shelley briskly.

More assent.

'And we'll promise to adhere to the speed limits on *all* roads?' she said, her eyes settling on Bilal who looked away, rubbing his chest, his nausea making an appearance. 'Until the next meeting then. Copperthwaite will follow up to confirm everyone's duties.'

George Copperthwaite grunted from the councillors' table, his bald head looking particularly shiny, his Ascot tie (pale grey and maroon today), tucked into a white shirt under his houndstooth jacket. Shelley sat next to him, Jenny Ponsonby on the other side – the presiding council over the community. Jenny's features and manners, Bilal had always observed, were as kempt as her sweat glands – even in the blistering sun she never seemed to need to wipe her brow.

'You'll be put in the stocks next time you go over the speed limit,' said Harry to Bilal as they scraped back their plastic chairs and people began to disperse.

Harry had left London several years ago to bring up his family here in the green and peaceful West Plimpington countryside, and so was in the enviable position of having lived a life big enough to make fun of the village's trivial preoccupations, while ignoring how much he benefited from them.



‘It’s the new car,’ replied Bilal in an excited whisper. They walked on to Skiffle Road, the moon visible before the sun had begun to set. ‘Incredible engine.’

‘It’s a thing of beauty. Meanwhile, the wife thinks we’ve got a poltergeist.’

Bilal paused. ‘Why?’

‘The blueberries were moved from the kitchen counter.’

‘Right,’ replied Bilal.

‘I mean, they were right there, *on the counter* – but when we came back home they were in the fridge.’

‘Cleaner?’

‘She doesn’t come on Wednesdays.’

‘Hmmm.’ Even now, years after moving to the village, the absurdity of its trials didn’t cease to surprise Bilal. ‘Well, don’t tell Mariam or Haaris won’t be allowed to come over and play with Sam.’

‘Bill,’ came Shelley’s unmistakable voice.

‘And I’m off,’ said Harry, jumping into his silver Land Rover.

‘Glad I caught up with you,’ said Shelley. ‘Have you spoken with Richard? I’ve left him several messages about Tom’s bush. I was hoping he’d come to the meeting.’

‘Sorry,’ said Bilal, shuffling on his feet. His nausea was always heightened by conversation with Shelley. ‘Haven’t seen him this week. I’ll pass on the message if I do.’

Bilal unlocked his car door as Shelley looked at the shiny black Lexus with delicately laced disapproval. Her eyes tended to linger on things – and the activity had leant itself to deeper crows’ feet than Shelley would’ve liked

– a natural by-product of having been a headmistress for thirty years. She pressed her clipboard to her chest.

‘You’ve been very quiet at these meetings lately.’

‘Oh . . . well.’

Bilal felt a lump in his throat so unexpected he wondered if he’d swallowed a fly. Shelley paused as people walked past, waving their goodbyes.

‘It was hard for me too, when my mother died,’ she said quietly.

‘Yes. I’m sorry,’ said Bilal.

‘It was a long time ago now, but I understand. Hers was cancer too . . . just not quite as sudden. It’s a horrid thing.’

For a moment they both paused, united in their mutual and timeless grief.

‘Thanks,’ he said as he got into the car.

He’d have to remind himself to be more gracious about Shelley.

‘Drive sensibly,’ she added with another one of her looks. ‘And careful of that puddle in Rayner’s Lane – the pothole is a lot deeper than it looks.’

Bilal started the engine and knew he’d have to go into town for Gaviscon. Shelley was right. Bilal had been quiet. If he were honest he was offended, on death’s behalf, at the way life seemed to march on, trampling on thoughts of his dead mother. The way it had only given him a mere few weeks to understand what was going on. That it was the end for her – no going back, no changing things. And now the minutiae of living in the face of mortality had

triggered his ulcer. He waved at George Pankhurst, who was passing him in the opposite direction and slowed down, rolling down the window of his grey Fiat.

‘My turnips have only gone and got club root,’ he said, his mouth barely visible beneath his ever-growing grey moustache.

‘Ah, yes, my mum always used lime for that,’ replied Bilal.

‘That’s the one. Thanks, Bill,’ said Pankhurst as he drove off.

His mum and her love for gardening . . . When he’d looked at her on the day of her funeral he’d suddenly felt as if, in life, he had understood nothing at all. For six months now he’d been involved in a desperate attempt to forget the remnants of her death; grief, regret, too much Tupperware and her dying bequest.

*Build them a mosque.*

Of all the things in the world.

Since her death he’d donated a lot of money to their local mosque in Birmingham. Wasn’t that almost the same thing? He’d even sponsored a child in Uganda. It was clear that his mum didn’t know what she’d been talking about. Babbel’s End was certainly *not* Africa. On a mission or not, Bilal wasn’t here to colonise anyone. It would be a dreadful business not to have moved on from that kind of thing. Taking over things, after all, was incredibly impolite. But his mother’s dying wish kept coming back to him after every cycle of his own reasoning, beginning again at the point of his guilt. Bilal focussed on the road ahead,

his hands gripping the steering wheel in case reality slipped away from him.

He drove past the now quiet village green with its Post Office, Mr J's Bookshop – owned by Jenny's husband, James – and Babbel's Bric-a-Brac, which sold everything from old maps and atlases to compositions of wax flowers in glass domes. He glanced at the Life Art gallery, which always struck him as ironic, given there was never much life in there. Rounding the corner past the eighteenth-century coaching inn, The Pig and the Ox, with its multi-coloured flower baskets hanging outside, he followed Coowood Lane (past Tom's overgrown bush), and sped up as he met the A-road. It was the tall pine trees that lined the route, blocking the light and leading onto the wide road that made Babbel's End feel like the type of place you discovered in the back of a magical cupboard: otherworldly but of the world, giving it an air of mystery. Though Babbel's End was not waiting to be discovered. It had always been a proud introvert.

It was a twenty-minute drive into Titchester. Under the fluorescent lights of the only Spar in town he loaded his basket with the necessary stomach medication, along with paracetamol, and superglue for Haaris' school project. Bilal picked up some sugar-free biscuits for Mariam and looked at them for a moment. In the grand scheme of things would it really matter if, for once, his wife decided to have normal, sugar-laden biscuits? An anxiety opened up in his chest, filtering into his stomach, as he thought about her ex-husband, Saif, who was suddenly so inter-

ested in being a proper father to Haaris. Bilal took a deep breath, took an Ativan out of his pocket and swallowed it without water. If the spirit that had lived inside his mum had disappeared, then who was to say that what existed on the outside couldn't vanish too? Was the pain in his chest, the nausea, real – was he sick? – or was it just a figment of his imagination? Each crisis seemed to balloon with every product that he scanned at the self-service checkout.

Bilal got back into his car and sped home, weary of his own company. He opened the front door to see Mariam in black leggings and a white vest-top, walking down the stairs with her laptop.

'Sorry,' he said, raising the bag and walking in, shoes clicking against the walnut flooring. 'Had to go into town.'

Mariam walked into the second living room and set her laptop on the table, taking a seat on their plush ivory sofa.

'What were you doing?' he asked.

'Hmm? Nothing,' she replied, avoiding his gaze.

He decided there was no use asking any further questions. 'Got your sugar-free biscuits.'

'Oh, thanks. I'd run out.'

'I know.'

He bent down and kissed her on the head.

'How was the meeting?' she asked.

He gave her the details as she looked at him now and again, distracted by the laptop's screen.

'Are you working?' he asked.

'That's why I'm sitting at my laptop.'

‘Haaris asleep?’

He watched Mariam’s eyes flicker to the clock on her laptop screen. *No, he’s sitting at the table with us*, he imagined her thinking.

‘Right,’ replied Bilal to her absent words.

Mariam’s eyebrows were knit in concentration as she must’ve been poring over her every word, ready to file her story about the village spring clean, or whatever her latest topic was for the *West Plimpington Gazette*. Bilal was no stranger to the feeling of discomfort, but it was only exacerbated when he watched his wife work. He took personal responsibility for Mariam moving from reporting local government corruption in Birmingham to writing notes on a badger cull in Babbel’s End, and other freelance jobs, that weren’t challenging his wife’s intellect. Fulfilment – and the lack of it – for his family was just another thing on his conscience.

After ten years of marriage, Mariam had changed very little. She was petite, her straight, silky hair was still short enough to not give her any pause to style it. He used to love running his fingers through it. It was all part and parcel of her no-nonsense demeanour, complemented by the perpetual crease in her brow. To some it might’ve looked severe but to Bilal it was inquisitive: ready to question rather than judge because of the sympathetic way her eyelids drooped. But then who could account for perception? In all three of Bilal’s prior relationships there weren’t many emotional conversations he was subjected to which weren’t followed by a trip to his local pharmacy.

But his wife was the epitome of self-sufficiency, just like his mother had been. Except his mother would also sing in the kitchen, hear an old Bollywood song and make her son dance with her. Khala Rukhsana would look on and laugh at them, shaking her head and then toddle off to the kitchen to make them all snacks, which she'd end up eating herself. Bilal was overcome with the kind of desperate fondness for his mum that one could only feel for someone you'd never see again. It was swiftly followed by an overwhelming feeling of his mediocrity as a son. His mother had been an extraordinary woman, trapped in an ordinary life. What Bilal hadn't bargained for was the way in which his wife's self-sufficiency had lately given way to his own feeling of redundancy. A feeling that had bubbled to the surface, along with her ex. He slapped his legs and got up, refusing to give in to paranoia. Mariam's eyes continued to flicker over the laptop screen.

'Tea?' he asked.

'No, thanks.'

He cleared his throat. 'It's muggy out.'

Mariam sighed and leaned back on the sofa. 'Do you want to have a conversation?'

He looked at her.

'Because we can have one and get it over with so I can finish my piece, or you can wait until I'm done and then tell me whatever you'd like to tell me.'

Bilal was just about to venture into explaining these feelings – the inconsequence of it all – when the phone rang.

‘Hello?’ he said into the receiver.

There was a lot of noise in the background. The uniquely loud Punjabi kind.

‘Hello?’ he repeated.

‘*Haan! Beta!*’

He moved the phone away from his ear.

‘*Beta?*’

‘Yes, hello?’

‘Bilal, *beta?*’

‘Yes, this is he.’

‘Who?’

‘Bilal.’

More hubbub in the background.

‘*Abo. Bilal bega,*’ shouted the lady on the phone, ostensibly, to another lady.

‘Who is this?’

‘Auntie Shagufta.’

*Oh, God.*

‘Ah, auntie.’

‘You remember me then? Hmmm?’

‘Of course.’

She was the one with the borderline blonde hair, not the one with the walking stick.

‘*Of course, beta?* You have forgotten how to speak Punjabi?’

She laughed. So did Bilal, albeit nervously.

‘No, no, auntie. Well, yes. It seems I have.’

‘*Hain?*’

‘Yes, Auntie, I’ve forgotten.’



He looked around to see Mariam mouthing *who is it?*  
 He put his hand over the speaker. 'Auntie Shagufta.'  
 Mariam took a deep breath.

'Your Khala Rukhsana has taken a very bad fall, *beta*.  
 Very bad.'

'Oh, gosh. Is she okay? What happened?'

Auntie Shagufta cleared her throat.

'*Beta*, we cannot look after her every day, na. Not like this. You must come and take her and keep her for a while.'

Mariam walked up to Bilal, folding her arms and looking up at him with her signature scrutiny.

A woman in the background spoke in Punjabi: 'Tell him she cannot walk properly. She cannot move. She has very bad kismet.'

'She has bad kismet,' Auntie Shagufta related.

Bilal wasn't sure what his *khala's* poor kismet had to do with him. Mariam took the phone. It was just as well; Mariam always seemed to have more answers than Bilal. Though probably because she often raised the questions.

'*Salam*, Auntie, what happened? Oh, God. Poor thing. How is she?'

Mariam slipped into speaking Punjabi far too easily for a woman who looked so *un-Punjabi*. Bilal felt proud of his wife. She was a woman of layers and she made him more interesting as a result of it.

'*Acha*,' she said. '*Abo*.'

Mariam glanced at Bilal, still speaking in Punjabi: 'She'd be so lonely here. We're hardly home.'

She made a face, as if she couldn't think of a better excuse, and for a moment they were united in their desperation to keep Khala Rukhsana away. Bilal tried to assuage his annoyance. He was sure he loved his khala in a blood-is-important kind of way, but she'd ambled on the periphery of his childhood memories – a woman his mum had to take into account when making decisions rather than helping towards them.

'*Acha?*' said Mariam, still looking at Bilal. 'But . . . hmm. Yes. No, it's just that . . . right. Okay. I understand.'

She put the phone down.

'What happened?' he said.

'It's as if we pushed Khala down the stairs ourselves.'

'Well?'

'There was nothing for it,' replied Mariam, folding her arms.

'Oh, God.'

'I know,' Mariam said, getting back to her laptop. 'We'll have to manage somehow. She'll probably end up staying a few weeks—'

'Weeks!'

Mariam looked him steadily in the eye. 'Maybe this way you'll stop feeling guilty about not actually looking after her—'

'I look after her,' interjected Bilal.

'I don't think a monthly stipend is what your mum had in mind.'

Of course he'd asked Khala Rukhsana to come and stay with them after his mum's funeral, but when she refused,

he didn't ask twice – that would be badgering, surely?

'There were a lot of things my mum had in mind,' he said.

'That's true.'

'A *mosque*,' he said, finally. 'Can you imagine what the neighbours would say?' he mumbled. 'I drove five miles over the speed limit and Shelley's been on to me like a hawk. True to her name.'

Mariam paused. 'As a social experiment it'd be pretty interesting, though.'

'This is the problem with all religious people,' said Bilal. 'They're so obsessive.'

His mum's request somehow felt preachy, manipulative, clinging on to him like burnt plastic on skin. There should be a legal ban on deathbed requests. But then the memory of her singing and dancing came to him. There was no understanding some people.

'You can't say she didn't have ambitions for you,' replied Mariam. 'The height of success for my mum was me marrying the man she told me to when I was eighteen. Now look at me, divorced and re-married to a man who can't even speak Punjabi.'

'Why can't they all just speak English? They did choose to come here.'

Mariam gave him a small smile and shook her head. 'Tory.'

'I'm just not quite myself in Punjabi,' added Bilal.

'Well, *exactly*.' She looked at him pointedly. 'Anyway, since my mum's dead too, you needn't worry about it.'

Mariam's bluntness still made Bilal flinch.

'Spoken to your dad lately?' he asked.

'No. He's too busy shagging his third wife, probably. I lose count. After every trip to Pakistan he brings back a new one.'

'You know what I say?'

'Yes, yes,' replied Mariam. "*At least he stuck around to watch you grow up.*"

'It's true.'

Bilal sat down opposite her on the ivory egg chair. Maybe the perpetual crease in Mariam's brow wasn't her being inquisitive (or judgemental), maybe it was just a product of her childhood – her fatalistic mum and wayward dad, etching their life's mistakes on her face.

'The thing is,' he finally said. 'I feel that Mum was right.'

'About my dad being a no-hope philanderer?'

'No. Well, that too unfortunately,' he replied as Mariam gave a small laugh. Bilal smiled. 'But I mean, about *life*.'

Mariam creased her brows again.

'When we . . . ' he cleared his throat. 'You know . . . *die*. What will we have left behind?'

He thought of his dying mother on her bed, the deep-set wrinkles in her skin, the hazy blue around her pupils – he was becoming too familiar with this ache in his heart. 'What did Mum leave behind?'

Mariam looked at Bilal for a moment then down at her laptop again. 'Khala Rukhsana, that's what. If she's coming then I'll need to get the cleaner in to sort the room before I drive into town . . . oh, since you're going to Birmingham

we can stock up on halal meat. Saves me driving an hour for it. She does eat meat, doesn't she? Does she prefer chicken or lamb? You should call her and arrange a time to collect her tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?'

'When else?' said Mariam. 'That's the problem with you – by the time you've thought things through and decided to actually do them someone's either over it, or dead.'

He bristled.

'Sorry,' she said. 'You know what I mean.'

He wasn't entirely sure he did.

That night Bilal went to bed and waited for his sleeping pills to kick in, so he didn't hear Mariam come into the room. If he'd been awake he'd have felt her gently kiss his forehead, whispering 'sorry,' in his ear. The way she so often did when she knew he couldn't hear.