

A Drop in Custom

The days were different now, thought Shafiq, as he peered through the street-grimed window towards the bus stop across the road. Of course, the light was weaker and greyer as November approached its close. But it wasn't just that. After what had happened, everything else had changed too. Muttering to himself, he returned to his stool and gazed around the shop. Everything he owned was here, enclosed by the fluorescent strip lights and gloss yellow walls: shelves of Saver Value shampoo and Vosene; of Saver Value sliced white ("Economy on the Go"); of loo rolls and tinned tomatoes. The chiller with the milk and the soft drinks. The beer, the cigarettes and the whisky. The video corner: DVD rental from only two-fifty a day. He shook his head. How long had it taken to build all this up? Thirty years? Thirty-five?

A wail of brakes announced the arrival of another bus at the stop, and he peered through the panes again. But before he could see if Roderick had got off, the doorbell rang and someone else came in.

'Shafiq, my friend,' said the man, extending a hand. 'How are you?'

He shrugged. 'I am fine, Harun. Thank you.'

His visitor wore a loose grey achkan, and a kufi which sat low over his brows. Deep brown eyes twinkled down at Shafiq from a weathered face fringed with a short white beard.

'So you are fine, are you?' said Harun, half-smiling. 'Then how will you look when you are ill?'

The shopkeeper gave a sigh. 'You are right,' he said, spreading his hands. 'Business is bad, very bad.'

Harun clucked sympathetically. 'Everywhere it is the same. People are shocked, they stay away. But they will always need a corner shop, my friend. And their memories are short. After a while, they will come back.'

'If it does not happen again,' said Shafiq, nodding towards the television.

Harun nodded. 'Yes. Inshallah.'

They were silent for a moment. Then Shafiq gestured through the window. ‘At least I will always have my faithful customers,’ he said. In a doorway across the street lounged a group of hoodie-clad teenagers, all baggy sleeves and ground-hugging waists. ‘The big one there – he is called Jez. Jez has a very good fake ID that claims he is nineteen.’

‘What is he, then? Fifteen?’

Shafiq folded his arms and inclined his head as if admiring a picture in a gallery. ‘Fourteen. My Farah, she knows him from school. We have a deal, this Jez and I. I tell him, no hard drink – only these.’ He waved a hand towards the fridge where cheap cider and lager stood chilling. ‘Otherwise, his ID is good. In return, they leave my windows alone.’

Harun raised an eyebrow. ‘He is their leader, then?’

‘Ha! He is the only one out of nappies!’

Harun laughed.

When his friend had gone, Shafiq slumped back into his stool and watched another bus come and go. In front of him were two monitor screens, but there was nothing on either: the doings of Ramsey Street on the proper one, and all four corners of his empty shop on the security one. His empty shop...

He shivered. For a moment he thought about turning the heating up, but then he remembered last week’s gas bill, and buttoned his collar instead. *I must try to be cheerful*, he thought. Old Harun had seen how he was feeling straight away. And Asma, who knew him so much better – what must she think? ‘I will try,’ Shafiq said out loud. Asma was a good wife, but she worried so much about things. He must protect her, keep her safe.

On the television, *Neighbours* ended and the news began. He reached for the remote, but before he could hit the “off” button, *that* scene was before him again. He left the volume down: he wanted to hear as little as possible. But his eyes were drawn to the screen as if attached by hot wires.

The scene was a deserted street, in town. In the middle of the picture was a red double-decker bus with its side peeled away, hanging there like torn wallpaper. There were scorch-marks over the remains of the advertising banner. The upper deck of the bus had lifted in the middle like a hump-back bridge, and along its length the roof showed half-a-dozen rounded bumps. The only window left intact was the front upstairs one, above a yellow display that still dared to show the bus's number and destination. All around, fairyland crystals of shattered glass glittered. Blue-and-white police tape cordoned the end of the road. Behind it, forensic investigators in ghostly suits moved around the wreck.

Shafiq felt the lump in his throat tightening. The reporter was saying that several of the victims had suffered broken necks, and Shafiq looked at the dents in the roof with reluctant horror. Then the picture changed: a young man, bearded and swarthy, a lost expression in his eyes. The bomber. Another picture: this time, three men. All young, so young. The plotters, caught on CCTV. All British-born, and now arrested. Shafiq wiped a sleeve across his eyes.

Then he turned to find Jez towering over him. 'Gorrany White Lightnin?' he muttered.

Shafiq sighed. 'No, but the Carling is on special offer. Three ninety-nine for four...'

In the fifteen years since she'd come to the UK with her new husband, Asma had changed very little, she hoped. Unlike some of the other girls, she had stuck to the old ways as far as she could. She liked to say that she had left Karachi, but Karachi would never leave her. She dressed modestly – the only item of British dress she'd adopted was a long, baggy woollen jumper to keep out the cold – and she stayed at home. There was plenty of work to do, after all. She was proud of this. She ran their home-behind-the-shop cleverly and economically; and she was there, always there for Kamil, and for Farah. But most of all, she was there for her husband, for whom she had a deep, deep respect. She thought it was probably love.

‘What is it, my dear?’ she asked that evening as Shafiq sat hunched on the couch, hugging his arms about himself. She settled next to him, drawing the jumper over her knees. ‘Has it been a quiet day again?’

He inclined his head and sighed. ‘Yes. It has been quiet. Not fifteen customers all day.’

She laid a hand on his arm. ‘Things will get better, I think. In time.’

‘That is what Harun said.’

The television news was there again; Shafiq hadn’t been able to stop himself switching on. It replayed the images that he now knew by heart. It showed the pictures of the same young men, caught on CCTV. He’d read somewhere that there was one surveillance camera for every fourteen people, in this so-called free democracy. These boys had been seen meeting with the bomber; their computers showed contacts with “a training camp near Peshawar”. And boys they were, just boys like Kamil. They looked so ordinary...

Shafiq turned to his wife. ‘It is Roderick that I am disappointed in.’

‘Roderick?’ She frowned. ‘Oh! Is he that tall man with the fair hair and big hands? He wears a sheepskin coat?’

Shafiq nodded. ‘Two or three times a week he comes to my shop. Sometimes he buys his newspaper in the morning, sometimes he gets off the bus and calls in after work. He buys milk, bread, beer. But always, he stops to chat. Most of these British, they come in, they go out. But Roderick – he stops. And we do not just talk about the British weather. He asks me how I am. He asks after you, and the children. And he tells me about himself. About his girlfriend troubles.’ He smiled at the recollection. ‘Only last week, he was telling me he has met the right girl at last.’

‘Ooh, that is lovely! He has a nice smile, I am not surprised.’

Shafiq pulled a face. ‘I said to him, “Roderick, this is the third time this year you have found your Miss Right. And there have been plenty of Miss Wrongs, too.” Well, he laughed at that. “This one is different,” he said. Then he spent ten minutes telling

me all about his girl, and how lovely she was. He says she sings, and dances like an angel. They play squash, they go out for long walks together.'

'Ooh. tell me more,' said Asma, her eyes big.

'More?' Shafiq frowned. 'That's it. I have told you all about her.'

Asma tutted. 'Oh! You are not romantic,' she said accusingly. 'You are a man. But, Shafiq, this is good news. You never know, perhaps he will marry her.'

He sighed again. 'You are right. I will never know. Since – since Tuesday,' he said, nodding towards the television, 'I have not seen him. Roderick has stopped coming.'

'What, you think he is like everyone else? You think he blames you for what the bomber did? You think, because you are from Pakistan..?'

'I am sad. It is not like him. But you can never understand the British. Unless – what if..?' Suddenly pale, he gripped his wife's arm. 'Asma, he gets the bus to work. Every day he gets the bus to work. Now, I do not see him...'

Both of their faces turned back to the television screen, where the stricken bus was now being towed away.

On Friday morning Shafiq was up early. He hadn't slept well, so he'd shivered his way out of bed and through a mug of strong coffee before slipping down through the back room and into the shop. Might as well change the window display around, he thought. Take my mind off things.

He pulled a face as he surveyed the window. The advertising strips on the outside were faded, their colours vaporised by the long-gone summer sun. Maybe he could move some of the brighter-coloured things into the window. That might help. He set to work, shuffling the tins of spaghetti up a bit, the toothpaste down a shelf or two. The things from the window could go here... Maybe I could do some special offers, he thought. Might as well make a loss as sell nothing at all. He brought a pile of magazines to the window-racks and looked out. *Had* Roderick been on the bombed bus? This was what troubled him and made his stomach ache, what had kept him

awake last night, wondering. He'd pictured his best customer sitting dead in a buckled seat, his head lolling at an impossible angle... In his half-sleep, the news footage had replayed itself over and over until he was no longer sure who he was more worried about: Roderick, the only Brit who treated him as human, or the young boy with the lost expression. Why? *Why?*

On an impulse – he wasn't due to open up for another twenty minutes – he unlocked the shop door and looked out. Somewhere behind the empty factory and the heavy clouds the dawn would be creeping out to size up the day. He remembered home – *his* home, so long ago: dawn was much quicker there, and the days never short and dark. The City of Lights. The reds and yellows of the markets, the splashes of garden; the smells of spices, of frying food, of perfumes and musky dyes...

To his left, a jogger veered out of the dark between the parked cars, a close woollen hat hiding the top of his head, earphone lead waving in time with his steps. It wasn't till he was passing the bus stop that Shafiq realised who it was.

'Roderick!' He called out, not caring who else was listening.

The jogger took no notice, the white stripes down the sides of his trousers flexing busily under the orange street lights. Shafiq hurried across the road.

'Roderick!' he called, not so loud this time. He was already puffing with the unaccustomed exercise. 'You are all right! I am so glad!'

The jogger jogged on.

'Wait!' said Shafiq between gasps as he scrabbled along. 'What is the matter? I thought you were dead. Why don't you stop?'

Then the man did stop, and turned abruptly to face him. His face was set, his eyes fixed somewhere over Shafiq's right ear.

'What do you want?' he said. His breath came fast, steaming in the damp air.

Shafiq reached out to shake his hand; the other pulled it away. 'I – I thought,' said Shafiq uncertainly, 'I thought you must – the bombing – it was not your bus? I was worried for you.' He searched Roderick's face. Even in the pre-dawn shadows, he could tell there was something wrong.

Roderick pulled off his earphones, and thin scratches of music leaked out. 'I missed my bus last Tuesday. I got talking to you, remember?' The words were forced out between set jaws.

Shafiq tried to laugh. 'I am sorry –'

'And the bus got blown up. The bomber got on two stops from here, did you know that?'

Shafiq swallowed. 'No. I – he is not from – I mean, I do not know him...'

'I don't care, all right?'

Roderick was standing over him now. Shafiq had been beaten up once or twice before, and he knew what it felt like. He looked back towards his shop.

'Please, Roderick,' he said, 'tell me. We are friends, you and I. What is the matter with you?'

To his astonishment, the other let out a sob. Just the one, escaped like a lonely child in a playground. Now Shafiq could hear the lump grating in Roderick's throat.

'I've been telling you about Lucy,' he said, his head now bent. 'We met on the bus. We get – we used to get – the same one, most days. Now she'll never walk again, and all because one of your fucking countrymen decided to make a name for himself.' His voice was a squeak now. 'And you – you ask me what's the matter?' He turned and began to put his earphones back in.

'Roderick –'

'Look, forget it. Just don't bother me. I'm never coming to your crappy little shop again, all right? I don't want to get blown up too.' He turned, and now he was no longer jogging, but running – sprinting down the road until the gloom swallowed him.

It was quiet in the mosque. Not silent: the prayers of his fellow-worshippers, alternately kneeling and prostrating themselves, rang in his ears like a busy river. But, yes, it was quieter than usual. Imam Khosa's sermon had been brief; at a time like this, there was nothing the old man could say. Shafiq's friends, the men he saw every week, had stood silent, looking helplessly at each other; or else they'd forced an eerie

cheerfulness which quickly lapsed. Shafiq himself was finding it hard to concentrate. Roderick, Roderick!

Praise be to God, the Lord of the Universe. His belly hurt as he bent. He remembered Roderick's pale cheeks, his vacant eyes. It wasn't that Roderick was his best friend, at all – he had so many good friends around him...

The Most Merciful, the Ever Merciful. No, it was that only Roderick had ever crossed the bridge from Britain...

King of the Day of Judgement. And the day of judgement had come, and the bridge had fallen. Should he himself have tried harder, Shafiq wondered: tried to understand this country, its glories and its horrors, its open spaces and its closed doors?

You alone we worship, and You alone we ask for help. Yes, we need help. We need help now. Times will be bad...

Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom you have blessed, not of those who have deserved anger...

He only knew he was crying when he saw the drips falling from his nose.

The prayers were ended. He felt a little better now; some of the emptiness was gone. As he dodged amongst the other men, trying to remember where he'd left his shoes, he caught a glimpse of Harun, and gave him a nod. His friend held up a hand. Then, behind, a commotion: a sudden shout, raised voices. A wail – not a shrill, woman's wail, but a deep-throated hollowness, echoing like wind in a stone tunnel. A small knot of men, lowering something to the floor; someone hurrying for water.

Harun was at his shoulder. 'Is it..? Yes, I think it is Saleem Rana.'

Shafiq knew the man, a fat and prosperous car dealer who sweated a lot. 'What is wrong with him?'

Harun leaned towards his ear. 'His nephew. One of the plotters.'

Shafiq stared. Saleem Rana was now moaning: 'Aou, aou, aou!', and his friends were trying to stop him beating his head against the wall.

He hurried home. He hadn't liked to leave Asma running the shop alone, but she'd made him go. Friday prayers were important, and life had to go on. Across the road, in the graffiti'd doorway, Jez and his friends had managed to get hold of some vodka and were passing it around. Shafiq shook his head, and pushed open the door. The bell jingled as usual.

'Asma?' he called. 'My dear?' There was no sign of her. What had happened? His heart in his mouth, he turned for the back room; then the door was thrown open, almost smacking him in the face. It was Asma, a telephone clasped to her ear. She gestured him to follow.

'...but you are all right yourself? Yes, you... you are not hurt? Allah be praised!' She covered the mouthpiece. 'It's Kamil. They had bricks thrown at them coming out of college. One boy in hospital. *He's* all right... Kamil? What are you doing now? Oh...'

'What's happening?' put in Shafiq.

'The police are taking statements,' she said. Then, back into the mouthpiece: 'How long will you be, then?'

'He is not arrested?'

'Hush! Of course not.'

Shafiq stomped back into the shop and began re-arranging the shelves again. He re-arranged them for another twenty minutes.

The afternoon passed slowly. Two tentative ladies came in together and bought milk before escaping. A dusty builder, glowing in fluorescent yellow, had swaggered in for some Embassy number one; and that was it. Now the streetlights were glowing dully and Ann Robinson was telling people they were the Weakest Link. The weakest link. Who was the weakest link now? Roderick had walked out. Who was left?

The door crashed open, the bell gave a shriek. Jez swayed in the doorway, his hood still up, rain glistening on his shoulders. From outside came a raucous cackle. 'Go on, Jez,' shouted someone.

Jez muttered, as he had been trained to do. ‘Fuckin’ Paki,’ he said to his feet.

‘What is it?’ said Shafiq. ‘Did you want some Carling tonight? Some Strongbow?’ But he knew it wasn’t drink that Jez wanted. Suddenly his narrow space between the counter and the shelves of cigarettes seemed like a trap; a cage; a grave.

Jez shouted now, showing off the new depth in his voice. ‘Fuckin’ Pakis, you’re all terrorists! Yer come here takin’ our jobs, then yer fucking blow us up! Terr’ists!’ He planted his hands on the nearest shelves and shoved, turning them over. Bags of flour burst over the floor; the vinegar and the ketchup went flying. Now everything happened quickly. Two more of the lads came into the shop and ran along the shelves, sweeping everything to the floor, shouting abuse. A brick came through the window, and Shafiq ducked behind the counter, covering his head as glass flew. Jez was bellowing, his words drink-slurred: ‘Paki bast’ds, Paki bast’ds! Terr’ists!’

Suddenly Shafiq was outside of himself, watching. This couldn’t be him, giving a great yell and leaping over the counter. This couldn’t be him, yanking one of the jobs from the drinks shelf and hurling him through the doorway. This couldn’t be him, roaring like a cornered tiger. The rage ran through him, like electricity in his lungs. He felt himself punching, whirling, flailing. He had Jez by the throat, squeezing it like a fruit. Then something hit him, and hit him hard. Where? Where had it come from? It happened again – his head – blood! – he sank to his knees. A smell of whisky, a shattering of glass. In his fingers, strawberry jam oozed over the floor. He fell there, felt the cold lino against his cheek. Someone was screaming – Asma – he must help her!

Then a voice, loud, quivering, quaking – something about getting out of there – ‘I’ve called the police,’ it said, ‘they’re on their way. And I bloody know who you are. Get the fuck out of here! Get out!’

Shafiq knew he had flour all over his face. He didn’t want Asma to see him like this...

Panadol: how many packets of the stuff did he sell every month? Shafiq didn’t know – he couldn’t be bothered to check the stock records – but it was a lot. He’d never had to

use it himself before, but now he was getting through more than the advisory eight-a-day. Pop them out of the awkward plastic. One, two on the tongue. Swallow of water. Blink. Head still throbbing, thigh still aching.

The squeak and graunch from the window wasn't helping, either. But he knew the pain would begin to dull soon. Blowing out his cheeks, he eased himself gingerly onto the stool: the bruising on his buttocks was beginning to subside. He looked around, feeling the uneven warmth from the fan-heater on his ankles and calves. Then he frowned. He'd tried to get the shop looking exactly the same as before – he couldn't help it, even though Asma told him not to worry – and yet something *was* different. There was the fresh coat of paint – maybe it was a different shade? No. There were the newly-repaired fridges; had they changed? No. The window was new, of course. Now it was double-glazed and toughened, fringed with a bright blue metal shutter. But it was still in the same place. Wincing, he looked out at the street, lit by the low sun which had been deceitfully brightening everything for the last week. Ah, *that* was it: the window was clean. It wasn't buried under a decade of grime like its predecessor, which was one thing. Another was, that it was getting cleaned three times a week. That was community service for you.

The new electronic chime trilled, and Jez appeared, water-stains down his parka. 'Finished,' he said, dumping his bucket and wandering in.

'You have done a good job,' said Shafiq. 'Kit Kat?'

'Got a Mars bar?'

'Just there.'

'Ta.' Jez took a giant-size one and peeled off the wrapper.

'So. Are you going out tonight?'

'Umph,' said Jez, chewing a large mouthful. 'Might go for a game o'pool.'

'I thought you said there was a disco on, or something like this? At Bexley Street?'

He shrugged. 'Nah. Boring.'

'You might meet a girl. You are not too young. It would you good.'

Jez scowled and licked chocolate from his lips. 'Don't be stupid. I mean, like, who'd have me?'

Shafiq shook his head; then wished he hadn't. The Panadol wasn't working yet. 'Stranger things have happened.'

Jez snorted. 'I'm off. Back Saturday, innit?'

'I'll see you then. And go to that disco.'

The door closed. Shafiq hugged himself and stood closer to the fan-heater. 'I am doing so well,' he said out loud. 'I have not strangled him yet.'

It came back to him; it frequently did. Asma had seen the flour on his face after all. She'd hugged his bloodied head and wept over him, rocking him to and fro. Then someone had taken him from her, to bind his gashed thigh. That someone had been Roderick. He'd gone into their house, found a bedsheet and torn it into strips with his own hands. He'd said soothing things. He'd stood at the doorway, looking out for the ambulance. He'd stayed at the shop, got one of the neighbours to help, until the police came; he'd given his statements, then gone to the hospital to check Shafiq was all right. Shafiq had been sedated, but Roderick had seen him, comforted Asma, and left his number in case she needed any more help.

And, in all the weeks since, Shafiq hadn't seen him. He himself had been busy, helping with Saleem Rana's funeral arrangements after the old man had died of grief. Then he'd had to get the shop back together. The family had rallied round, and his friends had been wonderful. So why was he still bothered about Roderick? He knew why. He'd had a dream, and in the dream it was Asma who was crushed by the roof of a blown-up bus, whose head was smashed deep into the metal. It was as if a deep hole had opened up in his guts, a hole though which he could feel the cold empty wastes of starless space. And then he knew how Roderick felt, and he knew what it must have cost him to come into the shop to save him from Jez and his cronies, and to be pleasant, and helpful, and to offer more help. To offer help to his girlfriend's attackers.

So Shafiq knew. And because he knew, he hadn't accepted Roderick's help. It was not right.

He moved his leg, to stop the fan-heater singeing his trousers. Ah well, he thought. It is the will of Allah. He remembered the way Roderick used to half-lean on the counter as he was chatting, the light in his eyes on that last morning when he'd spoken about his girlfriend, the gestures he'd made with his big boxing-glove hands... And because he'd been thinking about those hands, it seemed natural when, half a second and a door-chime later, one of them pushed open the shop door. There was a sort of commotion and an arm reached in. Then some wheels appeared, a heavy blanket, then more wheels and a figure in a chair, a pale face and a sheen of groomed fair hair. Pushing the wheelchair was Roderick.

He turned the chair into the shop, and Shafiq didn't know whether to look at the familiar, heavy-jawed face that blinked and didn't know what expression to wear, or the other face, lower down, pale and translucent as bone china, with eyes like the distant December sky.

'Hi,' said Roderick: a short word, but he still managed to bite the end off it. He gripped the wheelchair tightly.

Shafiq had been looking at the girl. His eyes followed down from her neck, wrapped in a fleece scarf, and her upper body, its shape only to be guessed at inside a quilted anorak; to her small-fingered hands, clasped in gloves on her lap; to the rug which wrapped her tightly from the waist downwards. Between the neatly-tucked end of the rug and the wheelchair's footrests there was a clear gap of six inches. He snapped his gaze back to Roderick's face.

'Oh! Roderick! I am sorry! I have never come to thank you. I am so grateful. I think you saved my life, yes indeed. Yes, I do not know what those boys would have done. But it is very bad of me, not to thank you. Please – ' he felt his gaze dropping towards the six-inch gap, so he swallowed '– that is – '

Roderick held up a hand. He was slightly breathless. 'Shafiq, it's all right. Anyway, you don't know where I live, do you? Er – look – can I introduce you? This is Lucy.'

Shafiq knew it. He knew this was Roderick's Miss Right. He felt a lump coming in his throat, and all at once a hundred pictures crowded in his head: Lucy and Roderick playing squash, scenting each other's sweat as they laughed and cursed and swung their racquets; the young boy with the lost expression; Roderick and Lucy, walking on the hills; Saleem Rana, banging his head on the wall; the broken-backed bus with its side spilt out and its roof dented; flour and jam on the floor; and Lucy, dancing and gliding like an angel... He covered his face with a hand. He tried to speak, but only a large wet sniff escaped.

'I am sorry!' He burst out. 'I am so, so sorry!' He pulled a packet of tissues from the shelf and ripped one out, drying his eyes. When he looked again, the wheelchair was in front of him and he was looking down into the December sky.

'Please,' she said, her voice quiet and soft, 'it's not your fault. I know it isn't.' She reached out, and all of a sudden Shafiq knew why Roderick loved her. He took her hand in both of his, and then failed to speak again.

At last he raised his eyes to meet Roderick's. 'Thank you,' he said, nodding.

'We've come to say goodbye,' said Roderick.

'Goodbye? But why? What has happened?'

'We're going to move to a new flat,' said Lucy. 'With better access, you see?'

Shafiq had to blow his nose again. He tugged out another tissue.

There was a rustling from his left, and Asma came in. 'Oh! Hello! You must be Roderick. And –' only the slightest hesitation as she took it all in '– you are Roderick's girlfriend, I think. I am Asma,' she said, coming towards them and extending a hand. 'I think we should all have a cup of tea, don't you? And some English scones?'

Shafiq wiped his eyes. Now he remembered why he loved Asma, too.