
The Found City (1977)

I was born in 1969 at a red-brick hospital in Leeds that has since been converted into a psychiatric unit. The very first words I heard were the ones uttered by my father: '*La illaha ill Allah, Muhammad ur rasul Allah*' – 'I bear witness that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah', the Shahadah, the declaration of faith, whispered three times into my right ear. A couple of days after my birth, my mother took me home to our tiny overcrowded terraced house. I was her third child, born with British citizenship, Pakistani values and a Muslim soul.

'Oh that's a pretty name. But what does it mean?' That's what people say to me when they can't pronounce my name. I reply: 'It's Zay-bar. It rhymes with "neighbour" or "labour". It means "Beautiful One".' Or 'Intelligent One'. Or 'Enlightened One'. I make up any old rubbish, depending on the mood I'm in. In fact it means 'Adorned One'.

I was named after a famous Pakistani actress called Zeba, a superstar who like modern-day icons had no need of a surname. Zeba played the heroine in scores of black and white films from the mid 1960s – most of them tragic love stories with controversial and complicated plots, such as

Armaan, about a young girl who has a child outside of wedlock, a jilted lover who becomes an alcoholic, a mother who commits suicide and a sexual attacker who is murdered. It makes me smile when I wonder if it was in a moment of weakness that my reverential father called me after a screen goddess who appeared in such ungodly films.

My family name, Malik, is Arabic and means ‘Master’. In the Koran, Malik is the Angel who guards Hell, assisted by nineteen guardians. ‘And when the sinners in the Punishment of Hell cry: “Oh Malik! Would that thy Lord put an end to us!” He will say: “Nay, but here ye shall abide for aye because you abhorred the truth when the truth was brought to you.”’

As it turned out, my parents named me well. It’s almost as though they anticipated the tension I would endure throughout my life, the tension between the profane and the pious.

I knew I was Muslim long before I knew I was British. And I knew I was Pakistani long before I knew I was English.

It’s hardly surprising.

There was the blatant declaration Umejee occasionally made me repeat from the age of about four:

We are Pakistani,
Pakistani children are good children.
We are Muslim,
Muslim children are good children.

Then there was the Islamic baptism ceremony, the Haqeeqa, that my siblings and I had at the Bradford YMCA,

where an old holy man with a long grey beard and a white crocheted cap stood in front of an audience of about fifty Aunties and Uncles and prayed to Allah that we, the four Malik children, would grow up to be good, obedient Muslims.

There was the way Umejee always referred to Pakistan and never England as home.

The way we spoke Punjabi in the house.

The way our food smelt and tasted so different to English people's, and how we used our hands, not knives and forks, to eat. Even the places we bought our food were different – we didn't shop at the supermarket, but at the halal butcher and the grocery stalls that sold lambs' hooves, fresh coriander, bird's eye chillies, ginger and mangoes.

The way we covered our bodies with sparkly *shalwar kameezes* and saris.

The time that Umejee made us leave a children's birthday party when some of the adults started knocking back 'viskey and Coca-Cola'.

The way that Dad treated all white people with the utmost respect and deference. 'Mr Councillor sir', 'Mr Police Officer sir', 'Mr Plumber sir'.

The Aunties, a network of women all about my mother's age or older, who, like Umejee, didn't work and spoke very little English. We always had to show the utmost respect to these women, for a start referring to them all as 'Auntie' even though they weren't (thankfully) blood relatives and ensuring an endless supply of sweet tea and coconut biscuits whenever they turned up at our house, always unannounced and always for bloody ages, so we'd miss *Sale of the Century* and 3-2-1.

Apart from bringing up their children, the Aunties had

one other function – to maintain Pakistani traditions to the best of their ability and to shame anybody who dared to deviate from them. So they would talk endlessly about Pakistani concepts such as the *halaht*, the situation, with family back home; the *himaht*, strength, they needed to cope with their ailing health – diabetes, arthritis, depression; the *fikr*, concerns, they had about their adolescent daughters and the *rishta*, marriage proposal, they were looking for for a teenage son; the *izzat*, honour, lacking in the British-born generation; and the *perishani*, sorrow, they had to endure as parents of this British-born generation.

The Aunties were masters at letting you know that they disapproved of non-Pakistani habits. It was very subtle – sometimes it was just a look, a hard stare, and sometimes it was just a sentence: ‘I see that your daughter is wearing trousers and not *shalwar kameez* at home, Begum.’ Like the poles of a tent, the network of Aunties supported and reinforced each other in upholding what they regarded as the moral and social protective cover for their children – the Pakistani Muslim way.

And then there was Bradford. Like hundreds of other Pakistanis, Dad had come to Bradford in the mid 1960s because there was plenty of work in the city’s textile mills, particularly on the night shifts. At first, he and the Uncles arrived here on their own from places like Sialkot, Kashmir, Rawalpindi and Mirpur; they worked all the hours they could, alternating shifts at the factories with shifts in shared houses (numbers varied massively from six tenants in a two-up-two-down to an implausible forty) and sending money back to their villages and towns. Life was hard but at least there was freedom – no parents to tell these young men what to do, no Aunties, no wives,

no imams. Nobody to tell them not to go into clubs or listen to rock 'n' roll or fall in love with girls in floral miniskirts who drank halves of ale and went by the name of Sybil or Barbara. That was what some of the men did – I can't tell you how many or who, that's a secret the Uncles will no doubt take with them to the grave – but there was certainly a fair number of them who fell in love with Ingerlernd and its ways and its women. I can just see it now: shouting sweet nothings over the deafening sound of the textile looms – 'Oh, you are so beautiful lady, like the film actress Nargis.' 'You what?!' – sharing fish and chips on a damp bench overlooking a bleak, blackened and smoggy Manningham, then bringing her back to your flat, where thirty brown-skinned men with coconut oil in their hair were taking turns to sleep in makeshift beds.

These 'love matches' may have been romantic, but they were also short-lived. As Enoch Powell spurted his 'rivers of blood' speech and the immigration laws were tightened, the young economic migrants had to act fast – they had to get their families over from the subcontinent before the proposed voucher scheme made it much more difficult. So over came the parents, the Aunties, the wives and the imams. And over came Umejee, an eighteen-year-old bride from Lahore who left behind eight siblings and a beloved mother, and Pajee, Dad's elder brother. All of them about to begin a very different life.

As hundreds of migrants became thousands of settlers, hostility grew. The National Front held regular rallies in Bradford, and the Yorkshire Campaign against Immigration (which won around 20 per cent of the votes in some wards in the 1970 general election) distributed leaflets

around schools warning white parents that if their kids sat next to Asian pupils they would certainly contract smallpox.



Umejee and Dad shortly after their wedding.

Despite such opposition, by the mid 1970s it was pretty obvious to all – the politicians, the racists, the Bradfordians and the Pakistanis – that we were Here to Stay, and that Here to Stay didn't necessarily mean Here to Integrate. For the thirty thousand or so of us in the city, there was a process of 'settlement by tiptoe' – we took on some aspects of British life by working in its factories and sending our kids to its schools, but preserved Pakistani life through language, religion and culture. We set up our own communities in places like Manningham, Little Horton and Great Horton, where I grew up; we established our own mosques and madrasas; we ran our own businesses – goldsmiths, curry houses, fabric shops; we even set up our own entertainment in the form of Asian record shops and cinemas.

In the early 1970s, the Reverend P.M. Hawkins, the bishop's chaplain for community relations, wrote a pamphlet entitled 'Pakistanis in Bradford' that was designed to explain to the white population the religion, customs and traditions of this newly arrived community:

The Pakistani will not have a very good picture of English people, because the ones he most often sees are feckless, amoral and poverty-stricken in every way. He is not very anxious to become 'like us' until he sees that there are people who live decent hard-working lives within English society. Such people are usually known to him as 'Royal Family'.

I'm not sure that such a brutally frank assessment did much to promote positive Anglo-Pak community relations at the time, but given the fact that Umejee and no doubt other Aunties had tried and failed to become part of the royal family, the most revered institution in the whole of the country, by offering their services as cooks, cleaners, etc., the only other option available to them in this 'feckless, amoral' society was to stick to their own.

Bradford, the city that was once called Worstedopolis, on account of its production of fine worsted wool, the best in the world, was now Bradistan. A home from home for the Pakistanis.

That was why I could never forget that I was Pakistani when I was growing up – because I lived in Bradistan.

But more importantly than that, the main reason why I knew who I was from a very young age – a Pakistani, yes, but a Muslim first and foremost – was because of Dad. You see, Dad was very religious. Which meant that I was too.

You may have heard it stated, particularly over the last few years, that Islam is much more than a religion, it's a way of life, and that everything a Muslim does from the moment he wakes up to the time that he goes to sleep is dictated by God and the Koran. You may also have heard

about the five pillars of Islam; the Shahadah, the declaration of faith; Salat, prayer five times a day; Zakat, donating money to the poor; Ramadan, fasting for a month from sunrise to sunset; and Hajj, pilgrimage to Mecca.

Now I have no scientific research to base this upon, but I reckon that the majority of Muslims living in the UK do not fastidiously observe all five tenets. I certainly don't. But Dad did, all his adult life.

So, for example, every morning he would wake up at the crack of dawn to recite his Fajr, even when he'd just worked a ten-hour shift at the mill. From underneath my blanket, I would hear him utter God's name, '*Bismillah Irahma niraheem*', as he headed downstairs to carry out his ablutions in the kitchen sink – hawking mucus from his nose and throat, gargling three times, drenching his face, neck, feet and arms in water, washing out his ears, all the time flooding the adjoining gas cooker, Umejee's spice jars and the lino, so that poor Mum would have to spend ages drying out the kitchen with a mop and cloth before we could have our sugary eggy-bread breakfast.

Throughout the rest of the day, no matter where Dad was or what he was doing, he would always stop to say his prayers. God came first. Even if it meant having his head perilously close to the wool machines he operated at the factory, and their two-foot-long needles that moved so fast you couldn't see them. Or having to park up on the motorway and pray on the hard shoulder: 'Get out your mats and pray to the west.'

My father spent more time at the mosque than he did at home. His regular place of worship was down the road from our house in an old Victorian building that had once

been a church, but if the call to prayer came when he was out and about elsewhere in the city, he would often nip into one of the other ‘God’s Homes’, as he called them.

Not that he had lots of choice. Back in the late 1970s, there were just seven mosques catering for Bradford’s forty thousand Muslims. Most of these were converted terraced houses, like the one on Southfield Square that’s still in use today. And when I say converted, what I really mean is stripped, so that the furniture you would expect to see in a normal residential abode – sofa, bed, table, etc. – had all been removed, but other than that there were few other changes. There was no proper provision for carrying out ablutions, not enough space for dozens of prostrated men, especially on a Friday, no emergency fire exits; such an arrangement was far from suitable.

I remember a story in the news recently about one of these converted houses, in Birmingham, collapsing under the weight of the congregation at a funeral. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that such accidents were once regular occurrences in Bradford.

In the absence of any organised Islamic body, it was left up to Dad and the many Uncles who made up ‘the community’ to work to improve the provision of religious sites for the growing and by now permanent population of Muslims in Bradford. They had a difficult task.

For a start, they had to battle against the authorities. If you look at the Subject Archive at the Central Library in Bradford, there’s a folder entitled ‘Mosques’, which details some of these disputes. A mosque in the residential Lapage Street was closed down after the Department of the Environment found that: ‘The mosque activities involve chanting and during the month of Ramadan, very long

hours of use.’ Another was shut after it was found to have dangerous wiring, and another was ordered to be closed by the corporation because it didn’t have planning permission. When a penalty of forty pounds had to be paid by the mosque committee, one representative stated that: ‘It’s not a crime to be religious but yet our members are brought to court and fined.’ There was a lot of ill feeling. One congregation even stated that it would use physical force to get into their mosque if it was locked up.

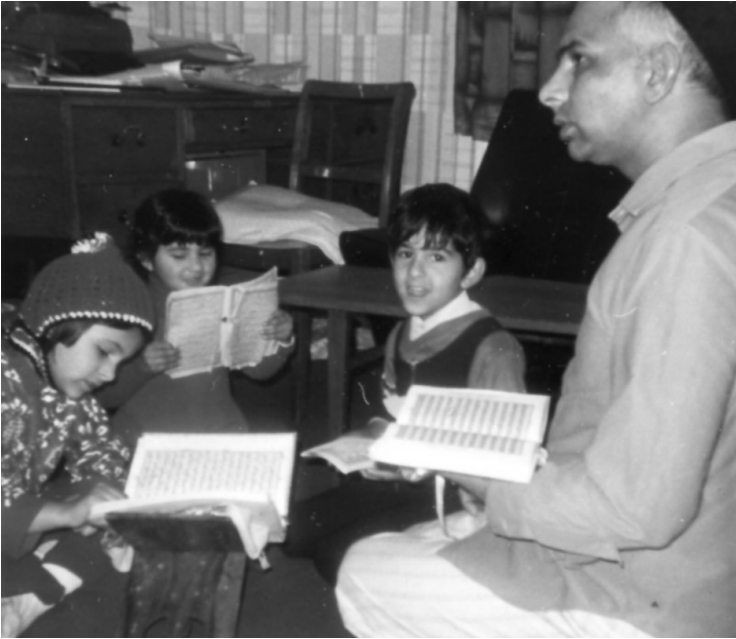
Secondly, they had to battle against each other. Throughout the 1960s, Bradford’s Muslims had looked after one another, helping other members of ‘the community’ to get jobs, learn English, find somewhere to live; any differences that there might have been from back home disappeared once it was realised that the priority was survival in this foreign and sometimes unwelcoming land. But as ‘the community’ became more settled in Ingerlerrnd, it also became more fragmented, with divisions based on nationality – Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian; geography – Mirpuri, Gujarati, Pathan, Punjabi; and denomination – Sunnis, Shias, Deobandis, Barelwis. So deep-rooted were the differences between these factions that they couldn’t even agree on the most fundamental things, such as should we class ourselves as Muslims or as Moslems or Mohammedans or Mosalmans, never mind reaching consensus on where to build the next place of worship. Again, if you look at the archive in Bradford’s library, you’ll see newspaper headlines such as ‘Bitter row at mosque’ and ‘Rival Muslim groups plan city mosques’. So much for the Ummah. So much for ‘the community’. So much for ‘God’s home’. Left to the Muslims in Bradford, God would be permanently homeless.

Like the father who nips down to the shed at the bottom of the garden every evening, I never really knew what Dad did at the mosque. Of course he prayed, but he also went there to chit-chat with his friends. I can only imagine that they talked about the usual stuff – religion, politics, cricket and paperwork. As one of the few men of his age who could read and write English, Dad was always being asked to check official forms for the Uncles – immigration and social security forms, sick notes, marriage certificates, that sort of thing. He was paid in kind for this community service – the odd curry made with lashings of ghee that oscillated in your belly for days, or a juicy bit of gossip. Very occasionally he would come back and share this tittle-tattle with Umejee: ‘They say that the imam at the X mosque in Bradford 9 has had to go back to Pakistan because immigration say there’s a problem with his documents.’ ‘They say that the robbery at X jeweller’s in Bradford 7 was done by the family’s relatives because they were owed some money.’ ‘They say that the wedding of Xsa’ab’s son isn’t going to happen now because the family in Pakistan is not happy about the match.’ Dad knew pretty much everything that was going on amongst *apnay lokhi*, but most of the time he kept it to himself or only discussed it with other men. That was the rule. The mosque was a place where the Uncles could relax and talk openly without the Aunties snooping. It was hallowed ground for more than the obvious reason. No wonder they were always in there.

Me, I did what I could to get *out* of there.

I really didn’t enjoy going to the mosque or the madrasa. I much preferred to read the Koran and say my *namaḡ* at home. For a start, our kitchen was warmer and it smelt

nicer. In the days before tinned pulses, foiled curry pastes and vacuum-packed rotis, Umejee spent hours cooking, making masala from scratch – ghee, onions, garlic, ginger, chilli, coriander, cumin and turmeric for our aloo gobi – boiling chickpeas in the pressure cooker for our keema chana and patting out chapattis on to the smoking *thava*. The spicy aroma of Mum’s cooking comforted me. The smell of holy buildings made me retch.



Adeeba, me and Tassadaque being taught to read the Koran by Dad.

The mosque stank of sweaty women and their sandals; the madrasa stank of sweaty teenagers and their pumps. Nobody could afford heating in those places, so the odour froze in the air. Imagine the stench in a Bedouin tent in the middle of the night after twenty nomads have trekked thirty miles across the Sahara in the glaring heat and then devoured a feast of lamb mansaf and gone to sleep. It smelt

like that. And it was bloody uncomfortable to sit on the stone floor for so long.

The women at the mosque spent most of their time nattering away at each other. Chitter-chatter. Chitter-chatter. They never stopped – even as the imam started his sermon in the adjoining hall, which was then relayed into our room on some dodgy speakers that kept cutting out so that he sounded like a Pakistani Norman Collier, the northern comedian whose routine was based around a faulty microphone. Have some respect, ladies. You're supposed to be here to pray and reflect, not gossip. At least make an effort to fill in the gaps in the imam's holy lecture.

The madrasa was quite the opposite, very strict. The teacher carried a long wooden stick that he thrashed down on the desk too close to your fingers if you made a mistake. He didn't know how to talk at normal volume, only how to shout, so he was constantly wiping the spittle away from his beard, which was precisely one fist long, as some say it is meant to be (I don't know why). He was a very scary man.

Neither he nor the imam spoke English, so I really struggled to understand what they were going on about. Pretty much all the holy men in Bradford came from back home, from villages and small towns. Their method of Islamic education was to teach the Koran in Arabic by rote and to give their sermons in Urdu or Punjabi, no matter that you had no idea what it all meant. They didn't provide many prayer areas for women, nor did they get involved in pastoral care. It was far from ideal, but I have to say that at least these imams and teachers never talked about jihad or *kuffirs*, non-believers, or martyrdom. It wasn't part of their vocabulary; it wasn't part of our vocabulary. We never

mentioned words like that. And we never discussed or challenged or doubted who we were. There was no need. We just got on with it.

I knew that:

If you are a good Muslim, God will hear your prayers.

If you are a good Muslim, you will go to Heaven.

If you are a bad Muslim, you will go to Hell.

It sounded like a fair deal to me. If I kept my side of the bargain, God would keep His, and everything would be just fine.

I would have no need to fear the end of the world, when ‘the sun is folded up, when the stars fall, when the mountains vanish, when the oceans boil over with a swell, when the souls are sorted out, when the World on High is unveiled, when the Blazing Fire is kindled to fierce heat, and when the Garden is brought near’ (Surah 81:1–13).

I would have no need to fear the Day of Resurrection, when the Angel Raphael sounds his trumpet, one blast to move the earth and crush its mountains to powder, the second to bring all the dead back to life like scattered moths.

I would have no need to fear the Day of Judgement, when the book of my bad deeds is weighed against the book of my good deeds.

I would have no need to fear that as I crossed the dark, narrow bridge over the fires of Hell, it would cut into my feet and I would fall into the flames below, where my skin would burn and would keep alight the fire of the condemned. Where I would be forced to eat the fruit of the *zaqqum* tree, with its flowers made of Satan’s heads, which would make my insides burn like molten brass. Where, whenever I tried to escape, I would be pulled back into the searing flames with iron hooks.

Instead, I would look forward to skipping joyfully over the flat, broad bridge that leads into the Garden of Paradise, where I would be met by the Prophet Muhammad at a beautiful pond. Where I would be dressed in fine silk and rich brocade. Where I could feast on the flesh of fowls and fruit and milk and honey. Where I could recline on jewelled couches and be waited on by immortal youths in a climate that is neither too hot nor too cold.

That was my purpose and my goal in life – infinity in Paradise.

And that was why I always looked forward to Ramadan – the month of fasting, when I could learn obedience, patience and discipline and ask for forgiveness. This was a time when I could make God happy and Dad proud.

In theory, I was exempt from fasting on account of my age. You're supposed to start when you reach adolescence, and I wasn't yet even eight years old. But that didn't stop me. And in theory, Dad was exempt from fasting on medical grounds. He was a diabetic, which meant that he was supposed to eat regularly throughout the day. But that never stopped him; even when his blood sugar levels dropped dangerously low and the doctor advised him to eat.

God came first.

During Ramadan, I relished the challenge of waking up in the middle of the night every night for a month to eat toast and jam and a big bowl of cornflakes before I started my fast, trying to stomach watching Dad eat ghosht kerala, lamb with bitter gourd, at four a.m.

And it was a challenge not to eat or drink anything all day. Occasionally I forgot and swallowed the odd midget gem or slurped a glass of dandelion and burdock. But there was no malice. I didn't have the guts to cheat and lie. I

knew that my two Angels, my honourable recorders, were monitoring my every move. The sweet smiley one on my right shoulder listing all my good deeds and the earnest, glaring one on my left shoulder making notes of all my sins.

They'd been there all my life, from the second I'd been born, and would stay with me until the moment I died. I knew that on the Day of Judgement my two lists would be weighed. If there was a positive balance I would go to Heaven, and if I was in the red, I would indeed burn in Hell.

I was aware of my Angels most during the Holy Month, and I would sometimes speak to them.

'I'm really sorry, but I just swallowed a bit of water when I was brushing my teeth. Is that allowed? . . . No, it was an accident and there wasn't much . . . Great. I'll be more careful next time.'

I was tempted to give the Angels names but I figured that might result in a point against me, there on my left shoulder. They were servants of God, not my chums.

Of course I was hungry and thirsty and tired throughout the day. And it didn't help that I was often the only one in my class fasting even though there were other Muslim kids there. Maybe their parents thought it was too difficult for a child to abstain for so long. But Dad and I didn't. I got blessings from God – thirty points recorded by the Angel on my right shoulder, one for each day of the holy month – and treats from Dad at dusk when we broke our fast. Cashew nuts, pistachios, dates, strawberry Cornettos, pineappleade and as many packets of Seabrook crisps as I could eat from the cash-and-carry boxes he'd bought.

Alhamdulillah. Praise be to God.

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The fifth and last pillar of Islam states that every Muslim who is physically and financially able must go to Mecca on the Hajj at least once in their lifetime. Dad went every year, without fail; so often in fact that even in a city such as Bradford, where there are a lot of Hajjis (the title given to those who've completed the pilgrimage), Dad was known to all his friends as Hajjisa'ab.

I've never been to Mecca, but I've seen it on TV on Pakistani satellite stations. It's breathtaking. Over two million people go each year. They circle the Kaba, the House of God, built by Abraham and his son, Ishmael, whilst calling out: 'Doubly at Your service, oh God.' How loud must that be? Two million people uttering the same phrase. Loud enough that God can hear it in Heaven. This forty-foot-wide and fifty-foot-high cube, draped in a black and gold cloth, is the centre of the earth, the point that every Muslim around the world kneels towards when he prays.

In the photos I've seen of Dad at Hajj, he's wearing two plain white cotton sheets, one wrapped around his waist and the other hanging over his left shoulder. His hair has all been shaved off and he's wearing open-toed sandals. This is the uniform of sanctification worn by all men at Mecca because all pilgrims, whether rich or poor, stand as equals before God.

And all men and women have to perform the same duties – go round the Kaba seven times and touch the sacred Black Stone. This stone came down from Heaven and was originally white, but has been darkened over time by the sins of humanity. Pilgrims have to undertake seven 'runnings' between the hills of Safa and Marwa, and then walk the fifteen miles from Mecca to Mount Arafat, where

God forgave Adam and Eve. Once there, they have to stand in the intense heat for hours to repent their sins, and then throw stones at the pillars at Mina to show that they reject Satan's temptation.

Every year Dad would tell us about the miraculous things he'd seen and experienced. People getting up out of their wheelchairs for the first time in years, the elderly and infirm finding strength, the terminally ill finding peace, the hungry being fed.

Sometimes he couldn't even describe what he'd witnessed. 'How can I tell you? There are no words I can use. You can feel God everywhere. *Vah bay vah*, it's so beautiful, so calm.'

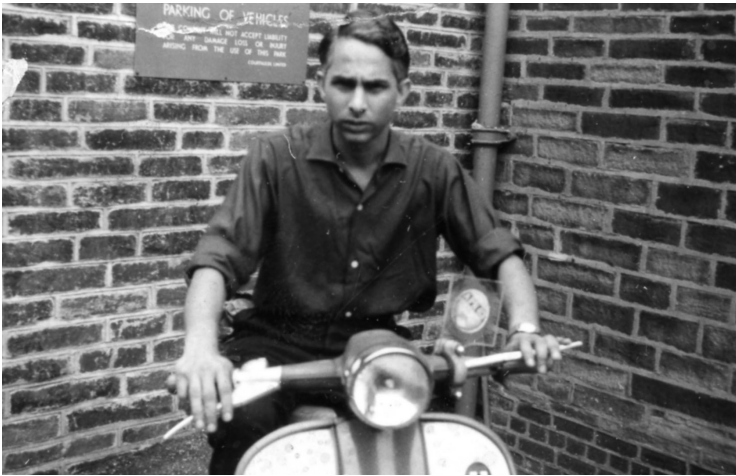
Not always, though. Dad would neglect to mention the stampede where a thousand people were killed when a bridge collapsed, or the fatalities around the stoning of the Devil when scores were crushed to death, or the fire in the tented city where he was sleeping where hundreds were burnt to death. We heard all this on the news and were worried sick. Was Dad okay? There was no way of contacting him. It was only weeks later, when he finally returned to Bradford, that we knew he had survived.

He would always shrug off our concern: 'Those people are very lucky. What a beautiful thing, to die on Hajj. Then you are guaranteed a place in Paradise. That is God's will.'

I never found out why Dad was more religious than the Uncles or, indeed, any of his siblings. Quite simply because I never asked. It never seemed right to query: 'Dad, how come you say your *namaz* five times a day and read the Koran, and Pajee doesn't?' And it never seemed right to ask Dad's elder brother, Pajee, who lived with us: 'Why

in all these years that you've been here have I never seen you pray?' It would probably make him feel very uncomfortable.

I don't know if Dad had always been like that or whether some particular event had made him so devout: the death of his parents, perhaps, or the birth of his children. He never talked about his life; all I know about his past is that he was one of eight children, three of whom died in infancy; he grew up in Sialkot, a region of Pakistan known for its manufacture of sportswear; he taught himself to read and write English under the light of an oil lamp; he worked for the Pakistani civil service as an administrative officer; he was a diabetic from quite an early age; he never met Umejee before they got married; when he came to the UK, he used some of his earnings from the night shift to pay a dentist to have three gold teeth put in; and when he wasn't wearing overalls at the factory, he liked to dress in very natty suits and ride around on his scooter.



When I look now at those black and white photos of Dad from the late 1960s, I see a man standing at the foot

of the Blackpool Tower in dark sunglasses, kneeling next to white women at the mill, crouching besides a rose bed in his shirt sleeves, eating candyfloss at a fair. And it feels like I'm looking at somebody else, not Dad. My dad wore a skullcap a lot of the time, carried rosary beads, often sat on a prayer mat and had a dark blue tattoo etched into the skin of his right arm that read 'Allah'.

Maybe things changed for Dad when the imams came over to the UK at the start of the 1970s. I've heard quite a few Uncles suggest that that was when those young male workers first got religion, whether they wanted to or not. The job of the holy men was to make sure that the settlers never forgot that they were Muslims, even if they were thousands of miles from home.

My gut feeling, though, is that Dad never needed reminding of who he was: a Muslim first, whether he was in Sialkot or Bradford.

I remember exactly when it dawned on me how important Dad's faith was to him, more than it was to most of the other Uncles. Some family friends were visiting us from the Midlands, three brothers and their wives. The men sat in our posh living room at the front of the house and the women congregated in the lounge. When I got bored of listening to the Aunties and Umejee going on about Pakistan and relatives and weddings and all the usual stuff, I went and stood outside the men's door. Earwigging. I liked to earwig.

'Business is very good. We are looking to set up a new shop soon. We moved house as well, did we tell you that? Into a semi in a nice part of the town where the *goray*, the white people, live. So we are keeping busy. Same normal things, you know, we work and the wives spend. Ha ha ha! How are *halaht* with you, Hajjisa'ab?'

‘*Teek tak, teek tak.* Okay, okay.’

That was about as far as it went with the social niceties before Dad somehow managed to skilfully manoeuvre the conversation from ‘Children doing well at school, missus okay’ to:

‘One day, the Prophet, when he was forty years old, was meditating in the Cave of Hira. He went there a lot, on his own, to think. Then the Angel Gabriel appeared and demanded him to read. “But I do not know how to read,” he replied. Gabriel squeezed him very very hard. So hard that the Prophet was very scared and he thought he was going to die, but still he kept saying, “I’m trying to tell you that I cannot read.” Then, just like that, by some miracle, the first words of the Koran came to the Prophet and he started saying them. The *surah* just came out from his lips. The first one was Surah 96: “Read! In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher who created, created man out of a clot of congealed blood.”

‘Then he remembered what he had learnt and he repeated it to others and they remembered it also and then they wrote it down. This is how our *muḏab*, our faith, came to be found in the Koran. *Vah bay vah*. How beautiful that is.’

I can’t recall how he did it, how he turned that corner from mundane chit-chat to divine revelation, but he was still at it an hour later when I had to take in a tray of tea and *matai*, Asian sweets, and cream horns.

‘. . . and when they heard that the Prophet had died, they could not believe it. “How can this be?” they asked. “He is our Prophet.” But the Koran teaches us that Muhammad was an *insaa’an*, a man like other men. He had said his final sermon in the middle of the desert: “This

day I have perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.” *Vah bay vah.*’

Dad could quote at length from the Koran, not as much as the *hafiz*, those revered individuals who could recite the entire book by heart, but substantial chunks, and he knew everything about the life of the Prophet Muhammad, including dates.

‘In 570, the Prophet was born in Mecca. He was an orphan, brought up by his grandfather, Abd al-Mutalib . . . In 619, the Prophet’s wife Khadijah passed away. This caused a great sorrow to the Prophet as she was a good wife and was the very first person to become a Muslim . . . In 624, at the Battle of Badr, Angels were sent to help the Muslims fight against the Meccans . . .’

‘Ah, *chai*. Very nice. Thank you, *bheti*,’ remarked one of the Uncles as I placed the tray on our posh onyx table. I swear all three of the visitors rushed towards the teapot and sweets. Something to distract them from Dad’s holy soliloquy. Poor Uncles. They just wanted to relax and natter. Poor Dad. He just wanted to . . . I’m not sure, really. He wasn’t trying to impress or brag or bore. It was just his way. He was always telling stories from the Koran to his kids, his wife, his friends, the builder, Mr John sir (who was white), his GP, Dr Douglas sir (who was also white), most probably even the imam at his mosque. It made him happy.

I can’t vouch for those others, but I loved to sit at the kitchen table with Dad and listen to him as he told us about the amazing miracles the Prophet Muhammad had performed: he split the moon in two, he fed an entire army with just a few scraps, he spoke to trees and rocks, he made

water flow from his hands, he blew dust into the eyes of some bad men so they couldn't see him. The Prophet also had the most amazing dreams where he could see into the future. I loved to hear the fantastic stories of Angels and the desert and the sun and the stars and fire and thunder and earthquakes.

Wow! It's like magic, but real magic!

It didn't matter that Dad never read fairy tales to us. I didn't need them, silly made-up fables to help me sleep; this stuff was real, it had actually happened and it was important. It taught me how to live my life. Be a good Muslim.

Dad had his own favourite bits that he would tell us time and time again, such as the miracle of the Night Journey, Al-Isra.

'The Angel Gabriel visited the Prophet one night and put him on a *buraq*, this is a donkey with wings on its legs. They flew all the way to Jerusalem, it is very far away. When he got there, at the . . . what do they call it . . . we call it the Masjid al-Aqsa but the Jews call it Temple Mount, he went up into the sky. The Angel Gabriel took the Prophet through the seven levels of Heaven. In our religion, we call this the Mi'raj. When he got to each one, he saw a different person – Adam, then Jesus and John, then Joseph, then Idris, then Aaron, Moses's brother, then Moses himself, then Abraham.

'Gabriel took the Prophet into Paradise and he spoke to God. Can you believe it, he saw God when he was alive! That is the most miracle! God explained that all Muslims have to pray fifty times a day. Fifty! So the Prophet tells Moses this and Moses says: "That is too much for humans. You have to go back and ask God to reduce it." So the

Prophet goes back, and now God says you must pray ten times a day. The Prophet tells Moses and again Moses says: “No, it’s still too much. Go back and ask to lower it more.” Again the Prophet goes back. He is very ashamed to ask God. It’s not good for him. God says he must pray five times.

‘Thanks be to God it is five times! If it was fifty times Salat, we would have no time to eat or sleep! We would be praying all day and night! Ha ha ha! So the Prophet Muhammad returned to Mecca that night on the *buraq*. Only those who were Muslims believed he had been on such a wonderful journey. *Vah bay vah.*’

You didn’t get Dad’s enthusiasm or his raconteur skills at the mosque or the madrasa. I really didn’t enjoy going to the mosque or the madrasa. I could learn the rules I needed to know about being a good Muslim at home. From Dad and Umejee and the Koran.

Such as: ‘God has forbidden to you flesh from animals found dead, blood, pork, and any food offered to idols’ (Surah 2:173), which translated into no pig or non-halal meat.

Everyone knew this rule and nobody flouted it. So when, one lunchtime at school, we, the Muslim pupils, spotted Usman with a slab of non-halal beef on his plate soaked in onion gravy, we realised we had to act. I’m not exactly sure who the informant was – it wasn’t me – but by the time Usman got home, his parents *and* ‘the community’ knew what he’d had for his lunch and they made sure he never ate it again. I can imagine there were a few slaps and some tears in their house that night. Poor Usman, he was only five years old. How was he supposed to know at that age? The harsh answer is: ‘Because he was.’

Some of the rules weren't codified; you just picked them up as you went along. Such as, you must always eat food with your right hand. When I asked Umejee why we had to do that, she answered: 'Because in old times when there wasn't much clean water people kept their right hands to eat and used their left hands for dirty work.'

'But we've got clean water now.'

'Yes, I know, but we have to carry on the tradition.'

And so we did.

'You must never kill spiders. Once when the Prophet Muhammad was travelling to Medina, he was being chased by some men who were trying to kill him. He hid in the Cave of Thawr and a spider spun a web across the entrance to fool the men into thinking the Prophet couldn't be in there. The spider saved the Prophet's life and now we cannot kill these creatures.'

And so we didn't.

'Mum, why does the lady upstairs show her legs and cover her hair?'

We had taken Muslim lodgers into our house: a young Iranian couple who were studying at the nearby university. I'd noticed that they had much paler skin than us and that the food they cooked smelt very different to ours; it was a lot less spicy. I'd also observed that the wife always wore a three-quarter-length skirt and opaque tights and always covered her hair with a scarf. I couldn't understand it; how could she, as a Muslim, get away with showing her legs? My sister and I were never allowed to show our legs.

'They're Shia,' Mum explained. 'People in Iran are Shia and they are different to us. The women wear skirts and cover their heads. We are Sunni. We always cover our legs but we don't always wear a duppata over our hair.' (Of

course, there were more fundamental differences between Sunnis and Shias that I didn't understand at that age; also this was a time before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when the dress code for women wasn't as severe as it became under the Ayatollah Khomeini.)

And so I remembered the rule: 'I walk on the Sunni side of the street and I don't have Shia luck.'

I was very good at obeying the rules. In fact I became quite fanatical about it. So much so that I developed Islamic Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Whenever I saw a shoe upturned, I had to rush to put it right on the basis that it's an insult to God to show Him a dirty sole. Whenever I saw anyone's feet pointing west in the living room, I would tell them to move them on the basis that it was an insult to God to direct your feet towards His house in Mecca. Whenever I had to recite prayers thirty-three times, I would say them forty times on the basis that I might have made a mistake whilst counting on the segments of my fingers. Whenever I had to say my *namaz*, I did my ablutions twice on the basis that it was better to be overly clean than disrespectfully dirty.

I was a star pupil when it came to observing the rituals of my faith. That was what mattered, wasn't it?

If you are a good Muslim, God will hear your prayers.

If you are a good Muslim, you will go to Heaven.

If you are a bad Muslim, you will go to Hell.

I was a good Muslim because I did all the things that I was told to and I never did those things I was told not to. I always made sure that my hair was covered when I said my *namaz* and I thanked God for my food after every meal and I never touched the Koran with unwashed hands or walked in front of Dad when he was saying his prayers.

Though a lot of the time I didn't understand why. Why some things were *halal*, allowed, and others were *haram*, forbidden.

Like giving your spouse a massage in the privacy of your own home. You see, it came to light amongst the Aunties that one of their friends had a room in her house that she regularly used to knead and press her middle-aged husband. It was as innocent as that. However, from the reaction of the Aunties, I could only assume that such an act was sinful. 'How disgusting!' 'What appalling behaviour!' 'What a thing to teach your children!' 'Don't they have any shame? *Basharam!*'

Everyone got to know about the massaging Aunty and Uncle, just like they got to know about Usman and his beef. But the consequences for the former were more severe than a smack and a telling-off. People stopped inviting the Aunty and Uncle to parties and weddings. They stopped talking to them. They pointed at their house as they went past: 'the House of Sin'. And so did I. Each time I went to school or came home on the bus, I tried to peer through their lace curtains to see if there were any signs of Evil. I'd never seen Evil before in real life but I was certain I'd know it when I saw it. Smoke, maybe, or flames. And horns and hooves. Just because I never witnessed these omens, it didn't mean anything. After all, as I'd been told at the madrasa, sinners are experts at deception, for they have been taught by the Master of Evil, Satan himself.

So there were many sources for the rules that I learnt as a child. Most were from the Koran and Umejee and Dad; some were found in customs and traditions; and some were

laid down by the Aunties, *apnay lokhi*, our people, ‘the community’.

Of course, I didn’t know it back then, but these last two sources had no divine authority. The laws they set had no religious foundation or rationale. They had nothing to do with the Koran and everything to do with culture. But sometimes the two got confused. What was a man-made decree would sometimes be misinterpreted or even knowingly mis-sold as the word of God.

There is nothing in the Koran about it being *haram* for a wife to massage her husband; in fact, on the contrary, the Holy Book encourages intimacy between spouses. ‘The community’ just made up its own regulations and expected everyone to follow them.

So I knew that if I asked Umejee if I could play in the yard at the back of our house she would say: ‘What will *apnay lokhi* say if they see you? They will talk about you. Girls are not supposed to play outside. Anyway, you know it’s not safe at the moment.’ And I would do as I was told. Not only because that was the rule – boys can play in the streets but not girls – but because it made sense.

Because at that time there was a killer on the loose. The Yorkshire Ripper. He’d murdered four women in Leeds and Bradford in the last two years. They’d all been prostitutes, but a few months ago the body of a sixteen-year-old had been found. She was a shop assistant. Jayne MacDonald. She’d been hit over the head with a hammer and stabbed in the chest and back. If the Ripper had started killing ‘normal’ girls, then he might come after me and my sister and Umejee.

I was petrified. Every time Umejee went to the shops or the chemist or into town, I sat at the bay window in the

living room, waiting for her to return. ‘I’ll be okay. Nothing will happen to me. God will protect me,’ she would say when I begged her not to go. She wasn’t interested in getting one of those personal alarms that were being handed out. Neither were a lot of other women, who argued that these little gadgets provided no protection whatsoever from a vicious attack. They armed themselves with knives instead. No man was to be trusted.

They’d been showing it on the news – body after body covered with a sheet or under a makeshift tent. I knew what was under that covering – I’d seen the horrific pictures of Jack the Ripper’s victims in the crime books Dad had bought us from the book club. Women who’d been bludgeoned so badly that they didn’t look like human beings any more. Like the other photos, in the books about the paranormal, of people who had spontaneously combusted, where there was just a charred heap. Those pictures gave me nightmares. I didn’t want to end up like that.

So I didn’t mind the rule that forbade me from playing outside.

Good rule, Umejee. Good rule, Aunties.

I stayed in and watched television with Dad. Dad loved to watch the telly. He never missed the BBC evening news. It kept him up to date with the turbulent events back home – the imposition of martial law and the arrest and eventual execution of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He was also an avid fan of light entertainment and comedy – Morecambe and Wise, Mike Yarwood, Shirley Bassey, *Mind Your Language*, *It Ain’t Half Hot*, *Mum*. He would chuckle away on the sofa and occasionally you would hear an ‘Oh dearie! Ha! Ha! Ha! Oh dearie!’ from him. And I would giggle too. How funny!

But then sometimes Dad would order: ‘Turn it over, quickly!’ And my siblings and I would run at breakneck speed towards the set in the corner of the living room and change channels as quickly as we could. You see, there was another rule. We weren’t allowed to watch any form of nudity on the telly.

So we always had to skip the opening titles of *Starsky and Hutch* because there was that gratuitous shot of a bikini-clad girl in what looked like a strip joint where the two detectives are ogling her. The rest of the programme was okay – it was just the first two or three minutes we had to avoid. *Dallas* was a no-no, not just because of naked flesh but due to general committing of sin, adultery, murder, treachery, that kind of thing. And no bra adverts. These were always tricky at a time when we had no remote control for the TV. We all knew that as soon as we heard the words: ‘Whether you’re . . . or whether you’re . . .’ we had to jump off the sofa and rush towards that disobedient box. There was no guarantee that we would get there in time – for example if we were busy eating – but it left everybody feeling mighty embarrassed and awkward if we’d got down to the words: ‘Triumph has the bra for the way you are.’ Too late. We’d seen it all. All that bare flesh.

There are only two instances I can recall when the naked flesh rule was not obeyed. Once was when Dad bought all four of us kids tickets to go and watch Lynda Carter aka Wonder Woman perform at the Alhambra Theatre in Bradford. He knew from the popular TV series that there was very little to the superhero’s outfit – a studded tiara and a US flag cape over some blue star-spangled hot pants and a red corset. It seemed even skimpier in real life as she

sang and danced on that stage in her knee-high boots. I was grateful for my vanilla ice cream in the interval, something to cool down my hot blushes.

The second time was when ITV broadcast the controversial film *Death of a Princess* in 1980. This was a drama documentary about the true story of the public execution of a Saudi princess and her adulterous lover, which didn't show the Saudis in a particularly flattering light, especially regarding their treatment of women. Despite protests from the Ummah, the global Muslim community, led by the government of Saudi Arabia, who demanded that the film be banned on the basis that it was 'an unprincipled attack on the religion of Islam', it was eventually screened on television. When Dad suggested to Umejee that we be allowed to watch it, to see for ourselves how Muslims had been portrayed, Mum put her foot down. 'No, it is a shameful thing. They cannot see it.'

It was much safer to watch the Asian VHS films that Dad rented from the grocer's shop or borrowed from the Uncles. We might be bored stiff and the plot might be completely implausible and the songs might go on for hours at a time and we might not be able to understand what anyone was saying, but at least we could relax, no need to act as though we had ants in our pants. There was never any nudity or kissing in these movies, romances such as *Kabhi Kabhie* and *Andaz*. That wasn't allowed. There might be a cuddle or a brushing of cheeks or a metaphorical gushing fountain but nothing more than that. Plenty of violence, though, that was okay – in films like *Sholay* and *Don*. My favourite was *Pakeezah*, which means 'Pure of Heart', a beautiful classic tragedy about a woman called Nargis who dances for a living. Or so I thought at the

time. Now I know that it's actually about a woman called Nargis who works in a brothel as a courtesan and who is forbidden to marry the man she loves. No matter how hard she tries to give up her immoral life, she can't. In real life, the actress who played the main role, Meena Kumari, also had a tragic existence. She split up from her husband, the director of the film, in a very bitter divorce, and one month after *Pakeezah* was completed, she died in a nursing home at the age of forty, a penniless alcoholic. Of course neither Dad nor Umejee told us that.

Before they were shut down in the early 1980s, Bradford had a couple of Asian cinemas, the Sangeet and the Liberty. In the evening they presented the latest harmless Bollywood blockbuster, but during the day, the projector beamed a much more shocking celluloid. Films where you saw what the world was like before the Prophet Muhammad arrived. Men and women cavorting in the desert, writhing, dancing, feasting, drinking, laughing uncontrollably, wearing very little, lying down before idols.

Then there were films like *The Message*, which showed you how Islam brought salvation to these sinners.

On that big screen, I saw the things that Dad had taught us from the Koran at the kitchen table. That God sent the Prophet Muhammad as a mercy to mankind; that three hundred and sixty idols were smashed at Mecca and then it was declared a holy place; that before he died, the Prophet delivered the Final Revelation of the Koran: 'This day I have perfected your religion for you and completed my favour to you and chosen for you Islam as your religion.' There's a particular scene in the film that I remember in some detail. A middle-aged woman, the mother of a believer, is lying on the ground in the desert, screaming.

Two men are pulling on a lever system, which is attached to two ropes tied to her arms. Every time they pull on the handle, her arms are pulled further and further out of their sockets. She screams, 'There is only one God and Muhammad is his Messenger!' The two men then drive a wooden stake through her heart, and the next shot you see is of lots of vultures circling in the sky.

The film starred Anthony Quinn, who also appeared as a Muslim in other holy films. Dad was a big fan of Anthony Quinn. '*Vah bay vah*, he is a good man, showing the life of the Prophet Muhammad and teaching people about our religion.' Dad used to say (incorrectly) that the impact on Anthony Quinn of making *The Message* was such that he converted to Islam. Like Muhammad Ali. Dad was a big fan of Muhammad Ali too. All Muslims were.

But the thing that Dad loved most, more than watching Muhammad Ali fight or Anthony Quinn act, more than his rented VHS films, his British comedies and his trips to the cinema, was his music. He had a massive record collection that consisted mainly of Indian and Pakistani ballads sung by stars such as Noor Jehan, Lata Mangeshkar, Kishore Kumar and Mukesh.

Some evenings he would sit for hours in the posh living room on the plush gold-upholstered sofa and just listen to album after album after album, carefully replacing each vinyl disc back into its protective clear polythene sleeve once he'd done with it. Beautiful melodies with beautiful lyrics.

Using the colours of flowers as ink and my heart as
a pen,
I wrote to you every day,

I can't even say in how many ways you torture me
in every instant,
I dream of you and I keep awake thinking of you,
I am all tangled up in thoughts about you, like a
thread in a garland.

Sometimes he would sing along; he didn't have a great voice, but that didn't matter. You could tell he was somewhere else. I have no idea where. Sometimes he would call Mum in from the kitchen: 'Begumsa'ab, come and listen to this. Such grace, such poetry. *Vah bay vah.*'

'I can't, I'm too busy.'

'Oh, you're always busy.'

And then back into his dream. Back to his secret place.

I wonder if that's where I get my love of music from. From Dad. Like him, I listen to music on my own. Like him, I go to a secret place. Stretched out on a piano at Ronnie Scott's wearing a long red dress and singing Crystal Gayle's 'Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue' to an enthralled audience.

I always loved to sing.

It was Dad who bought us our first four albums. A Barbra Streisand compilation and three Abba records. He'd seen the supergroup on Eurovision and took an instant shine to them.

I wasn't as keen on 'Waterloo' as he was; 'Nina Pretty Ballerina' was my favourite. I sat cross-legged on the floor, in between the two speakers of our Sony hi-fi system, and sang along: 'Nina, pretty ballerina, now she is the queen of the dancing floor, this is the moment she's waited for, just like Cinderella, just like Cinderella.'

I tapped my feet and nodded my head to the music and

I imagined what moves Nina might make as the Queen of the Dancing Floor. A pirouette and then a demi-plié going into a grand jeté. Sometimes I imagined that I *was* Nina, dressed in a tutu and a tiara, floating around some huge stage to rapturous applause and shouts of ‘Bravo! Bravo!’ It was the only place I could dance – inside my head. You see, that was another rule: no dancing. I’d discovered that when Dad had once seen me jigging away in the posh living room to Barbra Streisand and Donna Summer singing ‘Enough is Enough’ as he was setting off to do his night shift at the mill.

He came back into the house and told me: ‘It’s not allowed for Muslims to dance.’

And so I stopped. That was the rule and I obeyed it like all the other rules I’d learnt. That was just the way it was.

I could listen and sing along to Abba as long as I didn’t dance. I could watch Robert Powell in *Jesus of Nazareth* as long as I knew that he was not the son of God. I could eat fish and chips as long as they weren’t deep fried in dripping. I could wear a skirt to school as long as I wore trousers underneath it. I could run around the school playground but not in our back yard. I could watch that great British institution the Queen on the telly as she celebrated her Silver Jubilee, but not that other national treasure, Barbara Windsor, in *Carry on Camping* as she did her chest exercises so forcefully that her bra pinged off. And I could read Brer Rabbit and the *Mandy* annual as long as I remembered that the Koran was the Holiest Book.

Fair enough. I could do that. No problem.

Were you taught the same rules as me when you were growing up? Were you told that you weren’t allowed to dance or watch

any kissing on the telly? Or that it was a sin to whistle or open an umbrella inside the house because it attracted Satan, or that you could only drink holy water when you were standing up? Or that when you went into a bathroom you had to enter with your left foot first, and when you came out, you had to use your right foot first? Of course, some of these rules weren't rules at all – they were just customs or old wives' tales passed down through generations of Aunties. They were never meant to be observed.

Unlike the fundamental laws set down in the Koran:

Let there be no compulsion in religion. (Surah 2:256)

To you be your religion, and to me, mine. (Surah 109:6)

Those who believe in the Koran, and those who follow the Jewish scriptures, and the Christians and the Sabians – any who believe in God and the Last Day and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Surah 2:62)

O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for God and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just; that is next to Piety. (Surah 5:8)

Whoever kills one human being shall be regarded as having killed all mankind. (Surah 5:32)

These rules are written in black and white. They're very clear. They're not superstitions or stories made up by the Aunties. These are Divine Laws.

So why did you go against them?

Why did you do what you did?