



# DIFFERENCES

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Grey clouds jostled each other in a crowded sky, conniving to block out the light, giving the whole valley a leaden hue. It matched my mood perfectly.

I climbed the steps to the bridge without any urgency, it didn't matter when I got there. The wind flicked my long hair into my face, forcing me to brush it away; I'd vowed so many times to have it cut but Basim said I looked better that way, so I kept it long.

The thought deepened my misery until the clouds parted and a beam of brilliant white sunshine shone down on me.

God's searchlight.

Well, he could send me all the signs he wanted, it was too late. Not that I believed there was anyone up there anyway. Or if there was, I didn't want to know any deity that deliberately tortured people.

Shrieks of excitement made me look at the bridge. Two little girls bumped their way down the steps towards me on bicycles, pink ribbons flying from their handlebars. Heads jiggled, bodies bounced off saddles and made the journey look uncomfortable but they didn't seem to care, the laughter was loud and contagious and I found myself smiling. They flew past me, followed by their breathless dad who carried pink rucksacks that banged against his legs as he ran after them.

'Were you ever like this?' he gasped as he ran past.

I shook my head and he was gone.

I was eight when I got my bicycle. It was expensive, like all Dad's presents, and I wasted no time pedalling along the three streets to Basim's house.

Three streets but a world apart.

Our house was newly built on some old factory site, security gates kept us safe and separate from the denizens of terraced houses without even a front garden. Doors opened directly onto pavements so it was easy to knock on Basim's with our secret signal, so his family didn't see him with me, the white boy.

He was awestruck and envious, though he tried to hide it. He disappeared into their back yard to return with his brother's bike, rusty and with a broken seat ready to impale

you. We cycled to the park where we took turns riding mine, until we mastered the skill of riding on the other's back, hands on shoulders.

We laughed so much that day.

We did most of the time. Basim said the stupidest of things that got me giggling like a maniac. I think that was why we got on so well together, we laughed a lot. When you're both eight, life is simple that way.

But then you grow up and life gets complicated.

Secret door knocks no longer kept our friendship secret. We were from separate worlds we were told, we lived lives so different our friendship couldn't survive.

Yet somehow it did.

Two teenage lads, not much younger than me, hoodies up, strolled down the steps from the bridge. Instinctively I nervously pulled down my woollen hat and stared at the ground. They wore football scarves. It was Saturday, they'd be off to the match. I recognised them, they went to my school, a couple of years below me.

I held my breath.

I felt their eyes on me, their conversation stilled, their pace slowed.

'Hey. Aren't you...?'

'No.'

I hurried on, cast a glance over my shoulder, saw them watch me then nudge each other, say something and laugh raucously.

I knew what they'd be saying. The same things I regularly heard in the playground. The insults, the innuendo.

I turned and looked back over the city, where the football stadium rose up into the slate-grey skyline, the location of my dreams. A lump formed in my throat, I tried to push it down. Failed. You spend years with a fantasy and when it's snatched away from you, nothing can replace it. Not when the fantasy looked like it was coming true.

'They know about me, Basim.'

A month ago. In my house. My phone on the expensive wooden floor next to the empty vodka bottle. Mum's supply remained where she'd left it when she'd walked out. Dad hadn't taken any interest in what his teenage son might do with such temptation. He probably assumed I'd follow in Mum's footsteps. He'd enjoy being proven right.

Basim stood hesitantly in the doorway.

'Don't worry, Dad's not here. Another girlfriend.'

I snorted my contempt and snot dripped out my nose, I wiped it with my sleeve.

Basim looked at me as he shook his head in sympathy and followed me into the lounge. I stumbled backwards and collapsed on a sofa, the world spinning. I wanted it to hurl me into space, far away from this world.

'How did they find out?'

Anger fuelled my attempt to sit upright, nausea stopped me trying.

'Guys on the team. Supposed to be friends. A party.'

The need to vomit had me racing to the bathroom.

'Were you drunk?'

As I hurled burning bile into the toilet I grunted confirmation. The tiles on the floor were refreshingly cool, I curled up on them.

I woke as a cool wet cloth stroked my forehead, it helped quell the furnace inside my skull. Basim helped get me into bed.

'You shouldn't drink so much.'

I didn't care I told him, repeatedly. Drinking drove the world away. Stopped it being the place I hated because it obviously despised me. The world and I were like that, long-term enemies.

A little later, a pneumatic drill bore through my skull, my stomach muscles ached and the urge to stay off the booze proved strong enough to last for a few hours.

Basim sat in an armchair, dozing until my groans woke him. He made me coffee and handed me some bread. We said little.

‘Won’t your folks wonder where you are?’ I asked eventually.

He shrugged and grinned. A gesture so familiar, it meant he’d lied to someone and didn’t care. He claimed to be working for his uncle who owned a shop whenever he spent time with me.

He had my phone in his hand.

‘You have to ignore what they say. Or report it.’

I sobbed on his shoulder. Everyone knew about me and I had nowhere to hide. But there was one implication with even greater impact.

‘I’m ruined Basim. No club will sign me now.’

He sighed. ‘You don’t know that for certain.’

He didn’t understand. Football was my passion. Cricket was his. The one area where we differed.

Football was my life. I’d been getting lots of attention from the football academy where I trained twice a week. They were already talking contracts. A Premier League signing at my age, it was my boyhood fantasy coming true. Now my ambitions would be limited to the obscurity of coaching some Champions League club. So long as, though it would never be said outright, I didn’t hang around in the changing rooms while the lads showered.

My mobile chirruped with a text message. Basim read it, frowned, deleted it.

‘They’ll get bored eventually. You have to be patient.’

He was wrong. Like a virus, the news took on a life of its own. It reached the club eventually. They promised to support me. I was trail-blazing equality and diversity they said.

It didn’t feel like that on the pitch.

The fans on the terraces weren’t interested in diversity. Opposing players whispered innuendo at every tackle and as we waited in the tunnel before a game. The rest of my team resented me for making them the subject of gossip because we shared changing rooms.

So, when I told the club I didn’t want my contract there were no pleas for me to reconsider. Equality and diversity had been played and substitutes made: namely surrender and humiliation.

Perhaps if Dad had supported me things might have been different. But I couldn't possibly be a son of his. He was a red-blooded man and he'd always had doubts about Mum's faithfulness anyway. If I was passing up the chance to earn a fortune as a footballer, I could get a job when I left school and find my own place to live.

Basim was my touchstone with the world.

He kept me alive by bringing food and pouring away the vodka when I wasn't looking. Basim was everything to me and I came to realise he felt the same way. We lay in bed one evening, giggling at the stupidity of it all. He'd worked so hard to hide his true identity from his deeply religious family; he'd fooled me too. Or perhaps I was too wrapped up in my own angst to notice.

A cold wind blew in my face, momentarily robbing me of my breath and bringing me back to the present. Up here on the bridge you could see for miles, the city dwarfed into insignificance as it melted into a patchwork landscape illuminated by shafts of sunlight.

I reached into my pocket, took out the photograph I'd deliberately brought with me.



I'd printed it from his phone a week earlier. An image of us kissing, reflected in my bedroom mirror. We looked so happy. Basim so handsome.

We'd talked about running away, finding a life where we could be happy.

Naïve foolishness I realised. Happiness doesn't exist.

The wind chilled the tears on my cheeks as I stared at the photograph. Three days after it was taken, Basim was dead.

Murdered. An honour killing to protect the good name of his family. His little nephew had found the picture on Basim's phone.

In the middle of the bridge I held up the photograph and let the wind snatch it from my fingers. I watched it fly upwards with sunlight illuminating its journey.

I followed it.