

Bandanna

By Suhayl Saadi

To Ustaad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan¹

He had been dusting for nearly half-an-hour but it felt like his whole life. The shop was becoming unbearably warm. Its lemon walls were beginning to crowd in on him, so that he felt soon he would be crushed beneath their dull, yellow weight. The air was stifling, dead and yet he seemed to need great gulps of it. He felt that he would begin to expand like an overfed goldfish and would burst through the shelves, the plaster, the broken clock. He forced his right hand to continue wiping dust off the mica counter while with his left, he adjusted the knot of his bandanna. Somewhere at his back, his parents busied themselves as they always had, all their lives. Busy, busy, busy.²

The sounds of running and shouting shifted from the street in through the open doorway, disturbing the suffocating rhythm of the morning. Plastic on tarmac. Spittle. The big sky. Sal recognised the voices, and his heart leapt, then felt empty. As the lads ran past the burning glass, Salman Ishaq allowed the duster to fall from his hand. He watched it cut a delicate, slightly imperfect trajectory through the methi air and then ran out of his father's shop to shrieks of

'Haraam zaada! Five minutes work, and he's done? Hud haraam. Useless bastard!'³

They did not beckon, entreat or threaten him to come back; he knew this was because they would not expect him to have listened. He knew, as the sun's heat embraced his ears, burning out the fading, effervescent cries of home that during the succeeding minutes, hours, years his father would accuse his mother of having brought defective genes into the family, and his mother would retort to her majaz-i-Khuda, the life of her heart, that it would not have been possible to pollute the blood of his people, since their blood had already been dirtier than a Muzaffarabad cesspool. Love among the peasants was like that, mused Salman Ishaq (or 'Sal', as he was known outside of his home and his hundred-strong brathery, though his parents and all of the aunties remained in total ignorance -

blissful, perhaps - of this almost Roman and hence porcine nickname).⁴ He slackened his stride, allowing his long, Reebok'd legs to spring up and down on the quivering asphalt. White on black. Sal was fair-skinned, almost white - in any other country except Caledonia he would've been white, say Italy for example, or Espana or Portugal, or Greece or... he cursed his luck for ending up in this country of wallpaper-blond people. He cursed his parents. Fuckin ignorant peasants. Knew how to milk a coo and shit in the fields (and, he admitted begrudgingly, how tae run a Carry-out Off-licence), but when it came to knowin where they were at, he chuckled with a thoroughly blond glee, they didnae have a clue, no a fuckin clue. The group of lads he was following were also running, though not as fast and so he was able tae cover the ground rapidly and would soon be up with them. After aw, that wis why he had dropped his duster in the first place (an in several other places, too) symbol as it wis ae servitude fuck, he wisnae hovin that, his fellow-gang members seein him mop a fuckin flaer. No way.⁵ In the distance, their bandannas darted up and down, dun specks amid the gleaming bodies of cars. They were weaving in and out, darting between the moving vehicles, making them stop altogether at times, and then they'd be up onto the pavement and then back into the swim of the road. He could hear their shouts and the curses of the motorists, and began to feel the pulse in his chest grow stronger, impelling him to join them, to orgasm in vandal with the gang. Some of the drivers were shouting through rolled-down glass, swearing in Punjabi as well as in English, both at his pals up ahead and now also at him, too as he began darting in diamond formation, following in the hot tracks of the gang. Halfway down Albert Drive, he caught up with his comrades, and slapped Ali on the shooder.

'Hey, bhen-chaud!⁶ What's up?' Ali shouted in smiles.

They exchanged Bronx palm-slaps while from beneath the thick waves of August heat, a bass guitar thudded epileptiform rhythms, Bombay Dopplersahb spirals from an open-topped sportscar.

Thunk!

Roo-roo-roo-roo-roo

Love me!

Thunk!

Roo-roo-roo-roo-roo

Love me!⁷

They started off again, the three of them, impelled by the insistent thrum of the music in their ears.

As the Gang ran on, the shopkeepers moved in glue, hardly noticing them as they whooped past. They lived in a different time, another place. The dhokandaars were strung on the drone of a sarod,⁸ they pulsed to the rhythms of a different beat, a beat of the seasons, of the peasant calendar, of monsoon into dry and dry into monsoon. They knew nothing of white water, or of white women. They slunk along the fields of their gao's, happy only to be a little more than serfs. They asked for nothing else. Would have seen it as presumptuous, in another man's country. Sal felt a buzz in his brain. He was on the runnin-board, and they were pedestrians.

They reached the end of the street. Ahead lay the Tramway, a theatre which none of them had ever been in, not even when the Mela⁹ had been there. The Mela wis jis fur kids and cooncillurs. Sal and his dosts preferred machines to people. They were noisy, irascible, silicon-based like Michael Jackson. They'd play the robots for hours, not bothering whether they won or lost, not caring about the game. Just moving into the beat of chip upon chip, a twitch of the film-star thigh, the hot shoulder shuffle. They were on the film-set, they were living in total. There were no spaces in their existence. No gaps of silence. The Gang turned west, away fae the Mosques, towards Maxwell Park. That's where they were heidet. To the pond, and the trees. To muck up the quiet. To fill it wi gouts ae Bhangra and Baissee. They skatit past the tenement closes, each one a blink in the Gang's eye. The sound of generations carved into each corniced ceiling. Flip back: Sal, in the gao. Or, to be more accurate, in Azaad-Kashmir, the Land of Freedom.¹⁰ His family's land, earth-brown like their skins (not like Sal's, though), old blood, like the tenement stone. But Sal was another kind of Azaadi. Another hybrid. His was a freedom-within-freedom. A distant, grainy monochrome of greased colonials. Sal, formed between the dots of white and black, somewhere in the invisible alchemical mix flooding through the paper. Long before his conception, Sal was

there in the deep line of Partition, in the slime cartridge hate of the one for the other. Peel back the layer, the snakeskin deceptions of Poonch, now in Occupied Kashmir previously in Dogra-land, before that, a gleam in the eye of the Great Mughal, and back, beyond the photoframe, through the nastaliq of dynasties, swimming through the hot sperm of a thousand, to Sikander, Conqueror of the World.¹¹ Fast-forward: Sal an The Gang. The Black Bandannas. Black, because it made their faces look whiter. Italian, almost. Or Spanish, or Portuguese, or anything. As opposed tae the Kinning Park boys. As opposed tae ... The Uni-bastards

The Mosquers

The Khans¹²

and The Rest.

They were all small-time, forming and disbanding from one year to the next in tenuous hierarchies of slang and spittle. Transient allegiances like in the Games, the video-shop computer games. Nothing was static. Life was movement, juddering, twitching, filmi-star movement. Peasant to refugee, refugee to kisaan; emigrant to immigrant, Paki tae dhokandaar; shopkeeper tae gang-member. Sal slowed to a walking pace. The swagger of the multitudes. Zafar lit a cigarette, handed the pack roon. Puffin draws, they got their breath back.

‘Where’re we gan?’ Ali asked. Ali wis a Shia.¹³ Less than a human being,¹⁴ according tae the shitfaced cunt in the Bookshop.

‘The Park,’ Zafar replied, brusquely.

Ali curled his lip.

‘The Park’s borin. Ah dinnae want tae go thir.’

‘You shut the fuck up, arsehole.’

Ali shut up. He knew his place in the Gang, and that was as its arsehole. Zafar was its head, its brains, its brigadier (unlike Pakistan, the gangs did not have more brigadiers than sergeants).

'What'll we do there? In the Park.' Sal asked, measuring his words, levelling them down into the shape of an unobtrusive wheatfield.

'Sit, smoke, watch the burds. Tear the trees doon.'

'Tear the trees? What the fuck for?'

'Why the fuck, not?'

Sal shrugged. Zafar was a line ae crack on black. Clear-cut and Paagal.¹⁵ Sal wished he could be like that. As they walked along Darnley Street, Sal spotted a group of girls approaching from the opposite direction. They were growing like breasts, and he recognised wan ae his cousins amongst them and began tae hurl abuse as soon as he thought they might be within earshot. Not before. There was nothin more embarrassin than swearin at someone, and they couldnae fuckin hear you. The girls did hear it, and flung it right back, and the interchange continued as the two groups passed each other as though through a mirror and moved gradually out of earshot again. She had long, black hair, his cousin and he watched her swing it as she swore. Swung it around legs which he had never seen, but which he had often imagined as long, sinuous, soft, enticing... Fuckin bitch. He watched her as she disappeared around the corner. An imprint on his eyelids, and an ache in his groin. He blinked, and she was gone. But not the ache. The swollen throbbing expanded like Pakistan from the 'plane, and became a marriage ceremony. A man-in-a-mask, the elephant's vision.¹⁶ A bride, weeping tears through a waranteed hymen.¹⁷

He blinked, hard. Blood scarlet.

Ali jabbed him in the ribs. Raised his thick, black eyebrows.

'Randy bastart.'

'No way. No fuckin way, man.'

Ali shook his head, his lop-sided, peasant's skull.

'When the time comes...'

'It'll nivir come.'

'Nae mair white burds, wi thur wide open cunts askin fur it, a glais ae vodka an their yours, nae matter how black ya are. Jis feed them enough booze an dope, an they'll screw you and thank you fur it.'

'At least ah get them.'

That shut him up. Ali. Him, wi his big bug-eyes. Too big. They saw too much. They'd get him intae trouble, wan ae these days. Parso, they'd fuck him up, doon an sideways. He remembered a thin white cow he'd screwed last month.¹⁸ The feel ae her anorexic thigh-joins. Bone on bone. Jag-mairks. They'd huv tae be stoned tae fuck a Paki.¹⁹ And then, only fur²⁰ blue-backs. He began tae harden. Hated himsel. Puffed on his ciggie. It had gan oot.

'Goa match?' he asked Zafar.

Zafar didn't answer.

Silent bastart, thought Sal and he flung the ciggie doon, killin its corpse wi a stroke ae his trainer.

You'll smoke your life away

his mother had said. So many fuckin times. Like, they nivir said onyhin original, like there wis nuhin new in them. Nivir hud been. Jis work, work an work, like it wis the only thing in life. Kaam, kaam, kaam.²¹ Fuckin peasants. He wisnae in that trap. Gangstas were outside ae aw that crap. They were on the border. Along the silent razor.²² Between the dots. Sepia, again. Short-haired men with wives. Babies, dead - already. Visions of the past, of past lives. A long, Hindu cacophony. Sal laughed, inside of himself. He would never be born as a shopkeeper. Better, a dog. At least you got tae fuck freely. Or a mullah. Just sit in the mosque, and take money. Blue-backs. Grow a beard and never, ever smile. An easy job, really. One day, maybe. An image of a large bonfire. The Gangs, all throwing their bandannas into the flames. Black, red, blue. Even the Kinning Park Boys. All sprouting long, gray beards and adopting a bow-legged walk. The bonfire spread, and burned away the image.

And what's behind it?

Sal the Gangsta asked Salman Ishaq Sahb the Mohlvi.²³ Wagging his well-muscled finger, Ishaq Sahb gave the answer:

*Behind every image, there is always a jagirdaar. Just as (he went on) in every Coca-Cola tin there is a naked Amrikan slut, her legs overhanging the metal ...*²⁴

OK, OK Sal the Gangsta cut in, a little embarrassed, but what about ma Irn Bru tin?

The Mullah did not understand. In England, all tins were the same, he intimated. Just being a tin, was enough. More than enough. Just thinking about a can might even be sufficient.

But how could he know, Sal thought, unless he too, had been there, into the metal, between the jag-scarred thighs of the slut and had swum around (beard, frown-and-all) in the great fizzy vacuum of the West. Of Amrika, of Glasgee. The mullahs were all Amrikan agents. See-Eye-Aye. Everyone knew that. Even his father knew that, fur fuck's sake.²⁵

Now they were passin the Safeway, an there the pretty cars aw row'd up like obedient schoolkids. Only they weren't learnin onyhin. The Great White Superstores, stolid bastions thrown in a ring aroon the city. His father often railed against the toilet-friendly conglomerates, saying that they'd milk the small shopkeeper dry. *And what did loag want, Khuda-ke liye, a local, living-room sized dhokaan with you know a friendly face, or a giant metal aircraft hanger? What wus the future for our people in this country?* He sounded like a guardian of the tiny units of commerce which Bonaparte had faced, ranged in bared teeth shopfronts along the white, Doverine cliffs of Albert Drive.²⁶ And they were the new Napoleons, the massive brick battleships, the Safeways, the Sainsburys, the ASDAS besieging Glasgee, attacking Scola, runnin thur damned South American produce right intae the khanas of his ane bratherie. Apples ae Shaitan. The Gang chased past the trees of knowledge which burgeoned in the spacey grounds of the Hutcheson's Grammar Schule, the in-vitro incubator of budding intellectuals. Where any parents who needed their kids as fuel for the already bulging middle classes that stuck society together sent their offspring. So many went there, and fucked up. Cause they'd rather rave, than save. Salman had never aspired to a hood-and-gown.²⁷ Maybe it was his parents' fault. Their lack of ambition. They'd

rather he work in the shop. But then wasn't everything their fault? Comin here in the first place. Runnin a fuckin Paki-shop. That wis what they were seen as. Could've worn top hats an tails, an owned hauf the city, an they'd still have been Pakis. He hated it. Never, never wanted to be a shopkeeper. Had missed out on learnin. Jis wanted tae be in a Gang, an tae shout. Tae scream in blood and bhangra.

Boom-thaka-thaka-thaka-thaka-thaka

Boom-thaka-thaka-thaka-thaka-thaka

Boom-thaka-thaka-thaka-thaka-thaka

The harsh, Jullundri²⁸

consonants cut his flesh in slashes of kirpaan²⁹; it felt good; upon their blade would his skin grow calloused, hard. Nothing would hurt him. No words. No actions. Sticks and stones would shatter on his body. And still, he would sing-dance the juddering figure beat, the blood music of exile. The black slaves had bled in blue: R 'n' R, hip-hop, reggae; and now the sons of Swastika-daubed Paki-shop owners would disembowel the air in syncopation. Together, with night torches, they would fire the Swastikas and in the fractured air, would spin them round in great wheels up and down the streets of Glasgow. And they would feed the skinheads of Ibrox, the white trash tattoo of Penilee into the great, burning cunt of Mata Kali where five thousand firewheels spun time. Hindu symbols - yes! His parents would have been mortified to hear him thinking that way. But fuck it. They couldnae hear him thinking, no ony mair. It wis aw mixed up, onyway. Sikh Bhangra, Mussalman Qawal, Hindu Raag-Bhajan-Khayals... Black Blues, it all swirled together and spumed into a river of Techno-Rave Brummie Beat. And the Gang would rubber-dance in the Victorian park among the trees, the ducks, the water, the shouts of children. Amidst the summer leaves, resolution of the hard, post-hippie ethic; this is where Gudrun Ensslin of the Red Army Faction would have got to if she'd stuck to her pen, her violin and her mouth

They leapt over the jagged fence and into the Park. The smell of grass, cut skin-short.³⁰ Roses like the lips of courtesans, drawing out the sex act into a stream of notes.

Meri naam Jaan-ki-bai hai

Meri naam Gauhar Jaan

They half-ran down an incline and tumbled together in a heap near the bottom. Mothers were pushing prams, the wheels of which always seemed to go uphill. Children played with small boats and old folk simply sat in lines on benches, as though waiting their turn. Salman closed his eyes. Goldfish noises ...

He felt a fist in his belly, enough to provoke but not to seriously wind him. He turned, and caught another on the jaw. His head buzzed as he threw his arms outward to grapple with his opponent. Got a hold of his waist, and didnae let go. Salman and Zafar wrestled on the grass, rolling and screaming. Ali leapt in, and his extra weight had the effect of pressing down on Salman's chest so that he wasn't able to move, and could hardly breathe. Was not able to say, *Enough's enough, lads. Get aff noo.* Wasn'y sure they would've listened, anyway. The sun was streaming into his eyes and he could feel its golden brilliance flood through the coils of his brain. He could hear time run backwards through the veins of trees, moving always anti-clockwise in a broad tape-loop

<i>Kull ...</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>Solitude</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>Meri awaz suno, mujhe azad karo</i> ³¹ <u> </u>	<i>C</i>
<i>Kull ...</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>Masks</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>Chunnae ud ud' jae, guth kul kul jae</i> ³² <u> </u>	<i>C</i>
<i>Kull ...</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>Death is not dying</i> ³³ <u> </u>	<i>C</i>
<i>Achintya bheda bheda Tattva</i> ³⁴ <u> </u>	<i>C</i>
<i>Kull ...</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>Light</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>Kinna Sohna tainu, Rub nay banaya</i> ³⁵ <u> </u>	<i>C</i>
<i>Kull ...</i>	<i>C</i>

And Salman Ishaq was floating, downstream, in tears of noor.³⁶

Allah-hu

Allah-hu

Allah-hu

Inhale *Alla* Exhale *hu*

Inhale *Alla* Exhale *hu*

Inhale *Alla* Exhale *hu*

Allah-hu

Allah-hu

Allah-hu

He realised he was able to breathe again. His neck felt stiff. They had got off his chest and were lying, breathless, beside him. They were basking in the sun's warmth (this too, would've been unthinkable), half-watching the delicate slivers of light pour down on the park. They had noticed nothing. Would not have cared. They were true Gangstas. For a moment, he felt a rush of pride in being a part of the Black Bandannas³⁷ - soon, he too, would be capable of feeling nothing - but it passed and left him empty. He looked away from them and just lay there, letting the backs of his fingers rest upon the short, fine blades of grass. The sun filled his eyes, making them sting and water but he did not allow the lids to close. He began to grow blind and it occurred to him that one day, not too far in the future, it would be his fingers that would be pushing up the grass and that what he thought, felt, did, created during that minuscule pause in his fate might live beyond him, his family, the tribe to which he happened to belong and that the only constant in the whole of Maxwell Park - the trees, the birds, the water, the kids - the only beat that pumped all other rhythms, was the beat of love. Salman took a deep breath, the deepest he'd ever taken, it filled parts of his lungs which had never before breathed, not even at the moment of his birth. He felt a great swell of happiness explode infinitely slowly from the centre of his being. His love spread across the grass, the trees, the trunks of dead elephants and returned to

him sevenfold

*And in the end,*³⁸

*When the music's over*³⁹

*There is only love*⁴⁰

The drone behind it all was the note, c, right there in the soul of his brain. He felt its smooth curves, the walls of a tunnel on the way to heaven. And there it was, in the very coils of paradise. He followed a bird as it coursed along the sky. He sat up. Ripping off his bandanna, he ran his fingers through his long hair. Felt free. Wanted to leap into the pond, and swim. Desired the cool, green gown of its depth. From far across the city, Salman heard the Azaan ⁴¹ , carried upriver on currents of music. Rolling his bandanna out onto the grass,⁴² he faced towards Gorbals Cross and began to pray.

(c) The Bottle Imp