

Sarfraz Manzoor

THEY

I am searching for my father. It is a cold, late January morning, and I am wrapped in a long black coat on a train that I boarded at London's St Pancras heading to Luton. My memories begin in this town. I was born in Pakistan but arrived in Britain in May 1974, one month shy of my third birthday. My father, Mohammed Manzoor, left Pakistan in January 1963, leaving behind his wife and two children – my older sister was one
5 and my older brother had been born the previous month. My father promised my mother, Rasool Bibi Manzoor, that he was only going to be away for five years; he was going to work and save money and he would then return home. He did return, but only for visits; in the eleven years my parents were apart my father visited Pakistan three times – most significantly for me in 1970, when I was conceived. It was never a
10 permanent return. Britain was becoming his home and, in the spring of 1974, it became mine. My younger sister was born the following year. We lived in Luton where my father worked on the production line of the Vauxhall car factory and my mother as a seamstress at home. I went to school and college in Luton but left first to study in Manchester and later to live and work in London. I left Luton at the age of eighteen, it is my past. But the past is never over – it is not even past.

I get off the train and hail a taxi. The Muslim taxi driver asks me where I'm from. I tell him Luton.
15 "Yes, but where are you *really* from?" he asks. I stare out of the window in anticipation and guilt. I do not visit my father often enough. The taxi reaches its destination and I take a deep breath and step out. A light rain is falling and my footsteps are heavy as I walk towards him. I stop in front of him and say: "*As-salamu alaykum Abu-ji.*" Hello, Dad. The marble tombstone in front of me reads: "Mohammed Manzoor 1933-1995."

20 My father died from a sudden and unexpected heart attack in June 1995, three days before I turned twenty-four. He lies buried in the Vale Cemetery and Crematorium in a section reserved for the Muslim dead. Mohammed Manzoor is buried as he lived – among his own. My family's origins are in the villages of rural northern Pakistan. There is no record of where or when my grandparents were born and no
25 documents that detail their lives. There are no certificates that record their births and no memorials that reveal where they are buried. The lives of my grandparents are a mystery but the early life of my parents is scarcely more distinct. My parents married around 1960 – there are no photographs of the wedding and my mother cannot recall the precise date. I remember as a teenager being filled with an aching envy at seeing my White friends' family albums: photographs of grandparents' weddings, grandfathers in military
30 uniforms, and scenes of parents as small children. My friends took these things for granted but I was acutely aware of the impact of not having such images. The years my mother spent in Pakistan without my father went undocumented. There are no letters and no photographs. There are photographs, though, of my father's time in Britain during the sixties and early seventies, living in a succession of houses he shared with fellow Pakistani men. They offer tantalising glimpses of him, not as a father but as a man. I can see him
35 standing by a cooker stirring a pot. He is wearing an apron over his shirt and tie, while another man, more casually dressed, looks on. I can see him seated at a table, again in a tie, preparing to eat with three other men. I see him gazing at the camera in sunglasses, his hands casually slipped into the pockets of a cream suit. He doesn't look like a newly arrived immigrant working in a poorly paid manual job: he has an unruffled dignity that transcends his humble surroundings. In these photographs my father seems a sociable fellow. He is usually in the company of other men but never any women. These were my father's
40 friends but I have no idea who they are, or what happened to them. (I always hoped that writing about my father in the newspapers and making *Blinded by the Light*, a film about my relationship with him, would

prompt some of his old friends or their children to get in touch. Sadly no one has ever contacted me.)

45 Why do the faces in the photographs from my father's early life in Britain haunt me? In part, it is because photographs can help flesh out and provide colour and detail to our understanding of the past. Relatives who are long dead, or whom we view only through a rigid parental prism, or through the fog of distant memory, are revealed as fully-fleshed, vital human beings. It is not easy to feel rooted when one is drowning in a sea of unknowns. I stare hard at the grass under which his coffin is buried, and I swear the ground seems to move gently up and down as if the dead are still breathing. There is a space set aside next to my father's grave for my mother. I should come to see him more often.

50 I leave my father and order another taxi to take me into town. The driver is Muslim. "The difference between what *they* are like and what we are like," he says, "is that they cry about their parents when they're dead, but they treat them like crap when they're alive." I say nothing and look busy on my phone until the taxi arrives in Bury Park. It does not look special – just another two-bedroom terraced house on a narrow street in the heart of the Asian part of town. But this was my first family home and where I spent my first five years in Britain. It was from this house that my father would leave for work. My mother would pack his lunch – chapattis, lentil curry – in a blue tiffin box. She would then take us to school before taking her place behind a black, iron *Singer* sewing machine. I weigh up knocking on the door but decide against it. What would I say? "I used to live here forty years ago – would you mind if I took a look around?"

60 When my father arrived in Britain in 1963, I imagine he came filled with hopes and fears. He would not have left Pakistan unless he believed in Britain, believed that it was a land of promise. In the years since he died there have been many times that I have wondered how he would feel about that promise – was it delivered, or has it been betrayed?

65 My father died in 1995. I got married in 2010, my daughter was born in 2011 and my son joined us in 2016. This same period has also seen the rise of Islamist and far-right extremism. There have been many occasions when I have felt despondent about the times we are living in and what might be coming next. My father never lived to see me build a career; he never had the chance to meet my wife or his grandchildren. He also never lived to see a British-Pakistani mayor of London, a British-Pakistani Chancellor of the Exchequer, a British-Pakistani presenter of the *Today* programme or a British feature film about a Pakistani teenager growing up in eighties Luton. He didn't witness the terror attacks in the United States on 9/11, the terror attacks in London on 7/7, the Manchester Arena bombing, the London Bridge stabbings, the rise of Islamic State¹ or the reports of Pakistani grooming² gangs. He never lived to see fascists back on the streets of Luton.

75 Luton is my hometown but for many Bury Park and Luton have long been shorthand for many of the ills associated with Muslims and multiculturalism: extremism, segregation and a sense that such Muslim-dominated neighbourhoods resemble a foreign land more than England. When I was growing up in Luton, I was raised by my parents to believe that *they* were different to us. *They* had different values, *they* had a different culture, *they* were a threat to our way of life, and *they* would never accept us. *They* were White people. In recent years I have heard the same accusations repeated: *they* are different, *they* have a different culture, *they* are a threat to our way of life, and *they* will never accept us, but now it is far-right groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) – founded in Luton – and Britain First, as well as hate preachers in the national press and on social media, making the accusation, and now *they* are Muslims.

80 My ambition with this book is to honestly confront the fears some people have about Muslims. Why

¹ *Islamic State*: a militant Islamic fundamentalist group – active particularly in Syria and Iraq

² (here) building a relationship with a child or young person in order to exploit them

do *they* live in segregated communities? Why do *they* not treat women the same as men? Why do *they* wear the niqab³? How much should *they* be held responsible for Islamist extremism? Why are *they* so over-represented in child sex street gangs? Why don't *they* show more loyalty to this country? I want a book that is clear-eyed not rose-tinted. Whatever your preconceptions and prejudices, I hope there are moments when they are challenged, and you occasionally feel uncomfortable when forced to confront what you thought you believed. This book is for anyone who is interested in knowing why we became so divided, and how we might yet become more united.

90 The Muslim population in Britain is estimated to be around 2.71 million. Muslims in this country have arrived from Kosovo and Kenya, Somalia and Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Nigeria, Iran and Iraq, but the focus of this book is the 60 per cent of British Muslims whose origins lie, like my own, in the Indian subcontinent. "You are not a drop in the ocean," wrote Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī⁴, "you are the entire ocean, in a drop." It is impossible for any individual's story to represent the entirety of the British Muslim experience, but I believe that human tales of hope and love, rage and loss can reveal a greater story. "The fight against dehumanisation," suggests Turkish writer Elif Shafak, "needs to start with words. Stories. It is easier to make sweeping generalisations about others if we know close to nothing about them; if they remain an abstraction. To move forward, we need to reverse the process: start by rehumanising those who have been dehumanised. And for that we need the art of storytelling."

100 This is a story in which my father, my family and I are all characters. It is my contribution to that effort of rehumanising, of trying to build a bridge of empathy and understanding. When Muslims and non-Muslims see the other as '*they*', the danger is that they stop seeing each other as individuals, with each side dehumanising the other. At times it has been tempting to succumb to hopelessness, to accept that the divisions are too wide to bridge. But I cannot yield to despair – as the father of two young children, I have to believe that a better future is reachable, to believe Britain can still be a promised land.

105 My ambition for this book is that it reveals a story that is ultimately inspiring, optimistic and hopeful as it illuminates a path that helps lead from *they* to *us*.

(2021)

³ a veil worn by some Muslim women in public, covering all of the face apart from the eyes

⁴ Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207-1273): Persian poet