



— Hello From Nanga Parbat —

in The Shepherd & Dog, Hornchurch - November 17th, 2014

It can take people years to actually ask. Even still, the question's always audible in their first 'hello'. This time it's a stranger, a slightly drunk woman in the bar area. She didn't need the 'hello'.

"Where are you from?"

Well, I got to this pub today via the A12, from Brentwood, from my house, my room, going right the way back to my mum's birth canal in Basildon Hospital. Is that the correct answer?

For all my pedantry, I know what she actually means and, for all its presumptions, I know the question isn't intended to be rude. But her indignance at the uncertainty of my answer certainly is.

"How can you not know?"

I just don't. I know that my maternal-grandfather is the one to blame for me being off-white but I don't know anything about him, the fucker's illusive. When she was a child my mum would ask about him occasionally, about where he came from and why he left before she was born, but her own mother died without ever even revealing a name. She died of breast cancer, 1976, my mum would have been five years old at the time. She had to watch the rest of her family standing around that Dagenham grave, as her own mother was lowered in, and they each dropped whatever there was to know about my grandfather in there as well. *Very dark*. That's all they ever said about him. Perhaps it was oak, or black poplar, that leafless branch of a

wilting tree. I can't tell this woman any of that though can I - bit much. I'll just say that it's a *family mystery*.

"Hmm. What's your name then?"

You think that's gonna solve it? Really? Do you think my surname's Hernández and I just never put two-and-two together. Whatever. It's Arron Wain.

"Hmmm, I dunno."

Yeah, exactly. Neither of us know. But you're gonna tell me anyway aren't you.

"You look Asian. I reckon you're Asian."

Yep. I get that one a lot. Means something different each time. *Asian*.

Day 1, Morning - along the valley

After gutting the trout, the old man wipes his fingers across a once-pale skull cap. "I call it the *British-British War*," he scoffs, grey eyebrows alight with his gaze. "1948. Goodness, that's twenty-odd years ago now. I remember you and your mum leaving." Harun re-listens at the mention of his mother. "Me, I stayed right here. Saw it all." Between scaling the fish the old man conducts a movement with his knife over distant hills, of soldiers and battle. "One bullet came right at me tent, right past me head." He draws a line in the air, whistling through lost teeth, it leads to a moth hole in the awning.

He's the same old man Harun used to buy food from as a child, sat in the same place. His stories hadn't gotten any more interesting and, as always, he conceded that after some time. Talk of the past ends with a sharp severance of the trout's head. Finally the old man offers up that which he had been asked for, directions to the basecamp, and Harun walks away.

After several miles, the clack of the old man's knife against the chopping board had entirely dissolved in the sapphire river. Birdsong, midday beams, fall through nettles. The name and those who gave it may have changed yet no pile of bodies could shallow that valley. It doesn't feel British, or Sikh, or whatever the old man had claimed. It still smells of saffron and the snow is a perfect white on Nanga Parbat.

in The Blue Boar, Billericay - 19th September, 2015

“What makes you think your grandad was Indian then?”

I get it. People struggle with the subtler shades of brown. Almost everyone assumes my heritage is East-Asian - *Chinese*, as they like to put it. But no, I reckon South-Asian. My mum’s hair isn’t nearly straight enough and, besides that, way more South-Asians were knocking around in her day.

“Why India in particular though?”

It doesn’t seem the time and place for this conversation. The rugby’s on. The pub’s full. I drink the last drops of Guinness as my mate stares at me down the barrel of the pint glass.

“I mean, you do look *oriental*. I get why people say it.”

No, I tell him. No, he’s not looking hard enough. The aquilinity of my nose. See? Not remotely similar to East-Asians, they all have weak bridges and wide nostrils. Also, look, my eyelids have distinct folds but theirs don’t - they have *monolids*, that’s the term.

“You’re sounding a bit racist yourself.”

It’s not racist, it’s factual. I just don’t look like them.

“And are you happy about that?”

Yes. I’m not proud of it, but yes.

“I’ll take your silence as-- oh, holdup.”

My mate turns towards the rugby. It’s the world cup, Japan versus South Africa. The former being the underdog and, more importantly, not being

South Africa, has the backing of all the English watchers. They cheer along with the fans onscreen, those with paint on their faces that could almost be mistaken for St David's colours were it not for the features underneath.

I'm quite beige, my Dad having watered down my mum's skin. My hair is dark and straight. I've also never not been very thin. All this together, I understand why people insist that I'm of East-Asian heritage. And *insistence* is the word. Does something become true if enough people believe? No, probably not. But if everyone started calling me Akira or Fuji - to pick some un-random examples - I would eventually start answering to those names.

"Arron! They might actually do this!"

Japan have a couple minutes to score a try, a try which, against all odds, would win them the game. The pub crowd has gone quiet, their taut silence only creaking with the occasional whispered '*come on Japan*'.

"They're gonna win!"

Yeah, they might. And the realisation comes that I really want them to, that I've developed a Stockholm-kindredness. Years of being told I am East-Asian must have imprinted on me, been absorbed into my skin, they are my team. And when they score that final try, when they do win, and the tension in the pub splinters into dozens of cheers, I do my best to seem unfazed, suggesting that we move on to the next pub.

"Really? Don't fancy another one here?"

not really. I just can't be arsed to invent whatever etiquette is necessary to turn down everyone's congratulations.

Day 1, Afternoon - at the foot of the mountain

She would pray, Harun's mother, whenever a new expedition passed through the village. They were always bright with dopey smiles, finding reassurance in patting children on the head. And they'd always return from Nanga Parbat lonelier than they started. *Pale idiots*, she called them. Harun was never to try anything so stupid. *If God had wanted people to go up there, he'd have left stairs.*

From where he was standing now, at the foot of the mountain, that village of Harun's childhood could be eclipsed by his outstretched hand and an entire life plotted along each tendon of each finger.

The slopes he walked bowed low, all green in their infancy. The very same hills he used to look towards as a child to watch those hikers become a notion on the mountainside. He never thought they were idiots. He'd imagine them at the summit, full with the eyes of God, answers to every question he could think to ask.

in The Black Horse, Brentwood - 21st February, 2016

A girl. She's also very pretty. She's also black. That's not, like, a surprise - obviously not. It's just that a lot of the people I hang around with - I don't know why I hang around with them - insist that there are no attractive black girls. I like to make a note of the ones that are so I can use them as counter-evidence. That makes me not racist, I think - an ally. She's coming over. Fuck. I was staring too much. Jesus, she's about to talk to me.

"Hey, sorry. Just quickly, where are you from? Are you Malaysian?"

Uh, what? No one's ever been that specific when they've asked the question before. I'm not, no. Why?

"My ex was Malaysian. You look similar."

Oh. I can be Malaysian. Would it help? I don't even know where it is. Near Vietnam? I can be that too. I'll be whatever you want.

Day 1, Evening - at the base camp

Following the voices most palatable to his tongue, Harun arrives at a small gathering. He lets them make an introduction.

“Hey, welcome,” someone says warmly through the fireplace. “Who are you joining?” A short silence speaks on Harun’s behalf. “You’re going up the mountain by yourself? God, best of luck. Someone tried that a couple of weeks ago. He was last seen along the Silver Plateau not far from the top.” They both look up towards the idea of a summit, somewhere in the dark night sky. “I hope you two don’t meet.”

in The Eagle, Kelvedon Hatch - 22nd January, 2018

If I want to talk about *deep* things with my male friends there's an understanding that we use political discourse as a proxy, otherwise all talk takes place strictly under the comfortable blanket of video games and films. This time, though, we'd stuck our feet out into the cold air.

"Seen your dad recently?"

Nah, it's probably been three years at this point? Don't see him. Don't respond to his messages.

"Fair enough. I was angry when my mum left as well."

It's not even that. It's more-- I dunno. He's like my tyre pressure: I don't think about it much and it's not like, when I do, I can be bothered to check it.

"Reckon you ever will or is that it?"

Check my tyres?

"No, you dick. See your dad?"

I dunno. I'd do it for my mum. She never knew her father. Clearly he didn't give enough of a shit to ever say hello or write a letter. I know it would've meant a lot to her if he did. I'm in, like, the opposite boat. I know it would mean a lot to my dad if I replied to his texts or whatever. But I don't. Seems a bit unfair that I'm throwing away a connection she never had the chance to.

"The chance to what?"

Throw away.

Day 2, Dawn - at the base camp

A returning group of climbers meet a cheering crowd at the base camp. As they mingle one of the party tells Harun how they'd left a photograph of their daughter at the summit. "She used to always draw pictures of the mountain; Hermann Buhl was her idol. I hope it's still up there, the weather began to turn as we descended."

This climber went on to describe how their group had traversed in the dark to outpace the storm behind them - a clamber of blind and tired legs. Harun thought it was irresponsible for a parent to do something so reckless. Had his own been more considerate, might they be packing his equipment with him now to make sure it was all there before his climb tomorrow? Probably not.

The sky screams as it cuts itself along the needle of the mountaintop. Winds strong enough to stir Harun's heaviest thoughts as he tries to sleep. He realises that he hadn't ever even considered having children. It's not that he couldn't imagine it, he just never had.

on The Circle Line, London - May 2nd, 2018

Kill me. There is a representative of every racial group on this train and all their ears must be tuned to us. The colleagues I've found myself travelling with, the ones who only know colour from the tan they get in their parents' conservatories, have spun the wheel of conversation and it's landed on *White Privilege*.

"Yeah, I watched a video essay on it."

Oh, wow. A whole video? Tell me all about it.

"It was very enlightening. You know we all have it? It's, like, implicit." I wish the train doors could be opened mid-journey such that I could mince my face-flesh against the brick of the tunnel wall. Instead I scrunch it in a way I hope everyone else in the carriage will notice - in a way that shows I'm not complicit in the conversation without me actually having to directly confront my colleagues.

"You reckon you don't have white privilege, Arron?"

What? No. I haven't been told I'm not white my whole life - wished I was - just to be let into the club now on these gross terms.

"Oh, sorry. Okay then. You look white to me. So what are you?"

My mum would say half-caste. I'll say mixed.

"Mixed what?"

God. I don't want to have this conversation with them, let alone this entire fucking train carriage. I'll just tell them that my grandad is Indian. It's probably true, no one nearby looks Indian, no further questions, thank you.

"Oh, really? *Exotic.*"

Christ.

"What did he do?"

I don't know, we never met.

"Did he die? I'm sorry."

I don't know, we never met.

"Do you want to see a picture of my grandfather? Look, this is all the family at his birthday."

God, the picture's panoramic, look at all the fuckers. All white faces, naturally. But, then, so are my family photos for the most part, discounting only me and my mum. Maybe I do look white. I am more English than whatever else. More PG than Darjeeling - tea-stained. Looking at her grandad though, he's very definitely leaning towards Earl Grey.

"He was born in Lancashire. I like to go up there whenever I get the chance - you know, back to my roots. *Chips and gravy!*"

Jesus, she's doing a voice. Now I've got to worry about the northerners on the train as well.

"Oh! Everyone should come with me next time I go. You'd love it Arron, some really cozy old pubs up there."

Hmm, that does sound quite nice actually. I know it won't happen but, still, sounds nice.

Everyone on the carriage sits stoic as the train corners, summoning the agonised cries of metal-on-metal and electronic sparks that would have

had our ancestors on their knees in repentance. No one seems remotely interested in our conversation. Least of all a family at the far end; bearded father, wife and daughters in hijabs. I shouldn't complain. I have it easy, really.

Day 2, Morning - on the mountain

Harun was close enough now to be walking between the letters of Nanga Parbat, climbing the serifs which drew out in exhausted syllables the word he had so often read from afar. The air had not yet begun to thin and it shivered gently enough over the rocks to forget the coming storm.

From a ridge, an old Ibex watches over Harun who is waddling like an infant in the snow. One of the Ibex's horns had grown so large as to recur deep into the flesh behind its ear and become scarred in place. It had long tried to ignore the pain, keep its head forwards, not move too fast. But it was then, as Harun's feet groped awkwardly for some reassurance, that the Ibex wrenched its neck sideways, excising the horn, leaving a florid hole. There it bellowed hot relief across the mountainside and ran away.

Harun heard the scream but chose to understand it as an odd gust of wind. Had he climbed that ridge and followed the blood along the ice, he would have found a dead Ibex and would have lost the mountain path.

in Tanner and Co., Bermondsey - October 2nd, 2019

My mate's left me alone with one of his friends. I like to think I'm quite good at conversing with new people but I do rely on them to lead which, luckily, my friend's-friend does.

"What's your race then?"

That'll do. *My mum's dad was Indian, but I never knew him.* That's my latest version of an answer. Quick. Succinct. True enough.

"Nice. I'm mixed too."

Oh, cool. What of?

"Half Norwegian, half Nigerian."

That is quite the mix.

"Ha, yeah."

His chuckle hits the bar top like a wet napkin. Shit. He definitely hears that all the time. Fucked it.

Day 3, Afternoon - on the mountainside

Harun would sit on a carpet that was once his father's, ugly and thin. His kettle screeches in time with the playing children outside, while he imagines the neighbour's daughter getting ready for work. Above all this, in the flat upstairs, an elderly couple make the same breakfast they'd had for the past thirty-two years. And Harun is alone. Just as he will be, two years later, when his flat has been levelled and he's left clinging to the mountainside.

Ropes, harnesses, a helmet. Harun had chosen a pack too small to hold such things. Yet even the little he was carrying became a pendulum, swaying atop the sheer clock-face of ice. Just a brief rest, Harun says to himself as he entrusts his weight to the little gear he does have. *Let go, it'll hurt less than this*, replies the backpack. *The drop isn't that far, barely enough time to worry*. Harun looked down into that crevasse seeping in a black which had been thickened by the seven bodies that lay there in a mangled embrace, frozen.

Those bodies won't be found for decades. Even then, only one will be identified; letters shipped to its descendants. Letters to be filed away beside wage slips and birth certificates, used in passing anecdotes, or to remind someone of what their great-grandmother had once said about a Killer Mountain and a fatherless home.

In the guts of a frozen maw, under a pile of his friends, that body looked up at the coming of a morning which would never again look back at him. It played within the ice like candlelight in a necklace, a diamond necklace he'd bought on Oxford Street for his wife. He tried to imagine that

the arms around his waist were hers; the decay, perfume. With punctuated lungs and a new sincerity he whispered something about love, regret, hoping that there was anyone left to hear it.

outside The Moon and Stars, Romford - June 19th, 2021

Paki. The word used to be thrown at my mother, from across the street, when she was young. *Go home, go back where you came from*, they'd say. Which was exactly what she was trying to do, trying to get back to her house where her adopted parents waited like the white posts of a finish-line, reassuring and distant, never really understanding where she'd been.

Paki. I've never been called one myself. Don't know if I'd prefer it to what this chap's doing.

"Ching chong. Ching chong."

Being Indian's not like being a Paki though. People go to India on holiday. Taj Mahal, Ganges - everyone likes a curry. Nothing wrong with being Indian. You wouldn't get shouted at in the street for being Indian.

"Egg flied rice."

Is he waiting for me to respond? I haven't had to deal with this kinda thing for a while. It's almost nostalgic. I can smell PE kits and underage tobacco use.

"Ching chong. Is that what your parents sound like?"

Nah, my parents speak English, estuary accents. My grandad's from India though if that's what you mean. Have you been? Very rich culture. Beautiful countryside.

Day 4, Evening - along the Silver Plateau

Tall winds which had long ribboned the Earth beset Harun. Biting, kicking, jeering as they pull his clothes, and the sun turns away. In that cold furnace Harun can only think of his mother, how she'd sit and cross knitting needles, yarn diminishing to rags. He sees her lay them ready in a line, one after the other, some trousers, a shirt and jacket. Glistens of wool in the storm which Harun follows, all leading to the cave's entrance. Inside is a man, naked, his skin granite as the walls from which he seems to emerge as if the mountain itself longed for human form.

Harun's unrolled mat barely quiets the ground and his broken sleeping bag is left half open. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulls out a samosa which has almost thawed in the lost heat of his body; vegetable, his mother would object to that, not a *real* samosa, she'd say. He chews and chews the same single bite before throwing it aside.

Dimness to blackness, exhaustion smothers the chanting storm to a slur and, like familiar scars, the cold becomes an ignorable truth of the body. All that's left is a distanceless dark and, in it, the karahi begins to bubble sweet smells on the stove. Soon he'll be called for dinner; *put the book down, sort your hair*, she'll say. But the samosa's lying open, half-finished, on the cave floor and he isn't hungry.

in The Viper, Ingatestone - November 27th, 2021

"It's so good to see you, Arron."

Yeah.

"We can't leave it this long again. What's it been, seven years?"

Six.

"Too long. Too long. How are you?"

Okay.

"Good, good. I'm thinking of going to Spain this year if you wanted to come.

Yeah, maybe.

"I could do with the tan, ha. Maybe we'd match then... You know-- this is stupid-- you know it always used to bother me that I looked like the odd one out. You, your mum and sister, all look alike. And then there's me, blonde hair, green eyes."

Right.

"Yeah, ha... I sometimes regret leaving your mum, Arron. I just- I felt I needed to at the time. I wasn't happy. Seems we're all kinda worse off now."

Mmm.

"Money's been tough. I've had to move back in with my own mum, which is grim. And it's just difficult being alone, you know. I didn't think it'd be like this. I thought we'd all still get along. Maybe we can--"

How was your drive here? My car's awful in the rain, all over the place.

"What?"

Could be the tyres though, to be fair. I keep meaning to look at them.

"Right."

Yeah...

Day 5, Morning - at the mountaintop

It's a *victory*, an *end goal*, that's how those small people back at the basecamp describe the summit. That is what it once looked like to Harun's childish eyes from so far away in distance and in time. But now, above the worst of the storm, where the rocks are finally broken by sky and proximity hammers the mountain's top dull, it looks exactly like what it is, a halfway point.

An axe juts from the floor. If Harun noticed it he would see, affixed with a shoelace, the photograph of an adolescent girl. And he would see, written in pencil with thick gloves: *I made it. Hope it's as beautiful as you always thought. I'll never forget you. Love, Dad.*

The world is unmade there, a swirl of morning fog, mist, cloud, and those other grey things yet to be given intention. The horizon runs through Harun's fingers as he tries to resolve it into something solid but there are only wisps of places he'd been and people he knew. He aches. That's all he can focus on. How much he aches.

in the living room, Brentwood - May 12th, 2022

"That was my cousin on the phone. We were talking about my dad."

Mmm. Dug something up, have they?

"He was from Pakistan."

Pakistan?

"They don't know anything else about him."

Pakistan.

"So, yeah. There's that."

We paused, letting our thoughts fill them room until they quietly burst

"I'm sorry, Arron."

She's apologising. Apologising for the kids that shouted Paki at her in the street, who were right all along. Pakistan. It's where reporters sometimes go to tell you how shit everything is and scary looking people issue these things called *Fatwas*. That's all I know about the place. I suppose I can give them a real answer now, when people ask me where I'm from. Not much of one though.

"I'm gonna go to bed. There's a jacket potato in the oven, if you fancy it."

My grandfather doesn't have a name. I know nothing about his story yet the ink of it runs thick on my skin and even thicker on my mum. My mum who is scratching into the sofa the only thing she's ever known

about her dad and it's just a fucking place on a map; not if he loved her, not why he didn't.

"You okay, Arron?"

She glows in the light of the TV, black curls and gold. She doesn't look Pakistani, or Indian, or whatever it is people think. She looks like my mum. She's always looked like my mum. Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine.

Day 5, Morning - at the mountaintop

Harun had company on the summit. Two pale climbers chatter, pointing fingers over the land. *India's that way*, one of them says. *China, there. And obviously Pakistan, here.* It's all just clouds though, really, Harun thinks. Even if it weren't, everything would still look the same.

The climbers approach Harun, their weak Urdu struggling in the wind. "Greetings. Good? Healthy?" He nods. "Where you come from?" Standing in the boundless grey of that summit, Harun wasn't certain that he existed at all, the thought that he *came from* somewhere felt silly. He points at nothing, southeast into Pakistan. He talks about the village where he grew up, in the Kashmir Valley. He talks about his apartment in Mahir and about the British company that demolished it last month to build a dam, about how they offered him a place to live in London. If he makes it back down the mountain, that's where he'll go. If not, well, guess he'll remain in Pakistan, in the soil and dirt. That's perhaps the best answer to their question, that is where he *came from*. The climbers stare back at Harun, bemused. "No. Sorry. We mean, what route you come up the mountain?"