

STILL LIVES

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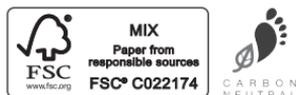
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BIRTHDAY WISHES

I turn fifty-five this year.

'You're getting on, old man,' Gupta says when I meet him for a drink after work. He sips his orange juice through a straw like a girl.

I look at his grey lips sucking in the juice. 'There are things I'd still like to do,' I say.

'Like what? Don't tell me you're still banging on about becoming a...' – his mouth contorts as he says in a mock French accent – 'a couturier?'

I push the bowl of peanuts towards him and shrug.

It's early evening and the Victoria in Chorlton isn't busy. A boy in a black biker jacket stands fiddling with the shiny buttons of the jukebox by the door, and the woman behind the bar is polishing beer glasses. Her bright pink lipstick is too young for her face. There's music playing, but it's new stuff, full of banging drums.

I finish my Budweiser and get up to buy another. When I come back, Gupta is still waiting for an answer. He's an accountant. He likes to get to the bottom of things.

'Maybe Geeta is throwing you a surprise party?' His eyes stay fixed on my face.

'Fat chance,' I say. 'I'll be lucky if she remembers. Anyway, it's no big deal. It's only a birthday.'

'Tell you what,' he says. 'Forget having a party. Be a rebel and go to Hertz, hire a fancy American car – a silver Lincoln or a Cadillac – and drive up to Scotland. Take a break from the bloody business. Run away from the family. There'll be plenty of Scotch, and I've heard the lasses in Edinburgh are bonnie.' He clears his throat and grins.

He's in a good mood because it's a Thursday, which means he'll soon be going home to have sex with his wife.

* * *

Driving home, I overtake a hearse on the M56. There are blurred faces inside the cars that follow. The rain hits the windows, smudges their features and streaks down their cheeks, like a clown's tears. I think of Gupta's words. I think of my twenty-five-year-old self, who left Bombay ready to start a new life in America. I'd only stopped in Manchester for a few days to see an old school friend – Gupta – who was studying accountancy at Manchester Poly.

'Stay a bit longer?' he suggested when it was almost time for me to catch a plane to America. We were sat at a bus stop eating our fish and chips, our fingers stinking of vinegar, waiting for the 215 to take us to Levenshulme to Gupta's rented one-bedroom flat. 'Manchester's small. It'll be easy to make money here. To hell with America!' he said, cocking a finger to the sky. His eyes were lonely, but he had swagger in those days.

I stared at the clouds and the dull brown huddle of buildings around, and thought, He's right. It would be easy to shine in such a small place.

'Tell you what, I'll stay for a bit,' I said, slapping him on the back. I'd make a few quid and then move on, I said.

Those early days. We were like brothers, Gupta and I, sharing rooms in Levenshulme, whining about the cold and the thin English girls with their bony thighs who giggled at our accents but let us squeeze their breasts at the Bellevue cinema.

Manchester was a mistake. I should've carried on to America, got proper training in high-tech design, then moved to France.

'Why do you want to mess around in America?' Father had asked me. 'It's a godless place. Stay here. Bombay is booming, beta. Even McDonalds is opening a branch in Juhu.'

But I'd made up my mind. 'I want to try my luck in America,' I said. I had received a scholarship offer to study textile printing

at Delaware college. Over there, anything was possible. India was a dead-end street, strangled by red tape and babus begging for bribes. America was the future, with its shiny, germ-free, dirt-free cities. I thought of my job as a shipping clerk in Wadia & Sons, and told Father I was sick of running errands, answering phones and preparing endless cups of chai for the department.

Father jabbed his finger against my chest. ‘You’ve got a soft Indian brain; it won’t work in America. They will fry you alive, son.’

He was sixty, an old man, and I was his only child. I understood his desperation, so I kept quiet and let him rant. Mother would’ve backed me, told me I was right, but she was dead.

We stood in the queue at the State Bank of India. I watched him draw out his savings. Eight thousand rupees for a one-way ticket to New York via Doha with a longer stop in Manchester. Travel didn’t come cheap in those days.

‘I’ll come back rich and famous,’ I promised him, slipping the notes into my wallet.

Father just kept shaking his head, his eyes hazy with tears. The day I left he broke a coconut for good luck and handed me a silver coin with Goddess Lakshmi imprinted on it. I must still have it somewhere. ‘At least try and be sad,’ he said.

But breaking the journey in Manchester and staying with Gupta was a mistake. I got caught there, stuck in the business of buying and selling second-rate frocks. America became just a name on a map.

* * *

Turning fifty-five *is* a big deal. It needs acknowledgement.

So one day, instead of going through unsold stock at my warehouse, I visit a personalised registration plate dealer in Stockport and buy a personal number plate for my car: PK 1. It has a nice ring to it. It says I’m a Somebody. I have to outbid a Paul Kennedy by two thousand quid. I don’t tell Geeta how much it cost; I say it’s a birthday present from a grateful customer in Ireland.

‘The Irish are just like the Indians, don’t you think – so kind and big-hearted,’ she says. ‘But there was no need for such a showy birthday present. You’re not a child.’ Her hands dip in and out of a big Pyrex bowl of flour as she speaks.

I’d like her to go outside and admire the car with the new number plate, but she stays put.

‘Later. Maybe later,’ she says. ‘I’m busy baking bread.’ She waves her flour-covered hands proudly.

‘What’s wrong with Warburtons bread?’ I ask.

I know she’ll make a mess in the kitchen, and the bread will burn or stay dense and uncooked in the middle. She’s always been a lousy cook.

‘Amar wants to try home-made bread instead. Miss Connor was going on and on in class about the wonderful smell of home baking.’ Geeta scratches her nose and the flour settles like chalk dust on her nose and chin.

‘Good luck, Delia Smith,’ I say. ‘Just make sure you don’t burn the kitchen down.’

I walk out of the kitchen and go outside to check my shiny new number plate, already screwed on to the second-hand Mercedes. In my excitement, I almost knock next door, but then I remember Mr Peters is English, and doesn’t like being disturbed.

* * *

Ten years ago, I took out a big mortgage and shifted from Long-sight, with its noisy West Indian neighbours, to Bloomsbury Close in Timperley, just south of Manchester. The streets are hush-hush here, and the houses have fancy names like ‘Fairholme’ and ‘Chatsworth’. We have British neighbours – proper ones with English as their first language. I give them a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label every Christmas. Our new house has a small garden where I keep trying, without much luck, to grow a mango tree.

‘I don’t like it. It’s too far away and too lonely.’ That’s all Geeta could say when the woman from Bridgfords first showed us the house.

‘Far away from what? India?’ I asked, as the agent waited on the front step, arms folded, a thin smile on her lips. She’d told us earlier that we’d be the first Asian family in the neighbourhood. ‘That’s progress, don’t you think?’ I said with a grin. I pointed out the electric gates and the garage to Geeta. ‘What more do you want? We’d even have an en suite. No more going down the corridor at night searching for the loo.’

Geeta still shook her head. ‘It’s too big – I do love the gates, but I’ll miss...’ She hesitated before saying she’d miss Mrs Ahmed, our neighbour in Longsight. They did their weekly shop in Rusholme together, and always stopped for a gossip and a samosa at Pundit’s afterwards.

‘We’re moving here for Amar,’ I reminded her. ‘There are better schools in this area. He will get more attention at Willows Grammar school if he’s lucky enough to get in. And you can invite Mrs Ahmed here. Show off the en suite.’ Once I brought our son into the equation, she agreed straight away.

The first time Gupta came around for dinner in our new house, his mouth hung slack in envy. ‘Lucky bastard,’ he whispered. His eyes were like hamsters, running across everything. ‘You’ve landed on your feet, all right, PK. A detached house in Timperley, pukka English neighbours and just ten minutes to the motorway.’

Mrs Ahmed dropped in a few times, too. Geeta switched on all the lights, flung open the doors and showed her the en suite and the Italian black leather sofa from Arighi Bianchi in the lounge, her eyes flashing with pride. Mrs Ahmed soon stopped coming.

‘People are so busy these days,’ Geeta said with a shrug. ‘It is this country. It gives you no time to breathe. Everyone is just huffing and puffing, puffing and huffing. She has no time for me any more.’ Her lips trembled as she said this.

* * *

One day, soon after I bought my number plate, an invite arrives.

BEN LAWTON REQUESTS THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY
AT A GOLFING DINNER AT MOWBRAY HALL

‘Why have they invited you?’ Geeta says. ‘You don’t even play golf.’

‘Why shouldn’t they invite me? I was their biggest account for ten years. You should know this.’

She looks at the stiff, cream-coloured invite as though it were a bomb. ‘A whole weekend? What do they think, you’re just sitting around doing nothing?’

It’s a Wednesday morning and I’m sitting around doing nothing, in no hurry to leave for work. Geeta, dressed in her weekday uniform of a blue velour tracksuit, is slicing an apple, head bent low and mouth open in concentration. Breadcrumbs cling to her top.

‘Are there any mangoes?’ I ask. They are my favourite fruit.

‘No Alphonso mangoes this year, only the sour Pakistani ones. I didn’t bother buying them. There’s drought in Gujarat – at least, that’s what Zee TV said,’ she says without looking up. ‘Ravi won’t get them till next month.’

Ravi is the Indian grocery store in Rusholme where Geeta does her weekly shop on her way back from the temple.

‘Besides, Amar likes apples,’ she says, smacking my hand as I lean forward to grab a slice. The slices are neatly arranged in a semicircle on the plate.

I check the cuckoo clock above the sideboard. The hour and minute hands have gone missing over the years, lost in our many house moves. Only the bird remains, chirping out the time in a sickly, syrupy tune. I want to replace it with a digital clock, but Geeta won’t let me.

‘How come Amar’s not left for school?’ I ask, knowing her excuses will be ready.

‘He’s not feeling well,’ Geeta says. She gets up to fill the kettle. ‘Poor thing. He’s got a terrible headache, so I told him to take the day off.’

‘Second time he’s done this. Last week it was a toothache. He’s nearly fifteen, not some old codger.’ I say this loudly so Geeta can hear me above the hissing kettle.

‘Calm down – he’s only a kid,’ she says, buttering a slice of toast and pushing the plate towards me.

I look at the invite again and check the dress code.

‘I’ll need a new suit. The one from Debenhams is looking a bit shabby.’

‘What’s the point wasting money on a new suit just for two days? I’ll get your brown one dry-cleaned and we’ll buy another one in the January sales,’ Geeta says.

The tracksuit bottoms are too tight on her. Her hips flare out as she bends down to open the sideboard where she stores her Haldiram snacks. She pulls out a Tupperware, grabs a fistful of salted cashew nuts and shoves them in her mouth. The salt leaves a faint silver dusting on her lips.

I catch my reflection in the kitchen window and suck in my stomach, run a quick hand through my hair, slap my jawline. It is still firm, and I have a full head of hair. It’s going grey, but I’m in good shape for a mostly sedentary Indian fifty-five-year-old man. Geeta’s different; there she sits, quietly giving up on herself, letting the careless pounds weigh down her five-foot frame year after year. Her once wide-open and alert eyes are now small and heavy, hooded with fatigue. Her mouth is set in a thin, anxious line. I want to help her, but I don’t quite know how.

* * *

Geeta mentions my invite to her older sister Lopa, who is in Bombay. She phones dutifully every Sunday at 8 p.m. Indian Standard Time. There are letters, too, that she writes – maybe once a month – where she can gush about the misery and glory of her English life.

‘Yes, didi, the business is doing well...’ she says that day, glancing at me. I turn the newspaper page so she won’t think I’m eavesdropping. ‘Yes... he’s so busy with all the orders... not so cold in Manchester now... he’s been invited to an exclusive dinner at the Mowbray Hall.’

The way she says it, you'd think Mowbray was a household name in Bombay, like Buckingham Palace or Harrods. I like the little white lies Geeta feeds her didi about the business doing well. I wish I could believe them myself as I drive up to my warehouse in Grotton day after day, year after year.

A few days before the golf do, I nip into Moss Bros on King Street and treat myself to a new Italian suit with a crimson silk lining. I want to look successful. Back at work, I ring Ben, my accountant at Coopers, the one responsible for the invite.

'Glad you can make it, PK,' he says. 'What's your handicap these days?'

'I haven't played for some time, but it's in single figures.' I make sure Margaret, my secretary, doesn't hear me. I haven't touched a golf club in years, and she knows. But she's in the corridor making photocopies. I'd moved the stationery cupboard and the photocopier there on her advice. It stops the girls pilfering little things like staplers and printing paper.

'I've got some bankers coming up for the weekend,' Ben continues. He knew I was looking to buy some Italian cloth-cutting machines. 'Someone quite important is coming too,' he adds after a pause.

'Prince Charles?' I joke, but there's a dull ache at the pit of my stomach. Bankers mean numbers, which means doing sums, showing profit and loss margins, explaining why my sales figures are quietly tumbling down like a house of playing cards.

Ben laughs. 'Not quite. But someone who might be more useful to you – Cedric Solomon, schedule permitting, of course.' His voice turns reverential.

'How did you manage to rope Cedric Solomon in?' I sit up straight and say Cedric's name loud enough for Margaret to hear.

Cedric is the god of my rag-trade universe. He had swooped into Manchester from nowhere and was busy swallowing up the high street, buying businesses that were teetering on failure and loss-making labels that were still on the shelf past their sell-by date. He

polished them, baptised them with sexy new names, and kerching! I hated his appetite and his guts.

‘Cedric and I were at school together,’ Ben says. ‘He’s doing it as a favour really. He’s a busy man, you know.’

I put the phone down and turn to Margaret, who’s now standing by my chair, holding invoices for me to sign. ‘Cedric Solomon is coming to the golf do,’ I say.

‘That’s nice.’ Her guarded voice gives away nothing. ‘You could talk to him about the denim jackets. We over-ordered. He might want to buy the excess stock off us?’ She pulls a hanky from her rolled-up M&S sweater sleeve and blows her nose. The damp walls of the warehouse have given her a year-round sniffle.

‘I’ve been trying to fix a meeting with him for years.’ I light my first cigarette of the day. ‘Just imagine – what if Cedric likes our stuff... who knows what might happen! We could even crack JCPenney and sell in America – he has enough contacts there.’

I shut my eyes and think of the possibilities. America. It’s where I should’ve been right from the start. Americans loved value for money, and my clothes were just that – Italian flair at Chinese prices. All I needed was a backer, someone like Cedric Solomon who’d put up the funds for the stock. And once the stock was gone, I could wrap up this business and go back to my first love, designing clothes – proper clothes that carried the style and cut of masters like Yves St Laurent and Pierre Cardin. Who knows, I could even have an atelier in Paris.

Solomon was shrewd. He’d take a chance on an old pro like me. I’ve worked in fashion long enough – not the glossy French sort like Dior or Chanel, which is what I really wanted, but the cheap, cash-and-carry variety, specialising in rip-offs of designer gear. I call it my Homage Line. A service to Joe Public. I alter a pocket here, a zip there, and sell it wholesale to retailers – mainly small-time shop keepers – who sell it on to the customer.

I became a hit at the right time: women were reading magazines and watching films and spending more on clothes. They wanted to

look like film stars. They couldn't get to St Tropez, but they could wear an LBD to a Salford pub and play at being Audrey Hepburn for a night.

Three years after moving to Manchester, I took out a loan from the Bank of Baroda and expanded the business for a song, soon getting the hang of selling skirts and T-shirts to punters hungry for cheap stuff from the Far East, long before the likes of Primark and Peacocks. I was the first to do it, no question about it, flicking through magazines like *Vogue* for ideas and kitting out the masses on the cheap. They were the golden days. The phone never stopped ringing. The faxes never stopped rolling. The air stank of money.

'I told you we'd be all right,' I said to Geeta after an enquiry came from Mrs Shrimpton, the chief buyer at BHS. She'd nodded happily, her fingers busy knitting booties, her body apple-round with our first child.

I sent Father a photograph of the warehouse, along with a newspaper cutting from *The Grotton Evening News*. There I was, right on the centre page, standing proud in front of the red-brick two-storey warehouse. I was 'the new face of immigration in England – an employer bringing jobs to deprived areas, not a scrounger on social benefits.'

'Don't tempt fate,' Father wrote back in his simple villager's English. 'Luck is like fruit: leave it hanging on the tree too long, it will ripen and rot before your eyes.'

He was right.

At fifty-five, the tide's turned. I own a warehouse the size of two football pitches, but most of it lies shrouded in darkness, musty with unsold stock. New-generation Asians and Jews working out of sweatshops on Cheetham Hill are busy churning out tatty copies off the catwalk. They are always a step ahead, with their websites and smooth-talking salesmen.

Entire weeks pass before the phone rings with an order, and when they do, it's always a tiny one from places like Doncaster and Belfast – places I wouldn't even spit at before.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RESHMA RUIA is an award-winning author and poet. She has a PhD and Master's in Creative Writing from Manchester University, as well as a Bachelor and Master's from the London School of Economics. Her first novel, *Something Black in the Lentil Soup*, was described in the *Sunday Times* as 'a gem of straight-faced comedy'. She has published a poetry collection, *A Dinner Party in the Home Counties*, and a short story collection, *Mrs Pinto Drives to Happiness*; her work has appeared in international anthologies and journals, and she has had work commissioned by the BBC. She is the co-founder of The Whole Kahani – a writers' collective of British South Asian writers. Born in India and brought up in Rome, her writing explores the preoccupations of those who possess a multiple sense of belonging.

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