

THE COLOUR OF HUMANITY

Bali Rai

If I could speak to you again, I would remind you about the park that we played in. Those multicoloured rubber tiles in the kids' play area, surrounded by bark chips that would get stuck in our shoes. The fence around the perimeter that kept danger away, and us feeling safe. I loved the swings but you were a roundabout fan. We still enjoyed it the same, though, didn't we? I can see your mum sharing gossip with mine, the two of them watching over us, proud and happy.

Remember the other kids from the neighbourhood? My cousins Michael and Joseph, Ruby Khan and Mia McCullough - and so many others whose names I've forgotten. The laughter and the fun, and the sun shining over the holidays. Going home tired and sweaty, our fingers sticky from melted ice lollies. It's like a different world now, isn't it? Just a dream that we once shared. Maybe you saw something else in those images, something that didn't include me. Or was it later that we stopped being the same? I guess I'll never know.

I'd offer you my food, if I could see you again, like I did every time you came for tea. Fish fingers and chips, and those tinned peas that my mum always kept in the cupboard. You loved putting tomato ketchup on yours - smothering everything in it until your food was floating in a bloody lake. You'd get your fork and smear a chip around the plate, making patterns in the sauce. Call it painting. Mum used to say you'd become one of them modern artists, like that man who cut the shark in half, or that Banksy fella. Something avant-garde, she said, and we didn't know what she meant - looked it up on my laptop.

You never took my food though, did you? I didn't like ketchup. I used to dollop mayonnaise on my plate, and you'd pull that face, like there was a really bad smell in the room. *Mayo*, you'd say, sounding just like your nan. *Ma-yo? How can you eat that muck?* you'd ask. *It looks like sick.* And I'd just grin, spear a chip and wave it at you. Ketchup and mayo - that's who we were. Only, underneath the sauce, our food was the same. *We* were different, too - came out of different bottles, your mum said - but it didn't mean anything at all. We were always the same. Always.

In Year Six I'd help you with your maths. Mrs Cooper's class - remember it? Every bit of every wall covered in paintings and stories, and maps and times tables. That big chart about grammar and punctuation, and *were* versus *we're*, and all that stuff. Gold and silver stars next to every pupil's name, and the timeline of major world events. The yellow and red chairs that we'd scrape across the floor just to annoy Mrs Cooper. The tiny tables, the bookshelves, and the corner where Jordan O'Connor puked after eating all those chocolates, after we egged him on. Mia started crying because Jordan was her dad's cousin on his mother's side. She didn't talk to us again, until you bought her a bag of sweets with your birthday money.

35 You'd say you didn't do maths, called it the devil's language once. Mrs Cooper touched her crucifix necklace and called you a wicked child. But you didn't care, because maths was useless. You'd tap your calculator and say, *I've got this, haven't I?* Then you'd look over at my answers, and I'd let you see. Just you and no one else. I was your brother from another mother, you said. And I never cared about you copying my work, because I wanted to help you. I *liked* helping you. You were my best mate, and that's what friends are supposed to do.

40 If we could meet up again, I'd take you back to Nando's, like that first time we went. You and me, and our mums, walking through town without a care in the world, even though it was cold and wet, and the football fans were going to the match. My mum ordering us to cover our ears, and your mum telling those lads off for swearing around us. It was a big treat, remember? We'd finished Year Six and were on our way to big school. Money was tight but our mums had saved up, 45 and we had chicken and chips, and that coleslaw that we ate out of the boxes.

I dared you to try the hot sauce, and you just laughed and said yeah. But when you tried it, your face went red and you began to cough. You grabbed every drink on the table and downed them, one after the other. Our mums were nearly crying with laughter and you ran off to the toilet. And all the time I didn't even smile, because I felt so guilty, like I'd hurt you, and I wanted to say sorry 50 but never did. When you came back, you were angry and wouldn't speak to me until your mum told you to grow up. I can't help thinking perhaps that was the moment - because you were never the same after that.

I would ask you about Year Seven, if I could, and those first few weeks, when you found new people to chill with. I'd point at Mia and Ruby, and Michael and Joseph, and even Jordan O'Connor, 55 and say, what's the deal with that Brandon lad and his dodgy mates? At first you were fine, told me you had new friends, nothing special. Just natural to meet other people, you said. And we were together anyway, in the same form, the same classes - all of that.

So when your Uncle Tommy took us to the football, it still felt the same. Like we were still brothers. You had your blue shirt and I was wearing red, but that didn't matter. It was just football. 60 We went to the chippy, and then stood outside the pub while your uncle and his mates had a few pints and talked about the game. Remember the banter that day? We felt like proper grown-up men, not the kids we were. Like we were part of something. And even though your side lost, you were still OK with it, and we had dodgy burgers on the way home - still the ketchup and mayo twins.

65 But that was the last time, I reckon. The last time we were brothers. The last time it didn't matter that we hadn't come from the same bottle. That we weren't the same on the outside.

See, if I could ask, I'd point to the books. You know, the ones that I borrowed from school, and the local library in the neighbourhood centre. I'd ask why reading made me a geek, because that's what you started calling me. Was it so bad that I wanted to be something, to make my life better? 70 How come you couldn't understand that?

Then I'd ask why you stopped knocking at my door, and why, when I walked to the shops, you'd be sitting there with Brandon and the others, acting all hard, like some wannabe gangster. Sharing cigarettes, thinking you were rude boys, or blagging cans of lager from some older cousin or

whoever. Those girls you had with you, too - all wearing more make-up than clothes, and swearing like old men at the football.

I remember you looking to Brandon every time you spoke to me, like the two of you shared some private joke. Brandon grinning on the sly, or one of his boys pulling a face.

The big change happened in Year Nine, didn't it? It was that night in McDonald's. Michael and me had asked Ruby and Mia to come with us. We were on the bench outside, drinking Cokes, remember? You came up with Brandon and two other lads, and started causing trouble. The Asian security guard told you to leave, and you called him a *paki*, and the four of us couldn't believe it. You just said it, right out loud, like it was a regular insult - just banter, nothing more. Even though Ruby's dad was from Pakistan, and you knew it would upset her. You looked right at her and grinned.

When I saw you the next day, you told me I was boring and that I should go out more, and forget about school. Said I couldn't take a joke, and that I couldn't be properly English if I hung around with Muslims. We were at war, you said, and people had to stand up for what was right. All I remember thinking was that Ruby was just like us, just fish fingers smothered in a different sauce. And that your voice sounded familiar but the words you spoke weren't yours. They belonged to someone else, someone vicious and nasty and full of hate.

I'd rave about the basketball court at school if you were with me now. I loved that place; it was like a second home. I spent every spare second there, honing my game, shooting from every angle, over and over again. The ping of the ball as it bounced off the concrete, with Mia watching from the sidelines, eating those sour cherry sweets that she loved. That was where it happened, the first time - if you're interested. When she told me that she liked me, and we went over to the Spar and I got her more of those sweets. Walking home with my basketball in one hand and her hand in the other.

I remember you and that Brandon lad, standing by the railings, watching me practise. I remember wondering if you wanted a game - to maybe play some one-on-one. I remember you watching Mia, watching me. I didn't think it meant anything.

But you got worse, didn't you? Acted like I'd done something to let you down. As though Mia and I owed you an explanation because we were together. All that time, I thought it was envy. But you'd never once talked about Mia that way, or told me that you liked her. You used to talk about other girls, and those celebrity women off the Internet. I must have been blind or stupid, or a bit of both, to think it was jealousy that made you cut the bonds between us. I must have been so naive, so caught up in the lie that we'd be brothers for ever. That nothing could divide us.

So, I think about the bus stop most of all. It's natural, I guess, because that was where it all happened. I think about the warm evening sunshine on my face. I think about the glow that holding hands with Mia gave me, as my cousin Michael teased us for being loved-up. We were waiting for the number 27 bus to take us into town, and talking about the film we'd decided to watch. Just three friends having a laugh. Three regular English teenagers, loving life and living it. No pressures, no school, no problems other than deciding which screening to go to, and which snacks to buy when we got there.

115 I think about that scene as the trailer from a longer film, and it isn't supposed to end there. There were so many more scenes to play out over the years. So many more happy afternoons, and mild summer evenings...

120 You came out of the pub over the road, remember? You and Brandon, and that thug with the beige Stone Island jacket. I never knew his name, just knew the type - shaven head, tattoos and that snarl when he saw me holding Mia's hand. That word that every one of my ancestors has heard since they were taken from their homeland. Since they ended up in this country. That word that makes something less than people, that belittles our humanity, our experiences, our hopes and our dreams, until all we are is a colour.

125 What were you thinking when it started, I wonder? Where did that hate take root? You looked right through us, and Mia and Michael fled. They ran back through the park, screaming at me to follow them. But I didn't move, because when I saw you coming I saw my friend, my brother, the lad I'd known since we'd both worn nappies.

130 Brandon had the first pop - two punches to my face. I had to kneel, to try and regain my thoughts, my breath. I didn't cry then - I was too shocked, too angry. Then I saw your boot; just for a split second but I knew it was yours. I fell on my side, remember? Lay there, looking up at that hazy blue sky through tears, wondering where it had all gone wrong. When I went from being your brother to being someone with less right to walk down the street than you.

135 The thug, he pulled that thing from his jacket - I don't know what it was. I just felt the crack and then all that pain. My skull felt like it was on fire. I knew then that it was over, and I tried to turn my head towards you. I managed to catch your eyes, and I *know* you remember that. Your face was twisted, contorted in rage, but your eyes were the same, brother. The same as when we ate fish fingers as the ketchup and mayo twins, the same as when we shared jokes and kicked footballs, and ran around the streets together. When what I was on the outside meant nothing to you.

140 So, let me ask you something else. Sitting in that cell, breathing in your own stink and that of others, what do you reflect on? Do you remember the playground, and the friends we had, and all those simple, naive childhood days? Do you find yourself back at the football, singing the songs and enjoying the banter? Does your mind play tricks on you at night? Does it take you back to the times when nothing but love and laughter and having fun mattered?

145 I lost so much that day. I lost my girl, and my family. I lost my chance to live a life the way it should be lived. I lost my dreams, my hopes. I wanted to be a lawyer. I wanted to have children of my own, and watch my mum play with them as she once did with me. I had the right to those things, just like anyone else. I had the right to become what I should have become. But ignorance and hate took that away. You took that away.

150 Only, you threw away as much of your own life as mine. The two of us, we're still the same, aren't we? Me in this bed, looking at nothing, feeling nothing, just a shell of the human I once was. You in that cell, your freedom gone, your life thrown away.

Neither of us is free, neither of us has a life. Mine ended that evening, I'll never get up again, never move on. I'll never walk or talk, or be able to hug my mum and tell her things will be OK. But your life is over too. Your life is rotting slowly away in there - and even though you can walk,

and you can talk, you aren't *free*, are you?

155 Tell me, when you sit and stare at those walls, do you ever ask yourself when it happened, exactly where the turning point was? What caused the change?

See, humanity has no colour, brother. It did not start with a colour; it will not end with one. Remember all those lessons we were taught - to share, to accept, to respect the other? Well, when did I change for you, my friend?

160 When did you negate almost every aspect of my humanity until all you had left was my skin tone?

When did I stop being human first and start being black?