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‘Just apply and see what happens.’

‘But, Mum, I don’t want to go there.’

‘Well, it’s not a choice yet, is it, Mochie? Why don’t you just apply and if you decide you don’t want to go, you don’t have to? But at least try. Have a look around.’

The local college, Leyton Sixth Form, required a minimum of five A–Es at GCSE. Although it was where I wanted to go, it wasn’t where I would be going if my grades were good enough. My mum still had her eye on the grammar school, the same one I had tried, years earlier, to get into.

My English teacher agreed to help me with the application to Ilford County High School. As we sat in her classroom after school, she looked through the questions and reviewed my answers. ‘I think this place will be really good for you, Mohsin, you need this.’ Each year they received dozens of applications for five spaces in the sixth form, and after an interview with a grey-haired deputy head teacher, I was offered a conditional place.

Once my exams were over, I had nothing to do but wait for the results, so I got a summer job. It was my first day in the menswear department of House of Fraser, tucked away on the third floor of the large department store on Oxford Street, with bright artificial lighting and endless escalators. The manager looked down and read out my name at the team meeting of around twenty sales assistants, all dressed, head to toe, in

black. My awkward demeanour and ill-fitting trousers told them I was new to the job and to the outside world. 'MO-MO-MO-SHIN. Hmmm ... is that your Christian name or is it ZEEDEE? I can't tell from this form.' He had mispronounced both. I paused, struggling to decipher what he was asking me.

'Er ... I don't ... I don't have one,' I replied.

'You don't have one what?'

'I ... er ... I don't have a Christian name.' The mumbling stopped.

'What do you mean?' His eyebrows met in a frown.

'I don't ... well, er ... have a Christian name because I'm a Muslim,' I said reluctantly.

The group laughed. My unease and confusion made clear it was neither sarcasm nor political. A young Asian guy put his arm around me, smiling, and asked me my first name. After that day, I came in for eleven shifts in a row before the same manager finally explained the rota system.

On the morning of GCSE results day, my mum took a £5 note from her purse and circled it over my head three times as she said a prayer. Most mums had to stand on tiptoe to perform this religious ritual but not mine. 'You are going to do well, inshallah, my son.'

I took my envelope to an empty classroom. I wanted to be alone. To have a moment to prepare myself for the news, good or bad. I tore away the brown flap and pulled out the results slip:

A, A\*, A, B, A, A\*, A, B, B, A.

I felt a surge of excitement as I raced out of the school to find Mum and Dad, who were waiting, no doubt with bated breath, in the car park.

'Mohsin!' the shout came. I looked round to see my English teacher. 'Well done, you've got some of the best results the school has ever seen.'

We hugged as I thanked her for everything she had done for me. I turned to leave and saw Marlon perched on a table, a disheartened look on his face and a torn envelope by his side. 'Well done, man,' he said.

I couldn't wait any longer to show my parents the results. I had never seen such an expression of pride on their faces. It was as though the brightness of my success might make it near impossible for them to see who I really was. And for me the exhilaration of succeeding felt like a drug that briefly numbed the pain of my sexuality. We drove the short distance to Ilford County High, Bollywood tunes blasting from the car mixed with screams from Uncle Tier on the phone, where the new school confirmed I'd be starting in September.

As a reward for my results, my mum took us to New York. We stayed with her cousin in New Jersey, a fifty-minute train ride from Manhattan and a picturesque view of its skyline greeted us on the way in and waved goodbye on the way back. The Twin Towers were its centrepiece and going to the Top of the World, the viewing gallery in the south tower, was one of the first things Abbass and I did on our trip. Rather than pay to go up, Mum and Raza waited for us on the ground floor to save money.

From up here, the buildings below looked like people, different shapes and sizes bustling confidently up against one another. The view was the most magical thing I had ever seen, sparking the exhilarating anticipation of what was waiting for me out there in the world. For the first time, the clouds were almost close enough to touch.

A few days later, back in London and in our living room, my family and I stared in collective disbelief at footage of the first plane and then the second ploughing into the towers, over and over again. The tears poured down my mum's face, as she recalled waiting for her sons in the lobby of the south tower, and imagined the planes striking at that moment,

unable to reach us at the top as the two buildings burned. She thought of the parents watching for whom this was actually true.

I was shaken to the core when I heard that the attack had allegedly been carried out by people who called themselves Muslims. That evening my dad sat Abbass and me down.

‘You have to be very careful. The world is a dangerous place right now and we will be blamed for all of this. Your only defence is a good education. You must study hard. OK?’ His words added to the sense of danger that had settled over our house.

I was miserable at having to start again at a new school, to have to try and endear myself to a new group of people, and not just people – boys. Sixteen- and seventeen-year-old boys with no female influence to dilute the laddish behaviour they expected of each other. An environment heaving with competition, and with the unwavering focus on getting into a top university.

‘Which universities will you be applying to, young man?’ our form tutor asked each one of us on our first day, as we sat in the chemistry lab in our dark suits and ties.

‘Oxford,’ said several. ‘Cambridge,’ said others.

‘You must all be aiming for the Russell Group otherwise you are wasting your time at this school, understood?’ he said.

‘What about you, newbie? Which of the Russell Group have you got your eye on?’ He sounded like the queen.

‘I don’t know,’ I mumbled, not wanting to admit I didn’t know what he was talking about. I could feel their eyes on me, trying to figure out whether I’d be a threat to their place in the academic pecking order. I knew that I wasn’t, that I didn’t belong. At my secondary school, I’d

refrained from speaking for fear of being punched for saying something clever. Here I feared being ridiculed for saying something stupid. They thought carefully about themselves. They considered how the decisions they made today would impact their lives tomorrow. There was an ambition in everything they did. An ambition to which I could not relate, but which, in the wake of 9/11, seemed more important than ever.