

14

The front of our home was on fire. Thick black smoke billowed from the upstairs window into the sun-soaked midday sky. The roof above the bay window was red, then orange then yellow. I swung open the door of my car and pressed the car horn ferociously, knowing that my mum and little Raza were somewhere inside.

Each second felt like an hour. My heartbeat echoed in my head. I ran up the driveway towards the front door and the flames. In that fleeting moment I pictured them trapped inside while I remained safe out here, unable to reach them. I imagined their screams over the cries I was already making. I imagined a life without them.

The door swung open. My mum looked confused.

‘WHERE’S RAZA?!’ I screamed. She stared at me, searching for the source of the fear. Then a part of the burning house dislodged itself and fell at her feet.

‘MUM! WHERE’S RAZA? THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE!’

‘What? He’s here. He’s here.’ She spoke softly, still unable to comprehend what was happening. Raza was playing on the floor of the front room.

‘GRAB HIM, MUM! GRAB HIM NOW AND COME OUTSIDE!’ I was at the door, clutching on to them both, watching for debris as I guided them to the end of the driveway as fast as I could. Our neighbours were on the street, aghast at the sight of the blaze. I shoved my phone into someone’s hand.

‘Call 999!’ I shouted as I ran back to the car. I saw my mum’s face now covered in tears, arms wrapped round a crying Raza, as she gazed back at me, confused once more. And then I drove off.

As I had been turning into our cul-de-sac just minutes earlier, I had seen a man running away and scrambling to cover his face with the hood of his black sweatshirt.

I saw red, determined not only to find him but to do whatever it might take to stop him. I drove for a few minutes before coming to my senses. What was I doing? My mum and little brother were standing outside our burning home. They had to be my priority, not this vigilante justice.

The fire was soon extinguished by firefighters. Inside the house there was only superficial damage but the outside looked like it had been burned to within an inch of disintegration. The opposite was true of me.

I called Abbass and my dad. I started by telling them everyone was safe and then explained that the house had caught fire. They didn’t need to know how on the phone. They just needed to get home.

The police arrived and confirmed that it was a petrol bombing. One officer, who didn’t remove his sunglasses the whole time, said it looked like the bomber had aimed for my parents’ bedroom window but missed, hitting the wall and spreading the contents of the bottle and shattered glass over the front of the house.

I told them I had seen someone running from the street.

‘What ethnicity was he?’

‘I didn’t get a good look,’ I said regretfully, ‘but he was white.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes I’m sure.’

‘How old was he?’

‘He looked young. Teenager maybe.’

'Would you be able to describe his face or any physical features?'

'No ... it all happened too quickly and he had a hood.'

'You know how this could have happened?'

Take off your sunglasses, I thought to myself.

'No ... no, I don't.' He pulled me to the side, convinced I knew more than I was letting on.

'You in any gangs at school?' he asked.

'No,' I said.

'So you have absolutely no idea who this could be?'

'Well, my brother had some trouble with some boys up by the station but that was almost two years ago and we've never seen them again.'

'What sort of trouble?'

Take your fucking glasses off.

'The racist kind,' I said.

After the police, firefighters, family and the few sympathetic neighbours had left, I went for a walk. I needed to clear my head but I also hoped I might spot the arsonist. Returning half an hour later, I looked at the house, seeing flames that were no longer there, imagining them raging from a crucifix pitched on our front lawn.

My mum was still shaking, my dad silent. Abbass held his head in his hands and Raza had gone back to his abandoned toys on the living-room floor. Aside from some burnt window frames and a blackened front bedroom, our house was fine and so were we. But the world felt different, more threatening and inherently more dangerous. I feared the bombing was a sign that things could get much worse.