

A TRAVELLING LIGHT SHOW

# STRICTLY BALTI

REHEARSAL DRAFT

By Saikat Ahamed

**BOXES** *Some play in music for audience coming in*

Boxes.

Our lives are full of boxes.

We live in them, two up, two down, we travel around in them, encased in steel and glass, we take our food out of them, put our waste into them, we receive our entertainment from them.

All our lives are filled with boxes and when we die...

*(Beat as I stare into the 'grave')*

Boxes tell us who we are.

Which box do you fit into?

Gender

Are you male? Are you female? Sorry, what was the first one?

Religion

Are you Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu?

I don't know

Ethnicity.

Are you a) White British? By white do you mean a pinkie fleshy sort of colour or do you actually mean white, like the undead?

Are you b) mixed race? Well yes I may be but they're all contained within me. They don't seem to be spilling out.

Are you Black? Are you Chinese? Are you Asian?

Why, do I look Asian?

Are you British Asian? I can be, is that better? Yes. I guess so.

British Asian. That's who I am. I am British Asian.

What does that mean? I'm half and half?

British?

Made in Britain? Can you be quintessentially British? Like Winston Churchill or David Beckham or Sid.

Sid was always so British. Sid was born in the leafy suburbs of Birmingham, Sid was educated through the public school system. Oh yes Sid was British alright but Saikat...

Notice the colour of my skin.

Something always seems to give Saikat away.

So Asian it is.

Asian.

*(in a thick Asian accent)* Oh yes sir, I am so very, very Asian *(without the accent)* except I don't really have the accent.

I like curry, love it in fact, does that make me Asian? Do you like curry? Does that make you Asian?

Or is it much more simple; is it just to do with where my parents came from long before I was around? or is it to do with my early morning steps on the cream coloured stairs.

Sometimes we have to go back to see where it all began.

## **CHRISTMAS**

Christmas 1979

I remember creeping down the carpeted steps, holding my breath.

*(Pause)*

This was Christmas day. As the living room door creaked opened, I saw them.

Piles and piles of boxes.

Boxes of all shapes and sizes, tall and thin, short and fat, all wrapped in brown paper!

My parents came over to the UK a few years before I was born. It had only taken them eight years to get into Christmas.

I don't hear the door behind me and before I know it, they're beside me. The sari and the moustache.

Mum and Dad.

(as Mum) You're up early, Shoi-kot.

(as Dad) This a special day, no?

So there we are, Mum and Dad, and little me between them approaching the mountain of boxes when I notice the first label;

Sh-a-j-al. Shajal?

Silly parents, they spelt my name wrong. Well I guess English isn't their first language.

Then another, Pinky. Pinky? That's a weird nick-name?

Then Shumon? And then...

Then.

*SQ1 – Zakir Hussaid – Making Music*

The penny drops and opens a door

It takes me to another time, another place.

Dusty earth, bright sun.

A hole in the ground to squat over.

Memories of Bangladesh.

We went over when I was very young, a toddler.

There, I used the common language of play to connect to my cousins under the quiet supervision of Bed Granny. And from her bed, draped in her cream sari, she watched as the boy from England played with his native cousins.

Cousins such as Shajal. Shumon. Pinky. – *Music out*

These boxes aren't for me!

A mountain of presents turns into an avalanche of disappointment.

As my parents go through all the parcels, one by one, Munna, all ready to be shipped to Bangladesh, Kajal, not Christmas presents, Saleem, but gifts to celebrate Eid.

How lovely for Shajal.

How wonderful for Shumon.

Won't Pinky be pleased?

They expect me to smile.

And I do.

I smile. I have always been an accommodating child.

A pile of boxes are slowly and carefully placed into the boot of my father's car, ready for the Post office after the Christmas break.

A pile of boxes all apart from one.

## **THE PRESENT**

A Christmas present for me.

I didn't notice it amongst the mountain.

A book.

A poetry book.

In Bengali.

I don't speak Bengali, let alone Bengali poems.

But still I smile.

That night after the traditional Christmas dinner, Lamb curry with yellow potatoes, my father tucks me into bed. He tells me that the book is written by Rabindranath Tagore, literary giant of all things Bengali. I'm supposed to be impressed.

He reads me a poem.

Taal gaach, it means palm tree Shoi-kot.

Taal gach ek paye dariye (*on one leg stands the palm tree*)

Sob gach chariye (*overshooting all trees*)

Uki mare aakashe (*peeping over the sky*)

Mone sadh kalo megh fure jaye (*wishing in mind... to float like black clouds*)

Ekebare ure jaye – (*and keep flying*)

Kotha pabe pakha se (*where will it get the wings*)

Taito se thik taar mathate / that is why it (*right on its head*)

Gol gol pata te (*on round round leaves*)

Ichhati mele taar (*spreads its desire*)

(*As Dad*) Night night Shoi-kot, merry Christmas

**SQ 2 – Pete’s Bangladeshi ‘Dream theme’. Single instrument / drone/ Very pure sound**

And that night in 1979 for the first time in my life, the dream comes to me, the dream that punctuated my childhood.

The dream of the Taalgaach.

It’s about the tall, tall palm tree stretching up to the clouds, hoping to fly, yearning to soar like the bulbul bird high above the heavens, feeling its leaves blown in the wind and for a moment, for the briefest of moments, believing that it too had found its wings.

## PRIMARY SCHOOL

**FX: SOUND CUE – SCHOOL BELL (bell is part of SQ2)**

Back at school, after the Christmas break, snow still thick on the ground but no time to play. Except play-time.

St Teresa’s Catholic Primary School. Children in brown jumpers herded around by nuns in black habits.

(*As Sister Catherine*) So children, put your hands together as we give thanks to Christ the saviour who was born in Bethlehem so that we could live/

And so we could get piles and piles of Christmas presents

(*As Sister Catherine*) For his is the glory, the beauty and the sanctity forever and ever, Amen

Saikat, did you do your hail Marys over the holiday?

Yes, Sister Catherine!

In the playground, all the talk turned to Christmas presents;

Oh yeah I got the latest Meccano set with gears and everything

Kerry McKenna, my best friend. Mad about Meccano, we should have called him Kerry Meccano. But we didn't.

Yeah well, I got a huge Boba Fett from Star Wars

Stuart Hubble, class clown

It's really cool, its' head comes off and you can pour out his gloopy insides!

Pretty sure that's bubble bath.

Even Arvinder, the Sikh boy who had joined in year 2, kept himself to himself, even he celebrated Christmas

What did you get Arvinder?

New patka.

Patka?

*(indicates top of his head)*

Oh the handkerchief thing on top of your head.

Yeah.

Wait, is that a Nike tick on it?

Yeah

Cool!

Did your mum stitch that on?

Yeah.

Cool *(unsure)*

What about you Sai?

Yeah what did you get?

What did I get? Well, I'm glad you asked. I was exceptionally fortunate this year. I got a Bengali book of poetry, written by Nobel-prize winning author Rabindranath Tagore!

*Pause*

That's what I could have said.

But instead what I actually said was:

Oh Christmas was great! I got a Boba Fett too and some Meccano, bit of Lego oh yeah and the Millennium Falcon and then we had a huge Turkey, bigger than an elephant and watch so many cartoons that Mum and Dad actually turned into cartoons. Yeah!

*Pause*

Wicked!

Sounds great!

You had the best Christmas Sid!

## **TWIN LIVES**

And so my twin lives were born or to be precise Sid was born.

Saikat and Sid, one body but two lives.

Saikat, born to Asian parents, a little piece of the Raj right there in Birmingham.

Sid, as British as fish and chips.

Twin lives: Saikat at home uncomfortably Asian and Sid at school, blissfully English.

All was good in the world. I felt like a secret agent fooling everyone.

The name's Sid, English Sid. Licence to blend in.

My cover held fast throughout Primary. My friends were all calling me Sid and when they came around to play, I always made sure there were frozen chips and burgers in the freezer.

Don't get me wrong, at home, my parents made a point of reminding me that I was in fact Bangladeshi.



Arei, tumi Bangladeshi!

For my parents, The Sari and the Moustache, it seemed like there was only Bangladesh, they surrounded themselves with Bangladesh, all their friends came from Bangladesh. Sure our black and white mock Tudor house couldn't have seemed more English but as soon you stepped through the door, you felt the climate change;

Chillies were forever sizzling in the kitchen, the Bangladeshi flag adorned the TV and the hallway was lined in green and red flock wallpaper. And Sid? English Sid daren't show his face in our Bangladeshi house, especially on a Friday night.

## **VIDEO NIGHT**

Friday night was video night and whilst for other children that might have meant a trip to the local store for a copy of Star Wars or Back to the Future, in our house, it was something very different.

(as Dad) You got your suit on Shoikot? Matching! Arei straighten his tie!

(as Mum) Come here darling, got to look your best.

(as Saikat) Mum, Dad do we have to?

(as Mum) Practice makes perfect

(as Dad) Only three weeks to go until Reunion weekend. Now face the camera. Red-light on? Good recording/

We would sit on the plastic covered sofa, reciting poetry, sometimes in Bengali/

(as Mum) Amar desh ei Bangladesh,

Sometimes in English/

(as Dad) Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats

And sometimes ineptly/

I don't want to!

(as Mum) Arei what is want?

(as Dad) Stand up straight!

(as Mum) Stand up tall!

*(as Dad)* Don't fiddle with your tie!

*(as Mum)* And speak!

My love of Bangladesh by Saikat Ahamed, aged 10.

*(as Dad)* Face the camera!

Although I may speak English  
My heart can honestly say  
I am a true Bengali  
And it will always be that way, OK?

*(as Dad)* Needs more practice before reunion weekend!

## **REUNION WEEKEND**

All the video nights in a year couldn't compare to reunion weekend!

Aio, aio, please park your car next to all the Mercedes and BMWs and make your way to reception

All the Bangladeshi doctors and their families in the UK would gather together in a hotel for one weekend a year. Suddenly corridors would be filled with multicoloured tides of sari fabric, strange exotic tongues either espousing Bengali/

Arei Shoikot miah, kita kobor?

/or often the queen's English in that clipped pronunciation of the 1950s

Oh, how terribly, terribly, delightful to see you young man!

Hi.

Everyone, related or otherwise, and it was generally otherwise was an Uncle or Auntie. There were so many of them, I often wondered if there were any Bangladeshi doctors left in Bangladesh.

Friday evening was the a meal, Saturday the medical seminar and Sunday was the 'cultural show'. In some closed off room in the hotel, we were subjected to songs in Bengali,

Amar desh Bangladeh *(Sung)*

Poetry in Bengali

Taal gaach ek pai darieh

That tree gets everywhere!

a Play in Bengali

Tumi kee kortoso eikeneh? (*acted badly*)

And of course the moment I was dreading.

(as Dad) Ladies and Gentlemen, my son, Shoikot. Poet. He write it himself. Come on Shoikot, up you come, everyone wants to hear.

My love of Bangladesh by Saikat Ahamed aged 10.

Although I may speak English  
My heart can honestly say  
I am a true Bengali  
And it will always be that way

Thank goodness it was only once a year.

## **PATKA**

No, school was where I felt at home, where I could get back to Sid again.

I got you!

No, you didn't!

Two weeks before the end of the summer term in my final year at Primary.

You have to turn into a werewolf now!

Fine!

We were all there, Kerry, Stuart, Carl and Richard, even Arvinder.

As the minutes to the bell trickled away, the game got more and more frenetic.

You're the king of the werewolves now!

Yes!

Sister Agatha was coming outside with the bell when...

*Pause*

Stuart Hubble sticks out his hand to tag Arvinder. As he does he grabs hold of something cloth-like and Arvinder's patka pings off.

As Arvinder's shiny black hair cascades down like a waterfall there is a stunned silence from all the children.

Followed by laughter.

Loud brutal machetes of laughter.

Look at that

He's got hair like a girl!

It's Rapunzel!

I stand and watch as my friends taunt this boy from the Asian subcontinent for being so very, very different, so different to Kerry, so different to Stuart, so different to everyone and I say nothing.

And then to my horror, I hear Sid joining in with the laughter and I can't do anything to stop him.

*SQ 3- Pete's Dream theme repeated*

And that night, again I dream as the flying tree soars above the wild Sunderban mangrove jungles, but this time I can sense someone down below lost; lost in the tropical flora and fauna.

Is it me?

No.

It's Sid.

Sid!

And as I see him wandering aimlessly through the Sunderbans, I realise it's actually me that's lost. – *Music out*

**BIG SCHOOL**

Enough.

Time to put away childish notions, time to grow up. Time for big school.

*(as Dad)* Work hard and all things can be achieved

*(as Mum)* Study, study, study and one day you can be a GP!

*(as Dad)* A Surgeon!

*(as Mum)* A Neurologist!

So basically any sort of doctor?!?

I left the black and white habits of St Teresa's for the oak panels and thick velvet drapes of a private secondary school.

Where the iron heart of England throbs beneath its sombre robe

In 1985, I entered King Edwards School Birmingham, a school, which according to its own school song, was where the iron heart of England beat, a school over five hundred years old, if King Edwards couldn't make me fully British, nothing would!

For my parents, immigrants to the UK, this was a validation of everything they had gone through, all they had given up and they, they couldn't have been happier.

Ha, ha, King Edwards is a very good school, you know great great Englishmen have gone to King Edwards

Yes dad, great great Englishmen.

Now make sure your hair is just so, not a hair out of place, you want to make a good impression on your first day!

Yes mum, hair just so.

Mum, dad... this blazer, it seems a bit, I don't know, a bit big?

No, not big, just roomy. Besides, you will grow into it darling.

Ha, ha, if the blazer seems big, fill it with study!

That doesn't even make sense.

Grey flannel trousers, pressed, check  
Blazer with the coat of arms, two sizes too big, check  
Shiny black shoes, polished within an inch of their life, check.

*(Shaking my hand)* Make your mum and me proud!

Come and give me a big kiss darling!

Mum, all the other boys are watching!

*Walk away from parents and wave before entering the building and breathing a sigh of relief.*

And so a new chapter began, more English than ever.

A chapter written in long corridors and flowing black gowns worn by the teachers./

Yes sir!

A chapter that took me to a science block with clouds of smoke and spherical bottomed flasks/

Ow that's hot!

A chapter written in English, French, German and most surprisingly for a boy raised in Birmingham, Latin!

Amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatus, amant!

Latin, the language of the Romans, the Catholic Church and private schools.

Veni, vidi, vici!

I took to Latin well like a Roman takes to straight roads and empire building.

I came, I saw, I conquered, wise words Julius!

And in the evenings, when my folks were conversing in Bengali around the dinner table, I managed to slip in some casual Latin.

Ha, ha Shoikot - kisu schabji nen

Well as Catullus would say Dad, when it comes to mum's vegetable curry, Brassica Cymosa est venenum

*Pause.*

Broccoli tastes like poison. Sorry Dad

My Dad was just glad I was working hard at school, making the family proud.

## DANCE CLASS

Mind you, my mother had her own ideas of how to make me a model British boy. She enrolled me on the Saturday class at the Enid Goodwin School of Ballroom Dancing. After all, that's what all good English children do!

*SQ4 - Ballroom Dancing Music (Cha Cha) Joe Loss 'Wheels'*

*(cha cha cha, cha, cha, cha)- Sound level drops*

Slow, slow, quick, quick, cha, cha, cha.

Slow, slow, quick, quick, cha, cha, cha.

The foxtrot, the quickstep, the waltz, these were what Saturdays were made of years before Strictly! – *Music fades*

*(Dancing ceases)*

Ballroom dancing does not make you 'English' but thank you Mum, Dad for filling all those Saturdays with cha, cha, cha when I could have been playing computer games, hanging out with my new school friends or maybe just having a life. – *Music out*

The only thing that got me through those Saturdays was her

## DONNA

*SQ5 - Etta James: At Last)*

Donna Smith.

Donna Smith.

Skin like cream and hair like a chocolate sundae.

Donna Smith. – *Music fades out*

She was my first crush and I only saw her on Saturdays at Ballroom dancing and when I say saw her I mean just that. Talking was very rarely an option. Sure the boys and girls danced with each other but that didn't mean that we actually talked, we were all too busy trying to get the steps right so we didn't get a telling off from Enid.

Now children remember the elegance of the 1, 2, 3. The waltz is the dance of romance.

*SQ6- Waltz music*

Even in her 60s, Enid was still glamorous though all her make up had a slight tangerine quality.

Boys, hold the girls' hips firmly, you are guiding them!

That wasn't strictly true.

Gaze into each others eyes.

Definitely not, no way. The eyes were the last place you looked.

*(Saikat tries to find an appropriate place to look at his female partner)*

Well, maybe not the last! – *Music out*

Thank goodness I never danced with Donna; I would have been a gibbering wreck. No, no. I was quite glad to not be talking with her; just sharing the experience of dance class was enough.

Our relationship consisted of being in the same building for one afternoon every weekend with absolutely no direct interaction of any kind.

Perfect.

Until, one frosty Saturday morning:

What do you mean we're giving Donna a lift to dance class?!

Bombshell, we we're giving Donna a lift to dance class.

But, but, Dad! You don't even know her.

(as Dad) Don't know her? Don't know her? I'm local GP, pillar of community! I know everyone! Her mother is my patient, she's ill, I do good deed!

What my Dad didn't realise was that I had carefully spent about a year cultivating an air of mystery between Donna and myself by studiously ignoring her, and now we were about to be thrust together with no other option but to make small talk. And trust me, an air of mystery does not go well with small talk

Thanks Dad. Thanks a lot.

Well the afternoon came and we were sat in the car waiting for Donna. She lived in a block of flats with crude graffiti scrawled up the side to an impossible height, a million miles away from the quickstep or the pasa doble.



She got in the car. We sat in silence as my father made the fifteen minute journey to Perry Barr.

Had Sid been with me, he would've known what to say;

Yeah Donna, you're looking fine.

What's that smell? Chocolate Sundae? Love it...

But Sid was gone.

When we got to the Dance hall Donna said thanks and jumped out.

Bye Dad.

As I walked into the hall, I saw Donna was with her usual gang of friends and so I went to my customary spot.

It was as if the car journey had never even happened.

Sometimes you hear the wind clearly but it barely lifts a hair out of place.

Come along class, take your partners for the foxtrot!

**SQ7 - Foxtrot music**

Enid effortlessly gliding between us all, like a bright orange Dyson hoovering up all ineptitudes.

Come on Saikat, lift up your head. Staring at your feet won't make them work any better!

Saikat keep those elbows high, we're fox trotting, not fox hunting!

Smile Saikat, smile! I want to see your pearly white teeth!

Smile Saikat, Smile, I want to see what you had for breakfast!

**Smile Saikat Smile! – Music out**

No you smile! Why should I smile, why? I don't even know who I am, at home I'm Shoi-kot, the good boy, the Bangladeshi boy, I eat my curry, I read my Koran, but no that's not enough I got to be English too and what does that mean? It's means dancing, ballroom dancing. This is the 1980s, if I'm gonna be dancing, I should be break-dancing, put me in a shell suit, not spangly trousers. I can't keep spinning two lives, I can't even manage one properly, can't even speak to a girl whose hair smells

like chocolate sundaes. So tell me Enid, tell me O Great and powerful Satsuma, what exactly should I be smiling about?

That's what I should have said. But of course I said nothing. I just smiled. I have always been an accommodating child.

Four hours can pass so slowly and at the end of the class the children file out to waiting parents until there is only me and Donna left, stood on the steps of the Dance Hall with only the moon and the wintery trees as company.

Is your Dad picking me up too?

Wait. Did she? Did Donna just talk to me? The first words Donna ever spoke to me.

And so I respond in the only way I can, with the truth.

I don't know.

I did it, I talked to her. I spoke to Donna.

Suddenly I'm filled with hope, filled with courage. Maybe it's because the moon is so large, maybe it's because the stars are shining so brightly or maybe its just because I've been practicing the waltz, the dance of romance, but right then, I know this moment is special and as I turn to Donna, my father pulls up and we climb into the car.

Those first words that Donna ever spoke to me turn out to be our only words of conversation and although I stay at the Dance Class for another two years, I never really get past cha, cha, cha.

## **THE ARGUMENT**

*(As Dad)* Snap out of it!

Getting older means getting serious: GCSEs and my parents make me painfully aware of what's important!

We come over to this country with nothing.

Nothing?

Five pounds in my pocket

That's not actually nothing.

One day be a great doctor!

Doctor?

Doctor.

Swollen boils and in-growing toe nails. I was pretty sure that being a doctor was not high on my list of dreams.

Dad, I think I might want be an actor.

Doctor?

Actor.

Don't be stupid.

Going into the arts was not a popular choice for second generation Asians in the 1990s.

You want to throw your life away?

No one respectable does acting dancing nonsense.

Mum, Dad, how can you say that, you spent three years forcing me to go to Ballroom Dance classes!

Stupid boy, dance class is OK, it is what all English children do.

No. no it's not.

Acha, now I see it. We thought dance class was good, we thought dance class was English. We were wrong. Now we see you are fully English, because you argue with your parents. In Bangladesh this wouldn't happen. Well done, you've done what we never could. You've left Bangladesh behind.

Left Bangladesh behind? I'm not sure I ever had it in the first place.

GCSEs gave way to A-Levels, and finally my parents grudgingly accepted that a medical profession was not in the offing for me as I plumped for A-Levels that would have made any patient nervous in a doctor.

## **BED GRANNY DIES**

It was late February. I walked down the winding path towards the back gate of the school and viewed the tall rows of trees, wondering if any of them had ever dreamed of flying through the wintery skies.

When I got home, I immediately knew something was strange. There was no smell of chillies and potatoes sizzling from the kitchen, no sounds of Bengali freedom songs. I couldn't even hear my father clearing his throat in that harsh guttural way he used to.

My father was sat on the sofa with my mum. The Moustache and the Sari almost entwined together and though he wasn't crying, you could tell from the wet tracks on his craggy face that he had been. For a moment, I regretted dawdling on the way home. It would have been something to see, my father crying, something I'd never seen but I was always curious about.

Bed Granny had died.

### **SQ8 – Repeat of Zakir Hussaid – Making Music**

Bed Granny who had watched the children play like a permanent sentry under the brilliant Bangla sun. I had called her Bed Granny since my first trip to Bangladesh as a toddler. She never walked, she never moved, she was a constant fixture on the brass bed in the living room of my father's childhood home.

I don't know why Bed Granny was stuck to the bed. As a child, I wondered if she was just hiding some stain on the quilt with her ample frame, or maybe she considered herself the queen of the house. All others had to come to her. I guess the truth was more mundane, more medical.

Bed Granny had died – *Music out* and we were half way across the world.

In an instant I realised what my parents had given up all those years ago when they got on the plane to the UK and I felt guilty for so many unkind thoughts.

We couldn't make her funeral partly because of the distance but mainly because my parents wouldn't leave the UK until I had completed my A-Levels.

Study comes first!

But that summer, a mere week after I had taken my final exam we are all on a plane bound for the motherland, Bangladesh

## **BANGLADESH**

### **SQ9 – plane sound effect**

As I look down from the Boeing 747, I see the tall trees reaching up to touch the great flying machine.

Is he down there?

Is he still wandering in that greenery? Against all the odds, will I find English Sid in Bangladesh?

The plane door slides open, we are surrounded by a tidal wave of relatives, grandparents, old and wrinkled like mangoes left in the sun,

Arei babu, babu!

Uncles with furrowed brows and thick oily moustaches,

Welcome young man to your homeland!

Cousins, cousins, so many cousins! Shajal! Shumon! Pinky!

Shoikot bhai! You hungry?

Over the course of the first three days in Bangladesh, my parents and I are conveyed from house to house to house, eating a small meal in each one. I think it's a traditional Bangladeshi custom to feed distant relatives until the weakest of them, in our case, me, spends eight to nine hours of each sun drenched day squatting over the hole in the floor toilets in feverish agony.

I want to go back to Birmingham!

And then towards the end of our first week in Bangladesh, we have the Milad.

Allah hu akbar! Allah hu akbar!

The Milad, a religious ceremony involving the whole family. A vast framed photograph of Bed Granny sits, unsurprisingly, on the bed, usurping her place while all the uncles and aunts, everyone, dressed in white, weeps and eats and weeps some more. I find it hard to cry, considering that I didn't really know Bed Granny but the thought of eating yet more spicy food does manage to bring out a small tear.

And then after the ceremony we all make the treacherous journey to Ajimpura Gorosthan, the cemetery where Bed Granny is buried, treacherous because we all travel by rickshaw and the roads are so bad that the chance of falling out of them is high indeed.

Mum, I'm not sure this is safe!

Excuse me Mr Rickshaw man, I think that's a red light.

It's a red light!

That was a red light!

Cow! Moo!!!

The walls of the cemetery are broken, the gates rusted over. In a city where the living get such a raw deal, no one worries about maintaining the resting place of the dead. Beggars with broken and missing limbs stretch out their cracked and dirty hands.

Some of them are children, no older than five or six and for a moment I am taken back to St Teresa's playground, waiting for the sisters to ring the bell. What a charmed life I've led.

We search for Bed Granny's grave for over an hour.

Some of the uncles are convinced the grave is in the northern part of the cemetery, others favour a different section altogether.

I find myself separated from the mass of relatives as they all search and argue amongst themselves.

I stand and look at a grave with a slightly wonky headstone.

Bed Granny could be buried here, a few feet under me in a cold dusty box covered with red earth. Bed Granny could be buried here, or here or/

And then I see him staring at me from amongst the broken gravestones after all these years.

Sid.

Sure he looks like me, but he's not me, not all of me. Even if I'm English right through the middle of me, my roots come from a much warmer climate.

In the heat of that sweating city, as my father says goodbye to his mother, I say goodbye to Sid, English Sid, licensed to blend in. Who wants to blend in?

Coming!

Rushi Aunty is calling. It seems they've found Bed Granny's grave!

Bed Granny's grave? I suddenly remember why I'm here.

Dad? Dad?

Dad, are you OK?

He isn't OK.

His moustache is soaked with salt tears and his face is crumpled like a paper bag left in the rain.

And for the first time in my life, the only time I can remember, my father leans on me. I feel his weight on me and my mind flashes through different pictures of my life.

Yellow potatoes so soft they melt in your mouth, falling asleep to his Bengali words, the smile he gives me as I leave the car and follow Donna. All these things I never noticed.

1992 in Bangladesh my extended family mourned the loss of Bed Granny. The bed was moved to make way for a vast carved sofa upon which all the youngest cousins could sit together to watch reruns of Disney classics dubbed into Bengali. It's probably what Bed Granny would have wanted. I can't be sure. I don't think I ever had a conversation with her.

#### **SQ 10 – Making Music Zakir Hussain, TABLA SECTION**

A few days later, I stand alone on the roof of the tall building that is occupied solely by my mother's family.

The sky is a brilliant orange with streaks of green.

Goodbye Bangladesh!

Bags are packed. Alarms are set. Tomorrow we head back to the UK, back to normal everyday life. – Music out

*(as Dad)* You looking forward to getting back to Birmingham?

Sorry Dad, I never noticed you. Birmingham? Yeah, I guess.

*(as Dad)* Ha, UK is home for you.

What about you dad? What's home for you?

*(as Dad)* You remember that poem I told you when you were little, taal gaach, it means palm tree shoi-kot

Yes I know.

*(as Dad)* My amma, your granny she told me this poem when I was little. I never like it, flying trees nonsense. But still she told me and I told you and one day, who knows.

*(as Dad)* Sometimes, you only know what you are by looking back as well as forward.

*(as Dad)* Look out over the city Shoikot, just here below us, huts, further away the mosque, you see, calling the people for evening prayers and there in the distance that big grey square, Government Assembly Building. You can't have foreground in a picture without background.

*(as Dad)* Otherwise life is flat.

*(as Dad)* Come on, we go downstairs. Rushi aunty is making spicy biriani.

Oh Dad, not Rushi auntie's spicy biriani

*(as Dad)* Don't worry, I got you a bag of monster munch from English shop in Gulshan. Just don't tell your mother!

*(as Dad)* And also, make sure you save some for me.

The next day when my parents and I came back to the UK I brought a piece of the motherland home with me.

It didn't take much room on the plane. I didn't have to declare it at customs. It wasn't in a box or a bag.

See, some things just won't go in a box. Sometimes you need to look past the pile of boxes to find what's really important.

Taking a chance to speak to the girl with the hair like a chocolate sundae.

Realising the boy with the patka is the same as you not because he's from the same part of the world but just because he's from the same world.

You can be a Sid, you can be a Shoi-kot, you can be a Saikat. It's actually your choice.

Beyond the boxes, you can always find just what you need.

A poetry book in Bengali. Taal gaach ek pai darieh...

### **SQ 11 – Final Track – Zakir Hussain**

A poetry book that lets you fly through the clouds with the hopes of a tree against the wind, and given the choice between staying in a box and flying high, I know which one I'd rather go for. – *Music out*