

Part one friday



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Barry Fairbrother's body had been moved to the undertaker's. The deep black cuts in the white scalp, like the grooves of skates on ice, were hidden by his forest of thick hair. Cold, waxen and empty, the body lay, re-dressed in Barry's anniversary dinner shirt and trousers, in a dimly lit viewing room where soft music played. Touches of discreet make-up had returned a life-like glow to his skin. It was almost as though he slept; but not quite.

Barry's two brothers, his widow and his four children went to bid the body goodbye on the eve of the burial. Mary had been undecided, almost until the minute of departure, as to whether she should allow all of the children to see their father's remains. Declan was a sensitive boy, prone to nightmares. It was while she was still in a fever pitch of indecision on Friday afternoon that there was an upset.

Colin 'Cubby' Wall had decided that he wanted to go and say goodbye to Barry's body too. Mary, usually compliant and agreeable, had found this excessive. Her voice had grown shrill on the telephone to Tessa; then she had begun to cry again, and said that it was just that she had not planned a large procession past Barry, that this was really a family affair ... Dreadfully apologetic, Tessa said that she quite understood, and was then left to explain to Colin, who retreated into a mortified, wounded silence.

He had simply wanted to stand alone beside Barry's body and pay silent homage to a man who had occupied a unique place in his life. Colin had poured truths and secrets he had confided to no other friend into Barry's ears, and Barry's small brown eyes, robin bright, had never ceased to regard him with warmth and kindness. Barry had been Colin's closest ever friend,

giving him an experience of male comradeship he had never known before moving to Pagford, and was sure he would never have again. That he, Colin, who felt himself to be perpetually the outsider and the oddball, for whom life was a matter of daily struggle, had managed to forge a friendship with the cheerful, popular and eternally optimistic Barry, had always seemed a small miracle. Colin clutched what was left of his dignity to him, resolved never to hold this against Mary, and spent the rest of the day meditating on how surprised and hurt Barry would have been, surely, at his widow's attitude.

Three miles outside Pagford, in an attractive cottage called the Smithy, Gavin Hughes was trying to fight off an intensifying gloom. Mary had called earlier. In a voice that trembled with the weight of tears, she had explained how the children had all contributed ideas for tomorrow's funeral service. Siobhan had grown a sunflower from seed, and was going to cut it and put it on top of the coffin. All four kids had written letters to put inside the casket with their father. Mary had composed one too, and was going to put it in Barry's shirt pocket, over his heart.

Gavin put down the receiver, sickened. He did not want to know about the children's letters, nor about the long-nurtured sunflower, yet his mind kept returning to these things as he ate lasagne alone at his kitchen table.

Though he would have done anything to avoid reading it, he kept trying to imagine what Mary had written in her letter.

A black suit was hanging in dry-cleaner's polythene in his bedroom, like an unwelcome guest. His appreciation of the honour Mary had done him, in publicly acknowledging him as one of those closest to the popular Barry, had

long since been overwhelmed by dread. By the time he was washing up his plate and cutlery at the sink, Gavin would have gladly missed the funeral altogether. As for the idea of viewing his dead friend's body, it had not, and would never have occurred to him.

He and Kay had had a nasty row the previous evening, and had not spoken since. It had all been triggered by Kay asking Gavin if he would like her to go with him to the funeral.

'Christ, no,' Gavin had said, before he could stop himself.

He had seen her expression, and knew instantly that she had heard. Christ, no, people will think we're a couple. Christ, no, why would I want you? And although these were precisely his feelings, he had attempted to bluff his way through.

'I mean, you didn't know him, did you? It'd be a bit weird, wouldn't it?'

But Kay had let rip; tried to corner him, to make him tell her what he really felt, what he wanted, what future he envisioned for the two of them. He had fought back with every weapon in his arsenal, being alternately obtuse, evasive and pedantic, for it was wonderful how you could obscure an emotional issue by appearing to seek precision. At last she had told him to get out of her house; he had obeyed, but he knew that it was not over. That would be way too much to hope for. Gavin's reflection in the kitchen window was drawn and miserable; Barry's stolen future seemed to hang over his own life like a looming cliff; he felt inadequate and guilty, but he still wished that Kay would move back to London.

Night drew in over Pagford, and in the Old Vicarage Parminder Jawanda perused her wardrobe, wondering what to wear to say goodbye to Barry. She had several dark dresses and suits, any one of which would be appropriate, and yet still she looked backwards and forwards along the rail of clothes, mired in indecision.

Wear a sari. It'll upset Shirley Mollison. Go on, wear a sari.

It was so stupid to think that - mad and wrong - and even worse to think it in Barry's voice. Barry was dead; she had endured nearly five days of deep grief for him, and tomorrow they would bury him in the earth. The prospect was unpleasant to Parminder. She had always hated the idea of interment, of a body lying whole under the ground, slowly rotting away, riddled with maggots and flies. The Sikh way was to cremate and to scatter the ashes in running water.

She let her eyes wander up and down the hanging garments, but her saris, worn to family weddings and get-togethers back in Birmingham, seemed to call to her. What was this strange urge to don one? It felt uncharacteristically exhibitionist. She reached out to touch the folds of her favourite, dark blue and gold. She had last worn it to the Fairbrothers' New Year's party, when Barry had attempted to teach her to jive. It had been a most unsuccessful experiment, mainly because he did not know what he was doing himself; but she could remember laughing as she almost never laughed, uncontrollably, madly, the way she had seen drunk women laugh.

The sari was elegant and feminine, forgiving of middle-aged spread:

Parminder's mother, who was eighty-two, wore it daily. Parminder herself

had no need of its camouflaging properties: she was as slim as she had been at twenty. Yet she pulled out the long, dark length of soft material and held it up against her dressing gown, letting it fall to caress her bare feet, looking down its length at its subtle embroidery. To wear it would feel like a private joke between herself and Barry, like the cow-faced house and all the funny things Barry had said about Howard, as they walked away from interminable, ill-humoured council meetings.

There was a terrible weight on Parminder's chest, but did not the Guru Granth Sahib exhort friends and relatives of the dead not to show grief, but to celebrate their loved one's reunion with God? In an effort to keep traitorous tears at bay, Parminder silently intoned the night-time prayer, the kirtan sohila.

My friend, I urge you that this is the opportune time to serve the saints.

Earn divine profit in this world and live in peace and comfort in the next.

Life is shortening day and night.

O mind, meet the Guru and set right your affairs ...

Lying on her bed in her dark room, Sukhvinder could hear what every member of her family was doing. There was the distant murmur of the television directly below her, punctuated by the muffled laughter of her brother and her father, who were watching a Friday-night comedy show. She could make out her elder sister's voice across the landing, talking on her mobile to one of her many friends. Nearest of all was her mother, clunking and scraping in the built-in wardrobe on the other side of the wall.

Sukhvinder had drawn the curtains over her window and placed a draught excluder, shaped like a long sausage dog, along the bottom of her door. In the absence of a lock, the dog impeded the door's progress; it gave her warning. She was sure that nobody would come in, though. She was where she ought to be, doing what she ought to be doing. Or so they thought.

She had just performed one of her dreadful daily rituals: the opening of her Facebook page, and the removal of another post from a sender she did not know. As often as she blocked the person bombarding her with these messages, they changed their profile and sent more. She never knew when one would appear. Today's had been a black and white image, a copy of a nineteenth-century circus poster.

La Veritable Femme a Barbe, Miss Anne Jones Elliot.

It showed the photograph of a woman in a lacy dress, with long dark hair and a luxuriant beard and moustache.

She was convinced that it was Fats Wall who was sending them, although it might have been somebody else. Dane Tully and his friends, for instance, who made soft, grunting ape-like noises whenever she spoke in English. They would have done it to anybody of her colour; there were hardly any brown faces at Winterdown. It made her feel humiliated and stupid, especially as Mr Garry never told them off. He affected not to hear them, or else to hear only background chatter. Perhaps he, too, thought that Sukhvinder Kaur Jawanda was an ape, a hairy ape.

Sukhvinder lay on her back on top of her covers and wished with all of her being that she was dead. If she could have achieved suicide, simply by willing it, she would have done it without hesitation. Death had come to Mr Fairbrother; why could it not happen to her? Better yet, why could they not swap places? Niamh and Siobhan could have their father back, and she, Sukhvinder, could simply slip into non-being: wiped out, wiped clean.

Her self-disgust was like a nettle suit; every part of her prickled and burnt with it. She had to will herself, moment by moment, to endure, to remain stationary; not to rush to do the one and only thing that helped. The whole family had to be in bed before she acted. But it was agony to lie like this, listening to her own breathing, conscious of the useless weight of her own ugly and disgusting body on the bed. She liked to think of drowning, of sinking down into cool green water, and feeling herself slowly pressed into nothingness ...

The great hermaphrodite sits quiet and still ...

Shame ran down her body like a burning rash as she lay in the darkness. She had never heard the word before Fats Wall spoke it in maths on Wednesday. She would not have been able to look it up: she was dyslexic. But he had been kind enough to explain what it meant, so there was no need.

The hairy man-woman ...

He was worse than Dane Tully, whose taunts had no variety. Fats Wall's evil tongue fashioned a fresh, tailor-made torture every time he saw her, and she could not shut her ears. His every insult and jibe was branded on

Sukhvinder's memory, sticking there as no useful fact had ever done. If she could have been examined on the things he had called her, she would have achieved the first A grade of her life. Tash 'N' Tits. Hermaphrodite. The Bearded Dumb-bell.

Hairy, heavy and stupid. Plain and clumsy. Lazy, according to her mother, whose criticism and exasperation rained down upon her daily. A bit slow, according to her father, who said it with an affection that did not mitigate his lack of interest. He could afford to be nice about her bad grades. He had Jaswant and Rajpal, both top of every class they took.

'Poor old Jolly,' Vikram would say carelessly, after glancing through her report.

But her father's indifference was preferable to her mother's anger. Parminder did not seem able to comprehend or accept that she had produced a child who was not gifted. If any of the subject teachers made the slightest hint that Sukhvinder might try harder, Parminder seized upon it in triumph.

" Sukhvinder is easily discouraged and needs to have more faith in her abilities." There! You see? Yourteacheris saying you don't try hard enough, Sukhvinder.'

Of the only class in which Sukhvinder had reached the second set, computing - Fats Wall was not there, so she sometimes dared put up her hand to answer questions - Parminder said dismissively, 'The amount of time you children spend on the internet, I'm surprised you're not in set one.'

Never would it have occurred to Sukhvinder to tell either of her parents about the ape grunts or about Stuart Wall's endless stream of malice. It would mean confessing that people beyond the family also saw her as sub-standard and worthless. In any case, Parminder was friends with Stuart Wall's mother. Sukhvinder sometimes wondered why Stuart Wall did not worry about their mothers' connection, but concluded that he knew that she would not give him away. He saw through her. He saw her cowardice, as he knew her every worst thought about herself, and was able to articulate it for the amusement of Andrew Price. She had fancied Andrew Price once, before she realized that she was utterly unfit to fancy anyone; before she realized that she was laughable and strange.

Sukhvinder heard her father's voice and Rajpal's, growing louder as they came up the stairs. Rajpal's laughter reached a crescendo right outside her door.

'It's late,' she heard her mother call from her bedroom. 'Vikram, he should be in bed.'

Vikram's voice came through Sukhvinder's door, close by, loud and warm.

'Are you asleep already, Jolly?'

It was her childhood nickname, bestowed in irony. Jaswant had been Jazzy, and Sukhvinder, a grizzling, unhappy baby, rarely smiling, had become Jolly.

'No,' Sukhvinder called back. 'I've only just gone to bed.'

'Well, it might interest you to know that your brother, here - '

But what Rajpal had done was lost in his shouting protests, his laughter; she heard Vikram moving away, still teasing Rajpal.

Sukhvinder waited for the house to fall silent. She clung to the prospect of her only consolation, as she would have hugged a life-belt, waiting, waiting, for them all to go to bed ...

(And as she waited, she remembered that evening not long ago, at the end of rowing training, when they had been walking through the darkness towards the car park by the canal. You were so tired after rowing. Your arms and your stomach muscles ached, but it was a good clean pain. She always slept properly after rowing. And then Krystal, bringing up the rear of the group with Sukhvinder, had called her a silly Paki bitch.

It had come out of nowhere. They had all been messing around with Mr Fairbrother. Krystal thought she was being funny. She used 'fucking' interchangeably with 'very', and seemed to see no difference between them. Now she said 'Paki' as she would have said 'dozy' or 'dim'. Sukhvinder was conscious of her face falling, and experienced the familiar sliding, scalding sensation in her stomach.

'What did you say?'

Mr Fairbrother had wheeled around to face Krystal. None of them had ever heard him properly angry before.

'I di'n mean nuthin',' said Krystal, half taken aback, half defiant. 'I was on'y jokin'. She knows I was jus' jokin'. Don' yeh?' she demanded of Sukhvinder, who muttered cravenly that she knew it was a joke.

'I never want to hear you use that word again.'

They all knew how much he liked Krystal. They all knew he had paid for her to go on a couple of their trips out of his own pocket. Nobody laughed louder than Mr Fairbrother at Krystal's jokes; she could be very funny.

They walked on, and everybody was embarrassed. Sukhvinder was afraid to look at Krystal; she felt guilty, as she always did.

They were approaching the people-carrier when Krystal said, so quietly that even Mr Fairbrother did not hear it: 'I wuz jokin'.'

And Sukhvinder said quickly, 'I know.'

'Yeah, well. S'ry.'

It came out as a mangled monosyllable, and Sukhvinder thought it tactful not to acknowledge it. Nevertheless, it cleaned her out. It restored her dignity. On the way back to Pagford, she initiated, for the first time ever, the singing of the team's lucky song, asking Krystal to start with Jay-Z's rap.)

Slowly, very slowly, her family seemed to be putting themselves to bed at last. Jaswant spent a long time in the bathroom, clinking and crashing around. Sukhvinder waited until Jaz had finished primping herself, until her parents had stopped talking in their room, for the house to fall silent.

Then, at last, it was safe. She sat up and pulled the razor blade out from a hole in the ear of her old cuddly rabbit. She had stolen the blade from Vikram's store in the bathroom cabinet. She got off the bed and groped for the torch on her shelf, and a handful of tissues, then moved into the furthest

part of her room, into the little round turret in the corner. Here, she knew, the torch's light would be confined, and would not show around the edges of the door. She sat down with her back against the wall, pushed up the sleeve of her nightshirt and examined by torchlight the marks left by her last session, still visible, criss-crossed and dark on her arm, but healing. With a slight shiver of fear that was a blessed relief in its narrow, immediate focus, she placed the blade halfway up her forearm and sliced into her own flesh.

Sharp, hot pain and the blood came at once; when she had cut herself right up to her elbow she pressed the wad of tissues onto the long wound, making sure nothing leaked onto her nightshirt or the carpet. After a minute or two, she cut again, horizontally, across the first incision, making a ladder, pausing to press and to mop as she went. The blade drew the pain away from her screaming thoughts and transmuted it into animal burning of nerves and skin: relief and release in every cut.

At last she wiped the blade clean and surveyed the mess she had made; the wounds intersecting, bleeding, hurting so much that tears were rolling down her face. She might sleep if the pain did not keep her awake; but she must wait for ten or twenty minutes, until the fresh cuts had clotted over. She sat with her knees drawn up, closed her wet eyes, and leaned against the wall beneath the window.

Some of her self-hatred had oozed out with the blood. Her mind drifted away to Gaia Bawden, the new girl, who had taken such an unaccountable fancy to her. Gaia could have hung out with anyone, with her looks and that London accent, yet she kept seeking out Sukhvinder at lunchtimes and on the bus.

Sukhvinder did not understand it. She almost wanted to ask Gaia what she thought she was playing at; day by day she expected the new girl to realize that she, Sukhvinder, was hairy and ape-like, slow and stupid, someone to be despised and grunted at and insulted. No doubt she would recognize her mistake soon, and Sukhvinder would be left, as usual, to the bored pity of her oldest friends, the Fairbrother twins.