LIFE WRITING PRIZE

Finding My Way Home
by Farhana Shaikh

I am split down the middle

Torn in two

Neither Indian nor Pakistani

British, born

I am forever a foreigner

At home and in my homeland

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I was born in Leicester in 1982 but growing up, it never felt like a place where I belonged, or one I could call home. My mum's family is from Pakistan, but they settled in Leicester in the 1960s, when my mum was just two years old. My dad is from India. He arrived in the city in his twenties to marry my mum. As a child I used to wonder whether this made me half Indian and half Pakistani, and if that was the case, how much of me was British. In the end, I decided I was only a quarter Indian, a quarter Pakistani and half British. For a long time I had this notion that I didn't fit anywhere, like a misplaced jigsaw piece, I was bent out of shape. I wonder now, whether it's a writer's natural habitat to be homeless, so they can move in and out of worlds, and inhabit places like squatters, or whether it is the rootless that find their home by writing.

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I wish that the story of my birth was glorious, peppered with minute details, but in my mother's diary entry under February 20th, she has simply written in the top right hand corner, in capital letters 'XXXXXXX BORN 6.40pm'. I realise that my mother owning a diary and keeping it since 1982 should be a cause of celebration. She hasn't any other diaries, of two years earlier when my sister was born, or of 1977, when she gave birth to her first child, my eldest brother. Perhaps she thought, pregnant with her third child (me) she needed to organise herself and I suspect that by 1984 with four children, she really couldn't have managed diary-keeping.

The diary offers a fascinating insight into my mother's life, more than thirty years ago. It tells me that in the week of my birth, she spent 42p on a pair of glasses for my brother (I am assuming even though it was February that these were sunglasses. my mother is the optimistic-type) and 60p on a book. She spent 88p on cream cakes, £6.55 on spices, and £10.40 on fabric from Saki Fashions. My mother has always been extravagant! The recipe of the week is a Pizza Neapolitan though I doubt my mother ever attempted to cook it that week or any other; her repertoire is strictly placed in Indian cookery. It may however explain why I have always had an affinity with the Italians.

Growing up, I pestered my mum to fill in the details of the day I was born, and she has (quite patiently) told me different versions of the story over the years, depending on what she's cooking. From these fragments I have pieced together a version of my own, as though I were a seamstress making an evening gown from scraps of fabric. I know I was born in the evening that Saturday. My father wasn't in attendance at the Leicester General Hospital. He was too busy watching the football. My grandparents and my aunt were among my first visitors, the latter of whom cried throughout the visit regretting that I had been born a girl, and dark skinned at that. When my father

finally did see me, he apparently fell in love, which is perhaps the truth, or some sort of consolation, I'll never know.

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It seems perfectly apt, that as a half British, quarter Pakistani, quarter Indian and third child, that Leicester would not only be my place of birth but my home. It is a place that is neither north nor south but somewhere in between. It too, is the forgotten middle child. It's inconsequential, and often invisible. It's the ugly sister of Nottingham and Derby. Even our family in India and Pakistan only ever refer to it as London.

What you need to know about Leicester is, it's the sort of place where people aren't in a hurry to get anywhere. Even at the bus stop, you'll find people waiting for ages, and when the bus arrives, they'll let others go on before them, as if they haven't decided they want to take that route. The people of Leicester may know exactly where they're heading, but they aren't in a rush to get there. Leicester is a forty-year-old that doesn't drink or smoke and wouldn't take drugs. It's rarely invited to parties, but when it is, it sits in the corner sipping on a glass of water, refusing to make eye contact with anyone.

Growing up, I always felt like life was happening elsewhere and as soon as I was old enough I was plotting an escape. Since the remains of Richard III were found in a car park, and its football team won the Premiership, Leicester's story is being rewritten. The world's media attended Richard III re-interment. More than a quarter of million people turned up to Leicester City's Premiership parade. It meant more to the city's people than anyone had imagined. Temporarily, the people of Leicester dreamed the impossible and came out triumphant. Today Leicester has returned to being, quiet and unassuming. Even our moment of glory feels like a dream, a shooting star; a glimmer. If you blinked, you'll have missed it.

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Growing up in the city in the 1980s and being born into a working class family – my mother, a housewife, and my father a self-employed builder – meant that my experiences of the outside world were severely limited. Besides a few trips to visit family in Coventry and Manchester, I spent most of my childhood at home. Much of my early life was constrained to the family home, school and mosque. The neighbourhood where we lived felt like the centre of the universe.

The street I grew up on was made up of rows of terraced houses built by local architect, Arthur Wakerley. The houses were originally built for people who worked in the nearby shoe factories. When we learnt about Wakerley being this important man in primary school, I felt a burst of pride and thought my dad was pretty special too! Wakerley had four daughters, Margaret, Linden, Constance and Dorothy and all the conjoining roads are named after one of them. We lived on Constance Road, which is the longest of them all.

Our community made up of lots of different cultures and backgrounds. Betty, our lollipop lady, lived just across the road. She was our hero. Our neighbour, Dasha Aunty, was Panjabi. She wasn't my real aunty. Most of the people I called uncle and aunt were just friends that had become part of my family. They were always coming and going, borrowing spices, rice or onions. Most of the houses on our road had a concrete strip for a garden, so we'd spill out on to the streets and into each other's lives.

By the late 1980's most of the shoe factories had closed and clothing manufacturers took their place. Most of the women in my family have at some point in their life worked in one of nearby factories doing piecework, CT and overlocking. It's not surprising to me that my mother, my aunt and grandmother have all worked with

fabric and stitches; they are all strong women, good at holding things in and together.

The only benefit of living near these huge buildings that dominated our lives was that we were sandwiched between an ice-cream factory at the top of the road and one surviving shoe factory in the middle. It meant that we could buy things we couldn't have otherwise afforded at a discount. Every summer, until the early 90s we would spend hours in the shoe factory, ogling boots, before picking up a pair of sensible black shoes for school.

The first house I ever lived in was so glorious that I still dream about it. It was a double fronted corner terrace with a green door. There's something about living on the corner of two roads that means you are in a unique position: you live on the edge of things, able to see both sides. The house had two huge reception rooms, a tiny kitchen and a downstairs bathroom, which my father had extended. My father kept one of the downstairs rooms for his office, a space we were forbidden to enter. We spent most of our time in the living room, which was home to a television, three piece sofa and a sideboard. In one corner of the room my father had built in some shelving for us to put our belongings. The space was divided into six, one for each of us and we kept them in pristine condition, putting everything from our piggy banks, to our reading books in them. The pantry was where my mother kept her chapatti flour, spices and rice. It made for a good hiding space when we played hide and seek.

Upstairs, there were three bedrooms, but we only ever used two of them. My parents slept in the front bedroom, and along the long corridor, my siblings and I shared the back bedroom. There was no space in our bedroom for anything except two beds, a bunk and one double, and a single chest of drawers on which we placed all our board games. I remember counting the games, from Operation to Guess Who and my brother singing Shammi Kapoor songs until we fell asleep. The third bedroom

was used as a store cupboard, for suitcases, an abandoned wardrobe and the fabrics my mother had collected over the years.

When I was eight years old, we moved across the road to Poplar Cottage in 1990, a house that my father had fully renovated. I remember people coming to visit our house just to look inside. It was a marvel. It had taken my father years to do up. Inside he had broken the wall between the living room and dining room, and built a wooden staircase that now divided up the space. The kitchen was no longer a tiny strip that we had to squeeze past each other but the centre of the house, with a proper dining table. The garden had a patch of grass and wild flowers that touched the sky. There were four bedrooms and a library. I remember my heart sinking when he broke the news that I still had to share a bedroom with my sister. I wanted a room of my own.

The library was my favourite part of the new house. Even though mum and dad never cared for reading, we owned a wonderful selection of Ladybird books, Roald Dahl's entire collection, a compendium of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, and the entire Britannica Encyclopaedia. The latter was bought as a gift to us children in the hope that we did something important, something that mattered. I was not old enough yet to handle those gold-gilded wafer thin pages, but I was quite content to re-read fairy tales, limericks and Matilda. With my thick, long black hair, I dreamed about the day, when Rapunzel-like I would throw down my hair and leave. Books were my safe haven from an outside world that often felt alien to me, hostile even. I struggled to understand people. The books I read, opened me up to other places, and allowed me to have adventures I couldn't otherwise go on. The more I read, the more I learned how to navigate the world and my place in it.

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The Leicester of my childhood was divisive and fragmented. Even the Muslim community was deeply divided between Pakistani Muslims and Indian Muslims. I didn't know what to say when people asked me if I was Indian or Pakistani. Wherever I went, I was afraid of being found out, or ousted as a fraud. In the predominantly Gujarati Muslim community, my siblings and I were treated as outsiders, and made to feel unwelcome. Our presence was a problem. At madrasah we were turned away for not speaking the 'right' language.

At home, we spoke a mix of broken Hindi, Urdu and English. It was a cut and paste language of our own making. When we didn't know the Hindi word, we simply replaced it with an English word that we did know. Some words were borrowed from Gujarati, others from Urdu. My parents weren't strict about us learning or speaking our mother's tongue so by the time we were teenagers we spoke entirely in English, dropping the Hindi/Urdu mix altogether.

I remember, one year my mother insisted that my sister and I attend Gujarati lessons, which was her attempt to make us fit in. Every week, after school, we began learning the alphabet and could recite a few words. I even learnt how to write my name. I can still remember how to do it today. One day when my father came home and saw us working on a project set by the class teacher he insisted we mustn't go to classes again. The project was to draw and colour depictions of Hindu gods. We never went back. In some respects my parents, especially my mother, may have spoilt us out of some misplaced guilt. Our home was a treasure trove of board games, books and consoles. We had every computer console going from the Atari 400 to Atari 800s (two) and an ST. We escaped into new worlds of our own making, away from the real world that didn't seem to want us, or that had deemed us unsuitable.

Despite these treasures, day to day life was mundane. Like clockwork, we did the same thing every day. We woke up, went to school, ate lunch, went to mosque, ate, came home, ate, and went to bed. Then we would wake up and do the same thing all over again. In the evenings, my sister and I were often summoned into the kitchen where my mother was always too busy cooking to stop, slow down and teach us anything; stirring spices into large pots, saving curdled yoghurt with yet more yoghurt and saving a pan of onions from burning. Her efforts weren't always successful. Mostly we learnt by watching and as we grew older we were given set tasks to do each night. My chore was to sweep the floor like Cinderella. I hated chores, more so, because as I got older I began to question why my brothers didn't have any. I couldn't bear the injustice, the double standards. But mum wasn't having any of it. 'Your brother hoovers every week, and your younger brother is just a baby,' she would say. It never really seemed fair.

My sister was much more understanding.

'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'We can make the most of being in the kitchen. We can have milkshakes just like the ones in McDonalds.' She would whip up two milkshakes, putting in the straws which helped to bring out the magic and made me instantly better.

The weekends were the worst. They were so boring! I longed to go on holiday or to a restaurant to eat out or even Spinney Hill Park which was practically on our doorstep. But if I mentioned any of this, my mother would say I should have been born into royalty. In the confines of our terraced house I never felt as small as I was. I was tiny, at under five foot two, but at home I felt like I could fill up the room. My parents often told me off for being too chatty. My father repeated this phrase in Hindi 'If your mouth was made of wood, it would have long been broken.' As I got older, I just said it before he did.

I soon learnt to keep shtum.

Besides school, the other thing I really looked forward to as a child was every Friday, when my mother would take us to buy sweets. We walked a few streets away to the green shop, which sold nothing but sweets. Mr Patel, stood behind the counter, and appeared nothing like Willy Wonka. He had a very serious face. The shop had rows and rows of jars on different coloured, shapes and sizes of sweets from pearl drops, to spaceships which were filled with sherbert and melted on your tongue. There were cola cubes and jelly beans of all different flavours and my mother's favourite, dolly mixture. The only thing my father had banned us from eating was chewing gum. My mother allowed us to by a quarter bag each. I remember my mother hurrying me to make a decision, and when I did, I instantly regretted my choice, wishing I'd bought something else instead.

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As I got older, I allowed my mind to dream and my imagination to spark. While my family sat and watched movies and shared a can of Coke, I sat with my notebook and pen in hand. I didn't always write, but I kept my pen and notebook close by just in case. When an idea popped into my head I wrote it down. I realised that writing helped me figure out my thoughts, helped me to make sense of the world. Ever since Allan Ahlberg, of *Please Mrs Butler* fame, had come into school for an assembly I had realised that the books I read were written by real people, and you could write as a job. I'm not sure who I thought wrote them before that! Once I knew writing was a thing, I decided I wanted to be a poet.

As soon as I was old enough to understand how the postal system worked I wrote letters, entered competitions. My desire to escape grew like the dandelions through the cracks in our now slabbed-up garden (my father claimed that the grass was a

nuisance, and the flowers were just weeds). The feeling of wanting to get away was something I couldn't shake off. Although I can't quite remember, this would also be the time I had my first crush. I had spent hours watching the TV series, Superman and Dean Cain as Clark Kent was my idea of the perfect man. I figured out that because I liked writing, I could be just like Lois Lane, and that way, I would find my Superman. I had everything planned out. I would marry Superman and together we would fly anywhere, leaving this dull city behind. I planned to work at my local paper, the Leicester Mercury, before landing my dream job at the BBC. It was always my dream to leave the city for London so it's strange to think of myself as someone who has never quite left home.

Thinking back, I'm not sure if I would have been at all bothered by Leicester, if it we didn't seem to share so much of our history with the ill-fated, the freaks and the hopeless. It's no surprise that with such ghosts among us, the city and those in it, seemed plagued by a chronic self-esteem issue. School trips to local museums and parks taught us the stories of Leicester's people. One of the earliest memories I have is of seeing Daniel Lambert sitting in the corner of Newarke Houses Museum wearing a bright red coat and our teacher explaining that he was once the world's fattest man. At fifty-two stone, our teachers warned us that this too would become our fate, if we ate junk food. One year, we visited the beautiful deer-showered grounds of Bradgate Park to see the ruins of Lady Jane Grey's house. The ill-fated queen's reign only lasted a mere nine days before she was executed. Lady Jane Grey never wanted to be queen, we were told, and her death served as a reminder of the consequences of getting in the way of someone else's ambition. The most memorable of these trips was the one we took in Year 6 when we went across Bow Bridge and were told that Richard III's head was cut off during the Battle of Bosworth and thrown into the River Soar by troops on the way back to London. At Bosworth

Battlefield we watched the re-enactment, willing Richard III to be defeated. We had no reason to believe anything but that Richard III was the epitome of all things wicked. Then of course, there was the man who nobody really talked about: Joseph Merrick aka The Elephant Man.

These stories were not limited to the classroom. At home, my dad told us about Eddie the Eagle, a skier so terrible that he won over fans. My dad explained that Eddie was popular because he was so bad at skiing. In the story I told myself back then, Eddie got better and won a medal, but the truth is, nothing of the sort ever happened. It's no wonder that by the time I was eleven I had pinned my hopes on my lush black hair and my brain to save me. The thought of being well known for being shit at something seemed utterly ridiculous.

Back then, Leicester felt as close to loser town as you could get. The only time I remember, Leicester being mentioned on telly was in EastEnders. It was the place the Indian family ran away to when their business failed, they were made bankrupt and they were keeping their heads down. All of this fed my woeful artist. How was I ever going to be a writer when there was nothing ever to write about? I looked out of my window longingly at night wishing upon a star. I blamed God for not sending me a story. I blamed my mum for never taking us out (I'll be grey haired before I get out). I blamed my dad for never being home.

At times there were glimpses of hope, a trail of breadcrumbs that hinted at excitement; a visit from the Queen, a new building, but nothing to really get my creative juices flowing.

There were the occasional success stories, names which I clung on to as hope and proof that not everything about the place was rubbish. Gary Lineker was a legend, and he'd studied at the same secondary school as my older siblings. Proof. There

was also Peter Shilton, one of England's best goalies ever. Proof. There was Thomas Cook, a traveller and businessman who had set up holiday tours. Proof. Engelbert Humperdinck, singer. Proof. Later there was chart success for Mark Morrison with 'Return of the Mack', and Cornershop, but these were considered one-hit wonders, or freak successes, unlikely to translate into anything more.

The other good thing about Leicester was, what it wasn't. It wasn't Coventry, which had been bombed during the Blitz. They only seemed famous for Lady Godiva, who once travelled through the city naked. We spent summers with our great aunt in Coventry, and the only thing they seemed to have going for them was a decent video shop. It wasn't Birmingham, where people had a strong, thick accent. We visited our aunt who lived in a high-rise tower block in West Bromwich. Even though it was made of concrete blocks and had great views of the city, it felt unsafe. I didn't ever wish to sleep over. It wasn't *proper* London, which was dangerous and expensive. We only ever made it to Heathrow.

I should take a moment to say that I wasn't the only writer to make an entrance from Leicester in 1982 with a dream to become a writer and work for the BBC. Adrian Mole also made his first appearance during that year. I didn't know of Adrian Mole or Sue Townsend until I was much older. I remember my brother giggling into his book, and if I ever dared to get close, he would say, 'You're too little to read it.' I was in Year 6 and my reading was the best in the class, aged thirteen and a half. Even so, my brother, who was about fifteen at the time, simply said: 'You might be able to read the words but you won't understand it.'

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Despite me wanting to escape and have adventures, I spent much of my early life indoors, or playing in the Blind Society carpark which happened to be two doors

away. Tucked away in the corner of my bedroom, which my sister had plastered with posters of dolphins (much to my annoyance), I would practice reporting the weather for the BBC. When my brother received a telly for his birthday he gave us the 6 inch telly/radio/cassette player. I thought it was the best thing ever. I could play music and record myself singing (I can't sing a tune). I could tune into different radio stations, which felt like spying on people (I spent a large part of my childhood watching episodes of Columbo) and occasionally watch TV. Outdoors, we had our own gang made up of our neighbours and used to play football in the Blind Society carpark, until the ball went over and we'd have to slide under the gate to retrieve the ball, ignoring all the signs telling us that 'Trespassers will be prosecuted.' I'm not sure if we knew what either word meant. We played seven stones, which I'm not sure I remember the rules for, and when we were particularly mischievous we played knock, door, run.

On the odd occasion when we stepped away from our small community, my sister and I felt out of place, awkward even. Going into town felt like a big deal. A visit to Bruciannis and the Christmas sales at Lewis's often filled me with worry that I would be lost or abandoned. My mother told us about the time my father nearly lost my sister in the store. After Lewis's closed we rarely made the trip, except to buy shoes from Clarks or to visit Fenwicks. Occasionally we visited the market, which was considered to have the best fruit and veg. I hated it. People were loud and pushed you. It stank. One day, bird poo landed on me or my sister's jacket (I can't remember which). I don't think either of us ever recovered from the embarrassment.

It wasn't until secondary school that I began to notice that I was a minority. The school was in a more affluent area of Evington but the demographic of its students was mixed. It was the first time I met people who lived very different lives to my own; people who lived in detached houses and went on holiday abroad every summer.

And although I had sat on a plane, I could hardly remember it. For the first time, I found myself embarrassed that my father was a builder. I refused to let him drop me off outside the school gates in his ugly white estate. He relented and agreed to drop me off at the traffic lights instead.

That year, in 1993, there were more big changes to contend with. My mum finished university and got a degree, which I knew was an amazing achievement because everyone kept telling her ‘I don’t know how you did it with four kids.’ Just as my mum’s career took off, my dad’s business went through an unexpected quiet period. My parents’ switched roles, my dad stayed at home and looked after us, and my mum went out to work.

Even though I didn’t admit it at the time, I much preferred my dad’s company. As an artist, my father used to spend hours painting. He played Scrabble too, if you can call chunking three letter words, playing. We would spend hours the on computer, playing adventure games, Pacman and the one where you had to type in swear words and the computer would swear back. We played Steeplejack and Championship Manager.

When we we’re fed up we headed back downstairs to watch *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*. These soaps filled me with a craving for the beach. It wasn’t long before I too wished for holidays abroad, or a trip to the seaside. At home, I felt stuck in one place. To die in the city of my birth seemed a great tragedy.

One year my dad caved in to my nagging to take us to Skegness. Leicester and Skegness have a weird connection. In the summer families head to Skegness. So many families visit, that Skegness has even named the people of Leicester as ‘Chisits’ because visitors from the city would always ask ‘How much is it?’ My dad didn’t take us to Skegness. Instead he drove us to Hunstanton. I’m not sure why.

That’s just like him. He likes to make up the rules. I didn’t care much as long as there was a beach.

When we set off that day we weren’t aware of the rule, never to travel on a bank holiday. We put on our seat belts with wide smiles, with all the promise of the seaside. I dreamt of beach walks along the sea, the sun setting in the distance. This romantic ideal was destroyed as soon as we hit the A47. We were stuck bumper to bumper for hours, my little brother was travel sick. My dad was miserable because he didn’t really want to go and my mother was worried about whether the food in the boot would survive the trip. I don’t remember anything at all about the beach, and there’s no family photos of the trip either to help jog my memory. All I know is my first adventure left me wanting more.