

Mr Pal's Retreat

by Courttia Newland

Many years later, Mr Pal sits on the curb of Whitechapel Road, his legs wide open and his hands limp between them, staring into the gutter. Rafi sees him first. He pulls at my shoulder. I hardly recognise him, then I do.

We go over, crouching beside him. He's muttering or singing something I can't hear. His trainers are worn and black, split at the front like an open mouth. His suit, which was always neat, is torn at the left sleeve and his white shirt is black with grime, billowing in the breeze of passing traffic. We speak to him, and each other, in Bengali. I'm not sure he recognises us anymore, as there's nothing in his eyes, but he talks back in return, saying something about retreating. We don't know what he means by that. Rafi suggests we lift him. He's the oldest, and I'm used to doing what he says, so I shrug and say 'Sure.' We tell him what we're about to do and make good on our promise. He's light, all bones and cotton. It feels as though he hasn't had a good meal for months.

He leans on us all the way to his home, gives us the keys and we let him in. Going upstairs he stops and stiffens, pulling against us as if he wants to go back on the street. We resist him, and it's a tug of war until Rafi opens his flat. The stink's terrible. Old rubbish, mouldy food, unwashed old man. Mr Pal gives up then, it's almost like the smell sedates him. We lift him the rest of the way, and deposit him on the sofa. Rafi turns on the spot, looking at the wall.

'Jesus,' he says, which is unusual for my brother. He doesn't take deity's names in vain, even when they're not ours. I'm keeping an eye on Mr Pal in case he makes another break for it, so at first I don't see where he's looking. When Rafi doesn't speak again, I clock it as the second weird thing he's done in as many minutes. I check on him too, and see why.

Mr Pal didn't bring much from Bangladesh, but the thing I always remember is the photo of his mum hanging above the electric fireplace. It's pretty big, and it was actually me who helped him to frame it when we found the print amongst his things, just after I really got into photography myself. It's one of those old sepia tinted ones, and must have cost a bomb at the time. She's sitting on an unseen chair, looking into camera wearing a sari with her head covered, and it must have been taken when he was young because I

have to say she looks beautiful. I dunno if it's the colour enhancement or the way she always was, because her eyes are bright hazel, and a really nice shape. They don't look alike at all, apart from something in the twist of her mouth, but Mrs Pal's smiling and Mr Pal hardly does that type of thing.

That's how it used to look anyway, has done for years. Only now, half of the photo and Mrs Pal with it have faded into some inky, black kind of fog that obscures the left side of her face, and everything else on that side with it.

Mr Pal rocks on the sofa. 'Retreating,' he says, pointing at his mum. 'All retreating.'

Rafi asks what happened, but that's all Mr Pal says. Retreating, retreating. His English had got better since we were kids, so it's a shame to see him regress to the Mr Pal we knew way back when. Rafi makes that whistle noise you use to say someone's cuckoo. I frown at him; that isn't fair. I get up to take a closer look at the photo, and there's smaller ones lining the mantel, these landscape colour snapshots like you used to get from the pharmacy. Old school. Grinning kids, an upright family, a young girl caught mid-cartwheel, kicking village dust.

Except each one's obscured by that fogged, fading blackness, like Polaroids in reverse. Instead of developing these pictures are dissolving, retracting into a misty, unreadable past.

'Retreating!' Mr Pal says, seeing my face. 'All retreating!'

He shuffles out of the room, so slow we don't stop him. The sound of rummaging comes from a back room. When he returns, Mr Pal is holding blossoming sheets of crumpled paper. He gives them all to me. They're yellowed, lined, and filled with scrawling handwriting; the ink's deep blue like sailors' tattoos. Or so it seems. When I look closer I see the writing's also fading, leaving half words and blank lines, exactly as they were before they'd been scrawled on. I look at Rafi. He gapes.

'Shit,' he says.

'Exactly!' Mr Pal screeches, laughing as if it's all a big joke.

We sit on the sofa in a row. Me, Mr Pal, and Rafi. We spread the colour photos on the coffee table together with the letters, trying to work out what's going on. Mr Pal explains in Bengali. It started happening recently, he says.

First he couldn't say whether he had a grown up niece, or a nephew. Then he couldn't remember his mother's name. Then the house he was born in, or the village he grew up in, or the country he'd left to come to England. All of it had faded and retreated from him. When they'd disappeared, it began happening to the things he'd brought over from Bangladesh too.

Rafi looks at me. I look at Rafi. To be honest we don't know what to say. My bro takes Mr Pal's left hand. I take his right. He begins to cry, his thin shoulders shaking with emotion, tears collecting in the crevices of his face. All we can do is gently rub his gnarled, stiffened fingers. We lie, and tell him everything's OK.