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Opening extract from

Dream On

Written by

Bali Rai

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To Liverpool FC – the team that made me fall in love with football.

And in memory of the 96 who lost their lives at Hillsborough on 15th April 1989.

You'll never walk alone.

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1. FISH AND CHIPS

"Do I have to work in the shop today?" I asked my dad.

I hated working in our fish and chip shop. It was boring and smelly. And greasy too. Loads of kids from my school came in and all I ever heard from them was, "Chips an' curry sauce, mate!"

When I was younger, it was quite funny, being asked for that all the time. But after a while, it just got on my nerves. It wasn't strictly a fish and chip shop either. My old man sold Indian-style food too – samosas and pakora and kebabs, and curries of course. For years, I thought he had the only chippy in England that was really an Indian takeaway in disguise. Until one of my uncles opened one in Birmingham.

"This is how we making our money, beteh," my old man would say to me in his own peculiar brand of English. "Those trainers you wearing were paid for by fish an' chips."

"Yeah, I know that, Dad, but I wanna go out with me mates."

"Out? Out where? I paying you money to work and do your duty to the family. I make sure that you finish your homework, and all you want is to go out. Tell me, do your friends pay you to go out? Eh?"

"Don't be silly, Dad. And anyway, I need a life outside of this place. Otherwise how am I supposed to grow up like a normal person? I'll probably turn into a battered fish before I escape from here."

My dad looked at me like I was proper crazy.

"Now who is being stupid? If you want outside life, how about school?"

"Ah, you ain't even listening, Dad. What's the point of talking to you?"

"I am listening, Baljit. Now pass me that bucket of chips and go and get some frozen samosas from your mother." Dismissed. Just like that.

I went over to the big yellow bucket into which I had thrown what felt like a million

chipped potatoes earlier, and I dragged it over to my dad. I wasn't going to pick it up. Raw chips weigh a ton. Over the counter, I saw our first customer come in. It was Mr Biggs, a pensioner who lived up the street.

I knew it would be Mr Biggs. He was always our first customer. He always wore his old brown leather shoes, and the same pair of faded brown pinstripe trousers with brown braces, and a cream-coloured shirt tucked in. This was finished off with a grey overcoat and a grey felt hat, which Mr Biggs told me was called a fedora.

I felt sorry for him. I remember when his wife died, when I was younger, and for about two months he didn't come into the shop. My old man was worried about him and asked all our neighbours if they had seen him. No one had. And then one day he was back, only he looked older and frailer, and he smelled kind of musty.

Since then, my dad only charges him for his chips on Monday, though he comes in every day. Monday's when he gets his pension. Dad thinks giving Mr Biggs free meals is a way of doing his duty as a Sikh. Part of the Sikh religion is to provide a free kitchen to those less fortunate

than you, no matter what colour or religion they are. It's called the "langar". My old man provides it for Mr Biggs and another pensioner, Mrs Benjamin, who's from Jamaica. But no one else.

"Be out of the business if I did," he always tells me.

Mr Biggs waited, like he did every day, for the first batch of chips to come out of the fryer, and he moaned to my dad about how the area we lived in seemed to have changed for the worse.

There was rubbish on the streets, he said, and cracks in the pavement and the council just didn't care. What if he caught his toe on a crack and broke his neck falling over? Who'd look after his poor wife, Elsie, then? Heh?

Then my old man reminded him that Elsie was dead. Mr Biggs nodded and looked kind of sad. They spoke some more and then Mr Biggs ordered his chips. "None of that curry sauce, mind. That's for you rag heads. I'll have a little tub of gravy, Mr Sandhu."

My old man laughed at the way Mr Biggs called us rag heads. I didn't think it was funny,

joking about turbans. But my old man told me that old dogs can't be taught new tricks, only he had a Punjabi version, which involved a long story about a lazy old water buffalo and a young herder with a big stick. He told me that Mr Biggs wasn't really a racist – he just didn't know there were some things you just didn't say.

"I would rather he calling me the rag head than smashing up my shop, beteh."

By which I think he meant that it's not words that can hurt you.

He gave Mr Biggs his food and said, "No money, please," like he always did.

"Ay, you're a good 'un. I'll have to get you a good bottle of whisky one day, Mr Sandhu." This was Mr Biggs's usual reply.

Then he turned to me and smiled. "All right, kid? How's the footy going?"

"It would be good if the old man let me out of here for once," I replied, ducking as Dad threw a greasy chip at me.

"Make a lot of money playin' football these days," Mr Biggs said. And then he turned and

walked to the door still talking. God knows who he was talking to. "Ah, course, in my day ..." he was saying.



I worked in the chip shop almost every night. But first, I'd get home from school, eat and then do two hours of homework or reading. I had to. My old man made me.

"Knowledge is power, Baljit." He believed that education would make me a better man. That and getting sweaty and smelly in a chippy.

And I wished he'd call me Jit for short. I hated my full name. But my old man would rather not speak to me at all than call me by the name all my friends used.

I'd enjoyed working in the chippy as a kid. It was like a great big adventure and my dad was the action hero. I remember seeing blokes coming in all tanked up, calling my dad all kinds of racist names, and he would just smile and take their money.

If they got really nasty he'd tell them to "leaving my shop you". Or sometimes he'd go bright red, grab the big old kebab knife from under the steel counter and go through the hatch, into the shop.

My dad is a big man and not one of those hard blokes stood their ground when he went mad. They just left, scattering their chips on the floor, curry sauce an' all.

It was when I started playing footy that working in the shop got annoying. I only had two days when Dad allowed me to play. There was after-school practice on Wednesday nights and then playing for the school team on Saturday mornings, but nothing more than that.

My two best mates, Danny and Mo, played with me for the school team. They also played Sunday League games for a local side which had really good links with the talent scouts from major clubs like Leicester City and Aston Villa. They went to more practice sessions than me and played more games. I wanted to do that too.

But my old man just told me I was stupid. "You playing one night in week and Saturday morning. That is enough, son."

"But, Dad, I wanna play more – like Mo and Danny. It's not like I'm out stealing cars and taking drugs every night! I just wanna play football."

"And I just want pay the bills, innit?"

"But how am I supposed to improve? You wouldn't complain if I ended up signing for Liverpool, would you?"

"How many Indian playing the football, beteh? They don't let us into the teams, innit."

"Only because people like you stop people like me havin' a go!" I was getting angry.

"Chadd deh, Baljit," Dad said, which means "leave it". And then he threw another chip at me. It was covered in batter and hit me in the middle of my forehead. The batter dripped down my face. Well, after that, how could I not start laughing and throw one back at him?