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Opening extract from

Just Like Tomorrow

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It's Monday and, like every Monday, I've been round at Mrs Burlaud's. Mrs Burlaud is old, ugly and she smells of Quit Nits shampoo. I'd say she's harmless, but sometimes I worry. Today she took a whole load of weird pictures out of her bottom drawer. We're talking huge stains that looked like dried sick. She asked me what they made me think of. When I told her, she stared at me with her sticky-out eyes, shaking her head like one of those toy dogs in the backs of cars.

It was school that signed me up to see her. The teachers, when they weren't on strike I mean, decided I was shut down or depressed or something and needed help. Maybe they've got a point. Who gives a shit? I go, it's free.

I guess I've been like this since my dad left. He went far away. Back to Morocco, to marry another woman who's younger and more fertile than my mum. After me, Mum couldn't have any more children. But it wasn't like she didn't try. So when I think how some girls get pregnant first time, without even meaning to . . . Dad wanted a son. For his pride, his reputation, the family honour and probably tons of other stupid reasons. But he only got one kid, a girl. Me. Let's say I didn't exactly meet customer requirements. Trouble is, it's not like at the supermarket: he couldn't get his money back. So one day, I guess Mr How-Big-Is-My-Beard realised there was no point staying with my mum and he cleared off. Just like that, no warning or anything. I was watching an episode from the fourth series of the X-Files that I'd got from the video club along from our block. The door banged. From the window, I saw a grey taxi pulling out. That's all. It's been over six months. She's probably pregnant by now, that peasant woman he's married. I know exactly what happens next: seven days after the birth, they'll invite the whole village to the baptism ceremony. A band of old sheiks'll come over specially with their camel-hide drums. It'll cost him a fortune - all his worker's pension from Renault. And then they'll slit the throat of some big fat sheep, to give the baby its name. It'll be Mohammed. Ten to one.

When Mrs Burlaud asks me if I miss my dad, I say 'no', but she doesn't believe me. For an old lady she's got her eye on the ball. Whatever, it's no big deal, my mum's here. Well, when I say here, we're talking physically. Because in her head she's somewhere else you get me, like even further away than my dad.

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Ramadan started just over a week ago. I got Mum to sign a slip to say I wouldn't be eating in the school canteen this term. When I gave it to the Head, he asked if I was taking him for a complete and total idiot? The Head's called Mr Loiseau. He's fat, he's stupid, and when he opens his mouth it smells of cheap wine, plus he smokes a pipe. At the end of the school day, his big sister picks him up from the main gates in a red Skoda. So he's kind of got a credibility problem when he wants to make out he's boss.

Anyway, Mr Loiseau asked me if I was taking him for a complete and total idiot because he thought I'd signed that slip instead of my mum. How stupid is that? If I'd wanted to fake her signature, I'd of written her name. Mum had just done this squiggle. She's not used to holding a biro. Bet that didn't even occur to Mr Brain-Dead-Head. He's one of those people who thinks illiteracy is like AIDS. It only happens in Africa.

Mum hasn't been working for long. She cleans at the Formula 1 Motel in Bagnolet - while she's waiting to find something else. Soon I hope. Sometimes, when she gets home late, she cries. She says it's from feeling so tired. It's worse during Ramadan, because when it's time to break the fast, around 5.30, she's still at work. So if she wants to eat, she has to hide some dried dates in her overall. She's even sewn an inside pocket to avoid attention, because if her boss saw her he'd give her a blasting.

Everyone calls her 'Fatima' at the Formula 1 in Bagnolet. They're always shouting at her, and they keep a close eye on her to check she doesn't jack anything from the bedrooms.

But Mum's name isn't Fatima, it's Yasmina. I guess Mr Schmidt must think it's so funny to call all the Arabs 'Fatima', all the blacks 'Mamadou' and all the Chinese 'Ping-Pong'. Stupid bloody foreigners.

Mr Schmidt's her supervisor. He's from the Alsace region. Sometimes, I wish he'd go rot in a basement and get eaten alive by rats. When I talk like that, Mum gives me a hard time. She says you shouldn't wish death on anybody, not even your worst enemy. One day, he was so rude to her she came home and cried her eyes out. Last time I saw someone crying that hard was when Myriam peed her pants on the school skiing trip. That bastard Schmidt thought Mum was disrespecting him because, with her accent, she pronounces his name Shit.

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