WHEN SECRETS SET SAIL

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Orion

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For my mum and dad – nurse Freda Brahmachari and the late Dr Brahmachari – and all the millions of people from around the world who have given their lives to working in the National Health Service and social care. Your and your ancestors' lives matter deeply.



'Perhaps it's true that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house – the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture – must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for. Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story.'

Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*







Newspaper Baby

'I'm not sleeping in no dead person's bed. Can't I take mine with me?'

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Imtiaz clocked Delyse's deeply furrowed scowl. This was exactly the sort of 'double negative attitude' that Delyse was on a mission to coach Imtiaz out of. The closer the day came for Imtiaz's adoption, the more Delyse got on her case and the angrier Imtiaz blew. She would never understand why Delyse couldn't stop being a social worker to everyone else in the children's home and just look after her. *What else will Delyse have to do when she retires?*

'There's still time to change your mind,' Imtiaz pleaded. 'You said no one's forcing you to leave the country any more, so stay, and you and Merve can foster me! You're always saying how I should accept an apology – well, the government have said sorry about how they treated you, haven't they?'

'Immy.' Delyse shook her head, exasperated. 'Remember you promised not to keep on with this. We've made our decision.'

Delyse placed a comforting arm around Imtiaz's shoulder. 'Don't worry about the bed. I'm sure you'll be getting a new one. Just wait and see your beautiful new ship of a room.' Delyse winked at Imtiaz. 'And don't look at me like that. All will be revealed. You'll see! That top deck's beyond your wildest dreams, I promise.'

'Doubt it,' Imtiaz mumbled, pulling away from Delyse.

'I'm telling you, Immy, this is meant to be. I can't tell you how happy it makes me that I've been able to settle this adoption. When I think about how it's all fallen into place, it does feel like a little miracle. Me meeting Merve and discovering his family wanted to adopt. *And* them sharing the same surname as you! Like it was God's will!'

'Don't go bringing God into it! You said you called me that because you had a school friend with that surname. Just so happy it's all been so convenient. At least you get to wash your hands of me now, before you go sailing off into your Caribbean sunset!'

Delyse took hold of Imtiaz's flailing hands before she could whip herself up into more of a state. 'That's enough, Immy!'

Imtiaz caught the fire in Delyse's eyes and knew not to push any further.

It was no use anyway. Last year, when Delyse was arrested,

had changed everything. Detained for, as far as Imtiaz could understand, *nothing*, except for Delyse's parents not travelling with documents for her as a baby on the ship called *Windrush* like, half a century ago. It still didn't make any sense. But at least they had released Delyse quickly and given her the money that was called 'reparation' because it was supposed to repair the damage done for arresting her. When she'd heard about this, Imtiaz had got her hopes up and she'd sprung at Delyse and hugged her. 'So you don't have to go, then?' Great sobs had heaved out of Delyse as they'd held each other. It was the first time Imtiaz had ever seen Delyse cry like that, so Imtiaz had cried too and wished she could look after Delyse for the rest of her life, like Delyse had looked after her.

'No money could ever repair how I feel. This country doesn't feel like home any more,' Delyse had whispered when she'd finally calmed down.

Imtiaz knew in her heart there was no point arguing with Delyse. She supposed there was one advantage in Delyse hooking up with Merve. She'd learnt more about the Joseph family than anyone being adopted would normally know. Not that all the getting-to-know-you meetings had got any less awkward over time. Mostly Usha had just sat quietly while her mum and dad, Tanvi and Lem, banged on about how much Usha had always wanted a sister. Just a shame Usha herself couldn't even be bothered to look her straight in the eye, let alone attempt a smile.

'Every time you meet it'll get a bit easier between you,' Delyse constantly reassured Imtiaz. But it didn't. Maybe they would have had more of a chance to talk if they'd had somewhere chill to go, instead of having to compete with all the comings and goings on the ground floor of the house, the bit they called 'The Hearth'.

'What even is a hearth anyway?' asked Imtiaz.

Delyse's face softened. 'A kind of fireplace to gather around, and find a bit of warmth at. As you know, it's refugee people mostly. Good name for it, don't you think?'

Imtiaz shrugged. 'I didn't see no fire in there!'

'I didn't see *any* fire!' Delyse corrected.

'That's because there isn't one!' Imtiaz grinned and despite Delyse's nitpicking at the repeated double negative, her face broke into sunshine.

'Why couldn't I be in a family where I'm the only one who needs help?' Imtiaz complained.

'That's not like any kind of family I've ever heard of! They're a busy, caring crew, the Josephs, always helping people. I think you'll soon settle.'

'As long as I'm not just another of their charity cases! Maybe that's why Usha's so weird. She probably just wants her house to herself – and now she's got me to deal with.'

'She's shy and sad about her gran dying, that's all. Give Usha a chance. She's had a lot to deal with too.'

'All I'm saying is they'd better clear out all her granny's stuff.'

Delyse placed a finger over her own mouth – her signal for Imtiaz to choose her words more carefully.

'Anyhow. Weren't you supposed to be at their ashes sailing-ceremony thing?'

Delyse shook her head. 'I was invited but I said my goodbyes at the funeral and I've still got so much to organise before we go. I'm handing over to the new manager later. *You're* all sorted though!' Delyse scanned the bare, posterless walls of Imtiaz's room, settling on the suitcase and crate of belongings stacked and waiting to be picked up.

'I haven't got that much!' Imtiaz shrugged. Everything she owned could more or less be fitted into a case and a crate. Not exactly impressive for eleven years of growing up here.

'I'd better get on.' Delyse stood stiffly and reached up to the shelf above the bed.

Taking down a card, she waved it at Imtiaz, her face growing stern. 'Immy! You told me you'd sent this!'

Imtiaz shrugged. 'I was waiting for Usha to invite me to the funeral or at least this ashes-spreading ceremony. In any case, I couldn't work out what to say. Never even met Usha's gran. Anyway, isn't it too late to send now?'

Delyse thrust the card into Imtiaz's hand. 'Just write something nice.'

'Like what?'

'Tell her you're sorry for her loss and that you're looking forward to seeing her soon.'

Imtiaz puffed her cheeks and released a pent-up gush of air.

'You want to try out that lido, then write the card. We can post it on the way back and they'll get it after the ceremony.'

With a surly scowl, Imtiaz took the envelope from Delyse and pulled out the revolting card. One of the reasons why she hadn't been able to send it was just how gross it was, with its shiny lily on the cover and the no-sense message inside. 'It already says "sorry for your loss". What else do you want me to say?'

The staff-only phone in the office rang. Delyse wagged her finger at Imtiaz on the way out of the room. 'I mean it, Immy! No condolence card, no swim!' she cautioned, hurrying out along the corridor to the office.

I need that swim, thought Imtiaz. One thing she *was* looking forward to was seeing the lido at the end of Usha's road, where Tanvi, Usha's mum, said she could swim all year round if she was brave enough! Sighing at the card, she thought, *Not in a million years would I ever choose this for anyone I care about. But who* would *I care about enough to send one of these to?* She came to the conclusion that the only person she would ever be truly sorry about dying or going away was Delyse.

Sorry for your loss.

Eugh. What's that message even supposed to mean if you don't know the person you're writing to, or the person who's died? Imtiaz's pen hovered over the card. *It feels fake!*

She pictured the impossible-to-read face of Usha. At least in looks they could just about pass as siblings: same-ish height, similar rich brown skin tone, dark eyes and shiny black hair – Usha's a tangle of curls and Imtiaz's cut short at the nape to fit inside her swim cap. But in every other way . . . *Us two, sisters? No!*

Every time she thought up something, it sounded wrong. *How can it be so hard to write a few words?*

Swim, I need to swim. Just write anything to get Delyse off your back, Imtiaz told herself, still hesitating over what she should say.

I'm not sorry for Usha that her grandma died, I'm sorry for me! Sorry that Usha will be miserable. From what Delyse told her, Usha and her gran had been pretty much best friends. In a way she felt more sorry for Usha. Maybe Delyse was right and she would soon 'come out of her shell'! But even so, *I'm not pretending to be someone I'm not. I didn't get the name 'say-it-how-it-is Imtiaz' from nowhere*, she thought as she wrote:

Dear Usha,
I'm sorry about your gran dying.
See you soon,
Imtiaz

Licking the envelope left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Grabbing her swimming kit from the crate, she peered

through her doorway where she could still hear Delyse talking.

What am I supposed to do now, with everything packed away? Imtiaz wondered, idling over to her crate and taking out her 'life book', containing the cutting about her first days in the world. Though she'd memorised every word, reading it always brought tears.

'NEWSPAPER BABY'

SOCIAL WORKER FINDS NEWBORN IN LONDON FIELDS

Local resident and experienced social worker Delyse Lovelace was walking her new rescue dog in London Fields on Thursday evening when her dog, named Tug, drew her attention to a bin on the far side of the park. After several attempts to recall Tug, Ms Lovelace was forced to cross the park to pull her dog away from the debris.

'I thought it was a bit of chicken and chips he was scavenging around for,' Ms Lovelace explained. 'But when I got close, I realised he was gently nudging open a newspaper and to my horror a newborn baby rolled out on to the grass. I was in shock but I swaddled her in my coat and took her straight to the hospital.'

There is a police search for the mother. No note or identification has been found. The child is presently without a name.

'In all likelihood this was a hidden pregnancy,' Ms Lovelace said. 'I assume the mother could be very young, frightened and in need of medical assistance.'

Laying the clipping aside, Imtiaz took out the rolled-up newspaper and, out of habit, sniffed it, despite the fact that the paper her baby-self had been wrapped in had never smelt of anything but damp and a slight whiff of mould. A familiar heat of anger rose in her. *As if I was a piece of rubbish.* The paper had grown soft and smooth to the touch, like a worn blanket, from so many handlings. *What's the point of keeping this?* She had the urge to rip it up into tiny pieces. *I never want to see this again. Why did Delyse save me and look out for me for so long, just to abandon me? If she's going to make a fresh start, why shouldn't I?*

Imtiaz tore through to the office, where Delyse was *still* on the phone. Ignoring her whispered questions, Imtiaz held her article and newspaper blanket over the shredder that turned everything to spaghetti.

'Immy! Stop! What are you doing?' Delyse grabbed Imtiaz's shoulders, pulling her away from the shredder with such force that Imtiaz lost her balance and toppled on to the floor. 'Sorry! Immy, are you hurt? I didn't mean . . . What were you thinking? You can't destroy your past like that!' Delyse soothed, kneeling next to her.

Tears rolled unchecked down Imtiaz's cheeks. Taking the card out of her pocket, she flung it at Delyse. 'Here! It's a crap past! So why shouldn't I? What about *my* loss? Who's writing *me* a card to say sorry?'

While Delyse held Imtiaz in her arms, the pent-up feelings she had not known how to express opened like a dam, rushing out of her. 'You said that someone in the government shredded your parents' landing papers and now nothing can be repaired and it's too upsetting, so you've decided to make a new start. Well if you can go off with Merve and pretend you're just setting out on some sort of adventure, then why can't I shred everything sad and start again too? Why should anyone else read my story? It's literally rubbish.'

Imtiaz held the newspaper in her hands as the words shot out of her in wild sobs. She clenched her fists as if she was about to crumple it. 'What's the point of remembering?'

Slowly, softly, Delyse unravelled the scrumpled paper blanket and placed it over Imtiaz's shoulders.

'Because this contains one of the most precious little souls I've ever met.' Delyse swaddled Imtiaz in the flimsy paper as if it still contained the newborn baby she had found and named. Delyse's chest heaved up and down, struggling to control her emotion too as Imtiaz's tears darkened the paper. She kissed Imtiaz on the forehead so tenderly that it felt as if she was being touched by a feather.

'Immy, my little warrior miracle, you hold on to that fight in you.'

'Please take me with you?'

Delyse's heavy sigh spoke for her.

‘Then take this, so you won’t be able to forget me,’ Imtiaz said, thrusting her newspaper blanket at Delyse. ‘Don’t you get it? I’ll never be Immy to anyone except you!’