



ODD GIRL OUT



[illegible]

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David Fickling Books

*To my niece – the real OG Maaryah – and the daughter
I never had. Love you always, Khalamoni x*

Odd Girl Out
is a
DAVID FICKLING BOOK

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by
David Fickling Books,
31 Beaumont Street,
Oxford, OX1 2NP

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978-1-788453-39-4

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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DAVID FICKLING BOOKS Reg. No. 8340307

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.75/15.75 pt Sabon by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Chapter One

The plane makes its descent towards London Heathrow, splatters of rain decorating the windowpane. Everything is green, brown and grey, a world apart from the yellow desert I've left behind. I sneak a glance at my mum next to me. Her eyes are closed, but judging by the vein bulging on her forehead, she feels just as anxious as I do. I resist the urge to slip my hand into hers, like I used to do until I was far too old to be clutching onto my mum like she was my comfort blanket.

It feels weird to be coming here in September instead of June. The sky is greyer than it was the last time I was here, echoing my feelings. I've visited the UK with my mum every summer since I was born, escaping the blistering Dubai heat to spend three glorious months with my extended family in London. My dad could never get enough leave from work, so he'd join us for the last couple of weeks, and we'd go to theme parks, West End shows, football matches. I used to moan so much when he'd drag me to the Emirates stadium. As much as he tried to instil a love of football in me, I wasn't

interested in a bunch of sweaty men kicking a ball around a field.

Now, I'd do anything to go to a match with him. My heart constricts, as it always does when I think of my dad and my brand-new, broken life.

'Mum, we're here,' I whisper loudly after we've made a bumpy landing and the plane has ground to a halt. People have started getting up and are shrugging on their jackets, but her eyes remain firmly shut.

'Mum!' I implore, more urgently, as I have a vision of us being the last people on the plane, and the cabin crew having to carry Mum out on a stretcher. Her eyes open slowly, like it's a struggle to keep her eyelids apart, like it's a struggle to exist. My body slackens in relief.

'Sorry, jaan,' she says, her voice strained from too many hours of crying. 'Come on, let's go.'

London Heathrow is drab and dreary compared to the glitz and glam of Dubai International Airport, even more so than usual. Usually, I'm excited to be here. Usually, I've already switched to my UK eSIM, and as we queue at passport control, I start posting on Snapchat and text all my friends. Usually, I've got a big list of things I want to do while I'm here, starting with shopping on Oxford Street and analysing all the latest fashion trends.

Now, the unknown stretches out before me. I see the cracks I had previously glossed over: the worn carpets, the smelly toilets, the passport control people eyeing us suspiciously as they scan our British passports.

'*Boro Affa!* Maaryah! Over here!' Uncle Kamil, one of Mum's four brothers, calls out to us as we walk through

arrivals with our trolleys. My face breaks into my first smile in ages and I hurry over to him and bury myself in his arms. My mum's the eldest of seven, with four younger brothers and two younger sisters. Most of them live in North London with their families. 'Boro Affa' means 'eldest sister' in Sylheti, the dialect spoken in the region of Bangladesh we're from.

'All right, Kam?' Mum says, giving him a quick hug. He grabs my trolley containing whatever material pieces of my life I had been able to salvage within the luggage allowance – my favourite cold-weather-friendly clothes, a couple of books, framed photos – and Mum falls into step with him. I trail behind them, trying not to eavesdrop on their conversation. My uncle speaks so loudly that it's hard not to. I hear him say 'bastard' and 'that piece of shit', and I guess he's referring to my dad. My stomach churns and I try to swallow the lump that has permanently lodged itself into my throat.

'Maary-jaan! Come here my darling!' Nani cries as she throws open the front door of their Victorian terrace, grabbing me and pulling me right into her bosom. I hug my grandmother back, and before I can stop myself, I burst into tears. That sets her off, and the two of us stand in the doorway crying until she gently pulls away and reaches for my mum. Then Mum starts sniffing, and Nani whispers stuff in her ear. I take that as my cue to leave.

Hearing the commotion, my uncles and aunts gather in the hallway, followed by all my little cousins who are running, sliding and jumping down the stairs, before launching themselves at me, the only granddaughter on this side of the family. I trip over a scooter that's been discarded in

the hallway amongst the countless shoes, coats and brown Amazon boxes.

‘How are you coping? Are you OK?’ Aunty Ayesha asks me when I’ve been greeted by everyone and finally managed to go up to her room to change out of my usual travelling outfit of joggers and a hoodie and into my PJs.

Aunty Ayesha and Uncle Ish are the only unmarried ones and still live at home with my grandparents. Uncle Kamil lives here too, with his wife, Aunty Yasmin, and two little sons; Ilyas the tornado and baby Zayd. Also in the house today are Uncle Ridwaan who lives in Palmers Green with his wife, Aunty Basheerah, and their three kids, who are the least sociable of my cousins. I can hear them crying somewhere in the house. Then we’ve got my other aunt, who I call Khalamoni, her husband, Uncle Abdulla, and their two boys, Kareem and Yousef. The only ones who aren’t here today are Uncle Kaif, his pregnant wife, Aunty Amira, and their son Eesa, because they live in Singapore.

There’s always a LOT going on in big, fat Bengali family on my mum’s side, and I used to love the noise, the mess, the pandemonium. I used to love how every summer I managed to slot right in like a missing jigsaw piece. I used to find the confusion comforting. But now, the chaos is overwhelming, and all I want to do is curl up into a ball and hide away in my old bedroom, in my old house, in my old life.

‘Sort of,’ I reply, as once again, my eyes begin to prickle with tears. Crying, like hugging, is something I never did much of, pre-divorce. I guess I was lucky I didn’t have much to cry about back then. Now, anything seems to set me off, and it’s proper embarrassing.

‘I’m so sorry this has happened,’ Aunty Ayesha says, drawing me in for another cuddle.

‘Tell me about it,’ I reply, grateful for the opportunity to talk about it with her. ‘I keep thinking that they’ll patch things up. I mean, they’ve been together for seventeen years! How can they fall out of love like that? None of it makes sense to me. There must be other reasons, right? People with kids don’t just break up like that because they’ve “grown apart”.’

Aunt Ayesha looks away. ‘I don’t know,’ she says quietly. ‘Crappy things happen sometimes, even if it doesn’t make sense.’

‘For real.’

We fall silent as we both sit there on her bed, like we’ve done many times before. With only six years between us, we’ve always been more friends than aunt and niece. Today feels different, though. I don’t feel like watching Korean dramas with her or making funny Tiktoks. I want her to tell me that everything’s going to be OK, but she doesn’t. As she stares out of the bedroom window, I realize she looks as lost as I feel.

Dinner is part sombre, part raucous. The adults are trying not to say anything to upset Mum and me, and the kids are running riot. Ilyas climbs onto the kitchen island and jumps off onto the tiled floor yelling, ‘I can fly!’ There’s so much noise that it’s difficult to have a conversation, and I’m thankful for it. Talking to Aunt Ayesha is one thing, but I’m not ready to listen to how much the rest of the Choudhury clan hate my dad’s guts.

All around me, everyone is tucking into their food like they haven't eaten for days. I'm not surprised; Nani's food is banging and this is a family of foodies. The funny thing is, Mum and I are probably the only ones who *actually* haven't eaten properly in ages, but we're the ones who are pushing food around our plates.

I know I should eat. My mum is a crap cook, so who knows when I'll have a decent meal next. In Dubai, we had house help who did all that, and Mum never had to bother. But it's hard to enjoy food when your whole existence has been cut into two. And post-divorce isn't just about your parents having broken up; it's moving across the world and starting up a whole new life in a new country, new school, new friends, new house. It's saying goodbye to everything and everyone you once knew and feeling petrified that you won't be able to fit in to your new life. It's not knowing when you'll see your dad next, but feeling too afraid to mention him for fear of upsetting your mum and her whole extended family.

'Is that all you're having? Here, take some lamb,' Nani scolds, grabbing my plate and adding a ladleful of tender lamb curry onto a bed of buttery pilau rice. She's also made kebabs, tandoori chicken, dhal and a king prawn bhuna; all my mum's favourites.

'Sorry, Nani, I'm not that hungry these days,' I answer without thinking, and immediately regret it when I see the look she exchanges with my grandad. Mum doesn't clock any of it; not my eating habits, nor the fact that my jumper looks oversized because I've become that skinny, not even the way everyone is staring at her like they don't recognize

her. She barely notices anything any more. Her plate is piled with food, but most of it remains untouched.

‘Sabina, zoldi khao,’ Nana, my grandad, says in Bengali, telling my mum to eat up. I don’t think she even hears him.

Later, as they’re cleaning up, I overhear Aunt Ayesha, Khalamoni and Aunt Yasmin talking to each other in hushed voices about how awful we look.

‘Look at Boro Affa’s dark circles,’ Aunt Yasmin whispers. ‘She looks like she hasn’t slept in months.’

‘She hasn’t,’ Khalamoni replies darkly.

‘They’ve both lost so much weight as well,’ Aunt Ayesha adds from her position at the kitchen sink as she washes whatever didn’t fit in the dishwasher. ‘They look so terrible. All gaunt and lifeless.’

‘Do you blame them?’ Khalamoni says. ‘Look what they’ve been through, what he did to them.’

‘I know,’ Aunt Ayesha sighs. ‘I can’t believe he had us all fooled like that.’

‘Sociopath,’ Khalamoni adds, because she always has to have the last word.

Aunt Ayesha turns to grab a dirty bowl and spots me lurking in the doorway with baby Zayd’s milk bottle in my hand.

‘Oh, let me take that from you,’ she says brightly, like she hasn’t been talking about me and my parents behind my back. I hand it over wordlessly and go up to her room. All I want to do is climb into her bed and hide under the covers, but I pray my Salaatul Isha first – the night prayers.

As always, the slow, methodical movements and the rhythmic Qur’anic verses in Arabic calm my nerves, and when I’m finished and ready to go to bed, my head feels clearer.

Turning off the light, I get in and as I lie there in the darkness, smothered under the heavy blanket, the conversation I overheard in the kitchen plays over and over in my head. What did Khalamoni mean by ‘what he did to them’? ‘He’ is obviously my dad. But what did he do? They broke up. As much as I hate it, and despite it being quite uncommon in our culture, it still happens. He didn’t ‘do’ anything specific, right? It doesn’t make him a ‘sociopath’. And then there was Auntie Ayesha’s comment about him fooling everyone. It didn’t sound like a general comment about how he fooled them into thinking he’d be a part of this family forever.

But if there was more to the story, and Auntie Ayesha knew about it, surely she’d tell me? She’s one of my best friends. Withholding information about *my* family and *my* life would be a complete betrayal, and I can’t imagine her ever betraying me.

I take out my phone and look up the proper meaning of ‘sociopath’: *a person with a personality disorder manifesting itself in extreme antisocial attitudes and behaviour*. That does NOT sound anything like my dad. Everyone loves him. *Loved* him. Until the breakup, my grandparents thought that he was the best son-in-law in the world, despite them originally being against my mum marrying him.

I hear Auntie Ayesha crawl into bed at some point later that night, and I wonder if I should confront her. But the urgency has been replaced by exhaustion and disappointment, so I turn my back to her and pretend I’m asleep.