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Opening extract from

Falling

Written by

Sharon Doggar

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Prologue

I saw a picture once.

A picture of a deep blue-green tropical sea; a picture of where the land stopped and the sea began. Only the land didn't give up straight away; it kept on trying to surface, reappearing in little green islands, small stranded bumps in the sea. Like a necklace, a chain of deep-green pearls, each one separated by the blue, blue water.

I still think of that picture sometimes.

I wonder if that's what special moments in a lifetime are like – that they stand out in a sea of sea.

Or maybe it's what whole lifetimes are like. I know that's what Sammy might think, that the struggling green islands are like lifetimes, each one of them separate and all of them different, yet somehow still connected.

But me, I think the islands are like moments. Single moments in time, saved and held on to – just waiting to be put together to make sense, to make a story.

Like memories.

Or choices.

And then there are the decisions.

Each one can leave you in the sea, drowning; each one can connect you back to land.

They can change everything, or nothing.

Sometimes you have to hold on.

And sometimes you have to let go.

Sometimes you have to remember.

And sometimes you think you'll go crazy if you don't forget.

And then there's forgiveness. What's that about?

It's a word, that's all, and after everything that's happened to Sammy and me, I think

I know a better one. A word that comes out of all the moments we've had, together and alone.

Me and Sammy.

I think the word we're looking for here is understanding. But that's us. Me and Sammy.

Maybe you're different?

I know I was ...

PART ONE

Neesh

'Useless!' That's what the new teacher's eyes are saying to me. Saying it so loud that I can't hear the actual words coming out of his mouth. I mean, I can hear the words moving in my ears – but they aren't in tune with his lips somehow. It's like his mouth's moving faster than my ears or something. I try to blink the words straight.

Blink. Blink, blink.

And slowly the words come clear.

'Take your coat off.' That's what his words are saying. Their meaning lands in me, echoes.

Blink. Blink, blink.

'She's weird, sir, she don't never take it off.'

Yeah, that's right, I think, *listen to Gita.* But the teacher doesn't, he just goes right on like he's sure he knows best.

'I'm talking to *you*, Nushreela, not the rest of the class!' he says, and he bends down low towards me, trying to look into my eyes, to see me. I drop my head further down. Down and down, until all my eyes are filled with is the floor. A little, tiny, dirty square patch of it. *Why don't you know?* I'm thinking. *Everybody else knows. Didn't anyone tell you I don't talk? Stop making them all look at me.*

And then I see my speech therapist's face in the dirty patch of floor. 'Not *can't* speak,

technically she can,' she always says to anyone who asks. 'There's often an emotional element to becoming mute … a trauma, maybe …' I usually stop listening at this point. The colours above her head are as lifeless and bored as I am at having to make shapes with my mouth. *Why* I won't talk is what she never asks me, but it's what she wonders. Well, *sorry*, I think, but I thought you were the one who was meant to have the answers.

I shake her out of my head.

'Is that a no, then?' asks the teacher. I don't look at him. I put my hands over my knees, snuggle them deep into the warm silky pockets of my coat, hold on to it tight.

Cold.

I'm so cold.

I can't take my coat off, ever; it would be like taking off my skin.

Can't ever.

Blink. Blink, blink.

'Are you being deliberately difficult?' the teacher asks, and I steal a quick glance at his blue, blue eyes, over in a flash. I can see his confusion, it floats above his head. It's grey, grey and woollen, like the old-fashioned long socks Jammi wears to his private school. The new teacher doesn't know what to do with me.

Neither do I.

I drop my head even lower, so that my hair and dupatta (that's veil in your language) fall across my face, hiding me from his eyes. Perhaps if he can't see me he might go away.

'Really, don't worry about her, sir!' says Gita, but what she really means is *Look at me instead. Notice me*. Everyone wants to look at Gita. I dart a glance at her through my hair.

Dart. Blink, blink. Gita's gorgeous. Lips the colour of brinjal (that's aubergine) and eyes that glitter.

Not like me.

'It's just her thing, like, innit, sir,' she goes on, 'having her coat on. Going on at her about it's just cruel, like teasing an animal.'

Everyone laughs and I bite the inside of my lip hard. The blood tastes clean and salty, the pain of it is sudden and real like the insult. I'm not an animal.

I draw my coat even closer, hold it on tight. Beneath the warm black wool I'm beginning to sweat, armpits prickling, everyone's looking at me. No one can make me take it off. *He can't make me, can't make me take it off,* I whisper in my head.

Can he?

I'm frightened, though. What if he can? My finger pokes right through the lining of the coat. Oh no! I'll have to sew it up again.

'Can you take it off?' he asks.

Question: Can I take my coat off? Can I speak? Can I do anything right?

Answer: No.

The teacher doesn't sound angry, only polite and determined. I don't know what will happen next; this is new. Most of the time I just get thrown out of class. I can sit in the annexe where it's warm. I can read. Nobody asks me any questions, nobody sounds like they can even see me. I like it like that.

I like it.

Go-away-go-away-go-away, I think at him.

Question: If I think it hard enough, will he do it?

Go-away-away-away.

Answer: No.

I shake my head again but he's still here.

Blink. Blink, blink.

He's still standing here, looking at me, and the class begins to chant, 'Off, off, off, off!'

'That's enough!' he shouts.

Go away, go away, I can't see you, I think. But he only drops his own head lower, even closer to mine.

Oh no! My hair's all greasy-dirty-filthy-disgusting. Greasy-dirty-filthy-disgusting, like the floor I'm staring at. I want to reach up and cover my head, BUT I CAN'T, I'd have to let go of my coat – and then what would happen?

'You'll boil, Nushreela!' he says. 'Even the radiators are overheating!' But he's wrong, I'm cold. I'm always cold, even when I'm sweating I'm still freezing, like I'm wrapped in ice and packed at the bottom of the world where nothing can ever warm me.

Q: Is it a Paki thing, always being cold?

'Perhaps she's cold, sir!' someone says. 'And she's not being insolent, she can't talk!' His voice is sky blue and calming. His voice makes my heart jump and pound at the bars of my ribs.

His name is Sammy.

Let me out, let me out! my heart shouts at me, crashing against my bones.

Q: Is that why it's called a ribcage?

I close my eyes. I blink so fast I can't see at all any more. The world's a blur. I can't see Sammy's lovely long dark hair and puzzled face, staring at me. Can't see that thing in his eyes … can't see the shape of his body … or hear the sound of his singing … all the things that make me … that make me want to …

Blink. Blink, blink.

But it's no good blinking because I can see the whole of him so clearly inside my head. I can always see his face. When I first met him it was like I was meeting a picture that was already outlined against the backs of my eyes and just waiting for him to come along and fit into it. We've been friends forever, but if that's the case then …

Q: What is it that I feel inside me every time I look at Sammy?

A: Nothing, nothing, nothing. Don't look, Neesh, don't see.

Danger.

I shiver.

'Are you *really* cold?' asks the tall white teacher with his dark hair and blue eyes. I nod, and at long, long last, he sighs, stands up and walks away.

Given up at last. Jesus, Mary and Mohammed (peace be upon them), what took you so long?

I heave a sigh and sink back into my coat. I pull up my dupatta and cover my hair.

'Useless … hopeless …. can't do a thing with her.' That's what the teacher's back says to me, and the colours above his head change and turn in the air like clothes on a washing line. He's going further and further away from me. He's going so far away that perhaps he'll walk right through the wall. Yeah? That would be funny. What if he just walked right through the wall without stopping, where would he be then? Lost, that's where.

Lost.

Like me.

'OK everybody,' he says, 'excitement over! Carry on with your stories.'

I bend back over the clean white paper and begin to write. I always write the same

story, because it's what I've always seen inside me. I'll write it next week, and the week after as well. None of the teachers bother to stop me any more. It's like a dream, a film that's always running inside my head, only the weird thing is, I don't know if it's a beginning or an ending. I only know that it's always stuck in the same place. It goes like this …

I'm standing on something that moves beneath me, rocks me. Far in the distance on a shining lake, there's a boat. Only you can't really see the boat because it's so buried in flowers, so heavy with them that the whole thing's sinking, leaving only a flowery boat-shape, an echo of a boat, floating low in the water.

There's a man standing at the back of the boat with a pole. A stick man, with stick-thin arms, punting all the flowers slowly through the water.

And he's so far away that it looks like they're hardly moving.

Behind and above him the mountains make themselves out of the sky.

Below him the same mountains hang motionless in the clear water. Reflected, suspended upside down.

The whole world is pale. Pale-blue sky and snow-capped mountains.

The water takes on the colours of everything around it.

Only the man and the boat are bright, because the flowers are red and gold and orange.

And the man is a deep chestnut-brown.

They look like they're stuck on to the scene, like collage. And they cut the sky and lake in two, marking the difference between where sky starts and the earth ends.

The picture rocks against the backs of my eyes. I see it again and again, and however hard I try, I can't ever make it go backwards or forwards.

Sometimes I think if I can only describe each piece of it minutely, perfectly, then

maybe, maybe everything will change and it will move forward. Sometimes I imagine being on the boat myself. I imagine I can sink my arms into all those flowers, lie down in them, roll in them, throw them in the air and feel them land all over me then … and then …

Q: Then what?

A: Then the picture fades, and if I try too hard to make it move all I feel is that I'm falling, falling, and the next thing I know I've blacked out.

I write and write the words that show the picture in my head. And when I've finished I go right back to the beginning and start all over again.

'Hello!' says the teacher. 'Anybody home?' And I see his hand waving in front of my eyes, like he's rubbing the picture out. Everybody laughs, except me.

Except me and Sammy.

Q: Where does it come from, the picture? Why doesn't it ever fade, and what's it waiting for?

A: A shiver. I don't know the answer. I'm not sure I want to know, and then I think that maybe it's not just the picture that's stuck, it's me too.

Stuck in my life.

Stuck in my old coat.

Stuck in my house with my sicko brother and freaked-out mum, and I wish I was someone else, anyone else but me.

And then I hear Sammy begin to hum. He's sitting right behind me and humming under his breath, singing an old nonsense song that we made up years ago. We used to sing it to each other in silly accents to the tune of Dad's old Bollywood records.
'Ip-in-ee-pin-ah-terri-terri-sutta!' The sound of his voice holds me up, and I see us both the way we used to be when we were just kids.
We're six and we sing the nonsense words over and over – 'Ip-in-ee-pin-ah-terri-terri-sutta!' – until we're laughing so much we have to hold on to each other as we fall over.
Sometimes it feels like we've known each other for ever.