

Brixton

Now

They arrive at the house-warming party at 10 p.m. The Edwardian house sits squarely between Brixton and Herne Hill stations. Shirin Bayat does not particularly like going to Brixton because she feels complicit in the jarring, and ever-increasing, gentrification each time she is in the area. And that is likely because she is. She begrudgingly enjoys the overpriced coffee shops, with their excessive number of plants, millennial-pink sofas and rose-gold accents, spending money on various vegan dishes that even she can make at home for a fraction of the price. Every so often, to alleviate her guilt, she will go to the shops and restaurants that have been there long before the gentrification began, and she will buy something she might not even want. It never quite clears her conscience though.

There are clusters of people in the living room, some sitting on the three-seater sofa, others standing. The interior of the house could be sponsored by Ikea, the furniture white and familiar. There is a Malm dresser in the living room, and she is reminded of making said dresser many years ago and it eventually crumbling, the drawers breaking one by one. She remembers the many ways she tried to fix it because she

couldn't afford another one, until in a fit of frustration she threw the planks of wood down the chute outside her East London flat.

Millie leads Shirin straight to the living room, like she has been here before, and kisses her boyfriend Henry on the lips in greeting. Millie is wearing red lipstick, and he rubs his lips after they kiss, to remove the stain. Millie has been with Henry coming up for two years now. Shirin dislikes Henry, dislikes being in the same room as him, and tries to avoid all gatherings he attends. It is difficult to be around them because Henry critiques most of what Millie does, due to his own sad insecurities. He has an air about him as though he is better than his girlfriend, although Shirin is not sure where his inflated ego derives from. He is the type to go on Twitter and reply to women's tweets that what they're saying did not happen, with his profile picture as an anime character. He will encourage debates about race or sexism, playing 'devil's advocate', though she suspects he believes the racist, sexist side. He is not quite an online troll but almost, teetering on the edge of what is acceptable online, though Millie cannot see this side of him. She is, sadly, too far gone.

Henry went to the same university as Shirin, and her first memory of him was when he added her on Facebook during freshers' week. She later discovered he had added more than fifty girls from university whom he deemed attractive, as though he were Robert Pattinson – or some other universally attractive man – and had a chance at sleeping with all of them if he so pleased. He was not and did not. He is best described as akin to a mole. Shirin does not mean to be derogatory to

moles, but that it is the animal Henry looks most like. But her friend loves him, so that is that.

Millie returns to Shirin's side, looking off towards the connecting kitchen, and says, 'That's one of Dylan's housemates. I'll introduce you.' She lightly touches the top of Shirin's arm, before leading her towards the other side of the room.

Indeed, Shirin has gone to a house-warming party for people she does not even know. She found herself with nothing to do on a Friday night – an ever-increasing problem as she ages – and Millie reassured her that more was merrier, that it would be fun. The final push came when Millie added, 'You should have just stayed in Hull if you don't ever want to leave your flat.' Millie always knew the precise words to fire Shirin up and make her do something she didn't want to do – it was always like that at university, and Millie has only got better at it once her friend graduated and progressed in her career in public relations.

And that is how Shirin found herself here.

The man Shirin is being taken to meet has dark hair, short on the back and sides and long at the front. His shoulders are broad, his waist slender and he is tall. Very tall. It is curious that how much space one is able to take up is often seen as attractive in a man, but is seldom the case for women. She can only see him from the back, but he's wearing a black T-shirt in a soft jersey fabric.

'Kian, hey,' Millie says.

He turns around and then Shirin's breath catches. There is a painful feeling in her chest, an acute ache, from the surprise.

Sara Jafari

Millie had said that Henry's friend Dylan was moving into a flat in Brixton. She had said that he was moving in with three other boys. What she did not say, though, because of course she didn't know, was that Kian Rahimi went to Shirin's school and they have not spoken in ten years.

Someone I Used to Know

'Shirin,' Kian says, lips parted, his eyes squinting slightly, like he is wondering whether he is mistaken, whether it is really her. Shirin is also taken aback by the image of him before her. In her mind he is always sixteen, baby-faced but beautiful. His face has developed a sharpness to it that it didn't have back then – his jaw and cheekbones strong and well defined. It is the strangest sensation, to see someone you once knew very well as a teenager standing before you, matured, as though out of nowhere.

'Hi,' she eventually says. She has imagined this moment many times before and she always says something much grander than *hi*.

'You know each other?' Millie asks, looking from one to the other.

'Yeah, we went to school together,' Kian says. 'Back in Hull.'

Seeing Kian again after all these years makes Shirin regret coming here. Her gut, she knows, is usually right about these things, and she should have listened to it. Being so close to him now brings memories to the surface, up out of her belly, almost spilling out of her throat. Even him saying 'we' makes her heart thud wildly and pathetically.

‘Oh. Small world, I guess?’ Millie says, uninterested by this moment that is so monumental to Shirin. She tucks a blonde strand of her hair behind her ear, before continuing to say, ‘Well, I’m sure you have lots to chat about ...’

And Millie is gone, returning to Henry, and Shirin is left reeling, thinking: Please, for the love of God, don’t leave me alone with this person I used to know.

‘Well, hello,’ Kian says, beaming. It is an uncomplicated smile. The kind of smile Shirin cannot imagine having. She struggles to smile on cue, her face a permanent frown that she often tries, and fails, to soften. Like now, the tops of her lips are raised upwards, but the rest of her face is unmoved. The smile does not touch her eyes because, when she looks at Kian, she does not just see a person she cared so deeply for, she sees all of the shit from her childhood that she has worked so hard to leave behind.

‘Long time no see,’ she says, her voice cooler than she feels.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I came here with Millie. I didn’t know you lived here.’ She scratches her neck to have something to do with her hands, and to mask that they are shaking.

Kian tells her that he sometimes hangs out with Henry – because Henry is Dylan’s home-town friend – and that Dylan went to university with Kian. It is a too-coincidental and long-winded connection. What are the chances, she cannot help but think, that these two people from Hull have found themselves in a connecting friendship group ten years later? Isn’t that the whole point of moving away from your home town, so that things like this don’t happen?

'It's weird that we've not seen each other before, at parties and stuff, when I've come down to London,' he muses.

Due to her avoidance of Henry, it is not that weird. But the fact that Kian, of all people, is tenuously linked to her friendship group is. In the past, Shirin attempted to look Kian up on social media, curious to see what he was doing with his life. His Instagram, however, brandished no photos of him, instead showing landscapes lacking in filters so that they looked dull, or his paintings, which Shirin thought were impressive and experimental, almost dizzying if you looked at them for too long. She admired that he had continued with his art. She's realised how easy it is to lose sight of your passions, of who you were before adulthood kicked in.

'So, you've just moved here?' she asks.

'Yeah. I was living in Manchester before. You've been here a while though, right?'

She nods. 'I went to uni here, at Queen Mary's, and stayed since.' She pauses as though she is thinking. 'Where'd you go to uni again?' She knows already though, from her aforementioned stalking.

'Glasgow.'

She nods, then says, 'Right, nice,' a little too quickly. She did not pace her response correctly, and there is a short silence before she fills it by blurting, 'You've lost your accent?' It's not really a question, though she says it like it is.

He raises an eyebrow, laughs. 'I definitely haven't.' The side of his mouth twitches upwards as though he is deliberating about whether he will say what he wants to next. There is a glimmer in his dark eyes. 'Yours hasn't toned down, though, I see.'

Despite not living in Hull for eight years now, Shirin's accent has remained, just as strong as it was when she left. People she meets for the first time habitually comment on it, like it is a quirk of hers. Sometimes they do not understand her, sometimes it colours their perceptions of her – they see her as less intelligent because she has a soft drawl and elongates certain words. Kian's accent, by contrast, sounds neutral to Shirin, like it has been tempered through the years.

She narrows her eyes at him.

'It's a good thing,' Kian adds. 'It reminds me of home.'

She resists the strange urge to smile at this – the urge in general to pick up where they left off, which she is realising would be very easy to do. In her fantasies – or nightmares – of this moment, Kian is cold and bitter towards her. They argue. He is not friendly, and perhaps that is because it is harder to think of him as he was all those years ago. Perhaps she has needed him to be a villain to justify the things she said. Her gaze wanders past his shoulder, towards Millie's back as she leans into Henry, and other people Shirin does not know well, chatting together.

'What are you doing then? Did you get a job here or something?' she asks.

'I got a place to do an MFA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths.' His tone is marginally less confident and quieter when he says this. He clears his throat, covering his mouth with his fist.

Her gaze returns to his eyes and she cannot help the real smile then. 'That's amazing. Congratulations. I always knew you were talented.'

He looks away and presses his lips together. It is a somewhat embarrassed, uncertain expression. 'Thanks.' He then scrunches his nose, before adding, 'I know some people say Masters are pointless, but I think it'll be good for me. There's the potential to spend some time abroad, too, which would be sick – and it was partially funded.'

'I don't think it's pointless. It's your passion. It always has been.'

Kian's mouth is open, she thinks, to explain what he means, when Hana comes over, as though out of nowhere, sidling her way between them. She is wearing a black leather bustier and red flared trousers, her lips a wine-red to match her bottoms. Her skin is buttery smooth. Shirin has never seen Hana with a blemish, even in their late teens at university. Having witnessed Hana's skincare cabinet, though, she knows such faultless skin takes supreme effort. It somewhat softens the blow of how grey and lacklustre Shirin's own skin is, despite the various The Ordinary serums that she uses.

'I didn't know you were here yet,' Hana says to Shirin, almost accusatory.

'I just arrived.'

Hana looks at Kian pointedly, then back at Shirin, with an expression that reads, *What's going on here?* Shirin cannot help but feel a twitch of irrational irritation then, like Hana needs to know – or be involved in – every facet of her life.

'You said you couldn't come,' Shirin says.

Hana smiles, pleased with herself. Her sudden appearance is actually unsurprising, really. She likes to show up unannounced, declining invitations and then appearing suddenly.

At the start of their friendship Shirin found this energising and unexpected. Now, though, she perceives Hana's actions as indulgent, as though she always requires special attention, even at a party for people she barely knows. Shirin dislikes herself for thinking such things, now, about her best friend. She thinks there is an ugliness inside her sometimes, some kind of repressed anger that she takes out on other people in her mind.

'I live to surprise. You know me,' Hana says. She touches Shirin's hair gingerly. 'I like the colour. It's very 2015.' On a whim, the night before, Shirin dyed her hair a colour that Bleach London calls 'Awkward Peach'. Hana's words make her question her decision, given it is now 2018. She resists the urge to touch her very dry locks, which are coated in argan oil, in response. Her annoyance must show on her face because Hana backtracks and says, 'What I mean is it looks cool.'

The doorbell rings. Kian's eyes flick to Shirin's, hold hers for a moment, before looking back towards the door. 'I better get that,' he says, leaving them.

'So,' Hana begins once he has left. 'Aren't you happy to see me?'

Just looking at Hana, so immaculately put together, results in Shirin straightening out her geometric-patterned wrap dress, which by comparison feels frumpy – like Shirin is going to a garden party, and Hana to a club. Shirin used to dress edgy, though she'd never actually use the word *edgy*. She doesn't know when that changed. She tries not to compare herself to others, but often cannot help it. Especially when she gets the feeling her friend is also doing it to her, as she does now.

People Change

Hana perches herself on the armrest of the sofa and crosses one leg over the other. 'God, have you seen them? Could they get a room?' she says with derision.

Shirin turns to see that Henry and Millie are kissing. His arms are around her waist, and hers are wrapped around his neck. They are the same height, which makes the kissing appear more intimate.

She does not know what to say. Ordinarily she would join in, to appease Hana, but she is too wired, her heart beating too quickly. She feels a scary mix of wanting to take flight and freeze. Seeing Kian has made her feel so unsure of herself, unsure of anything. What are the chances of him being here, in her world, with her friends, after all this time? It's like she has reverted to being an unhappy teenager, and she needs to be alone to process it all. She knows that not even Hana, who she loves but who also sometimes annoys her, can assuage her anxiety right now. So she shrugs and says, 'I need to pee,' before leaving the room, allowing no time for her friend to reply.

She does a solitary tour of the house and finds herself in the kitchen, looking out onto the garden. People are smoking by the patio, and at the far end of the garden is a summerhouse. She opens her phone and sees that Uber has surge-charging and so she decides to stay.

Tonight is a balmy summer evening and the sky is black, pollution providing a mask over the night stars. She makes her way outside for some air. Voices from this party, and other people in other houses around Brixton having parties too, spill out into the gardens. Occasionally there are the

sirens of ambulances and police cars, and it is only now that Shirin is alone, willing her thoughts away from Kian, that she notices them.

Unthinkingly she finds herself by the summerhouse. Phoebe, her friend from back home, has one and it has always struck Shirin as a middle-class addition to a house. The glass doors are left slightly ajar, the inside unlit. As she enters, her phone's torch illuminates the interior of the room. She shines it around the walls to find a light switch, and the bulb gives off a soft, dim light. It takes a moment for her eyes to adjust to her surroundings.

Against the wall is a white corporate-looking desk with grey legs, and a clashing pine chair. The desk is bare, except for a Sports Direct mug containing pens and pencils. Boxes are stacked against the opposite wall. She peeks inside one of them. It contains various vinyl records, and atop the pile is Fiona Apple, *The Idler Wheel Is Wiser Than the Driver of the Screw and Whipping Cords Will Serve You More Than Ropes Will Ever Do*. She runs her hand over the sleeve. It is covered in a thin layer of dust, which she brushes off with her fingertips and instantly regrets, wiping her now-dirty hand on her dress. She remembers listening to 'Every Single Night' on repeat one summer when she was still at university, with an unrequited crush and feeling as though she might die from the lack of attention.

'That's her best album,' a voice says behind her.

She jumps, dropping it. The record lands clumsily back into the box. She turns and Kian is standing in the doorway. He has put on a navy denim jacket, and she immediately

thinks he is one of few people who wears double denim well. He looks as surprised to see her as she is to see him.

'Sorry,' she says. 'The door was open.'

'You not enjoying the party?'

'No, I am. I just needed a bit of a break.'

He nods like he understands. Stacks of painted canvas lean against the side of the desk.

'This is a really nice space.' She gestures around her.

'The landlord used to live here and was an author. This was her writing space,' he says.

'And you use it as a studio now?'

He nods. 'Dylan's parents bought him the house, and he's been quite sound in letting me use it for my work.'

'Of course they did,' she says, her voice thick with derision.

Kian's laugh is short and quick. She is struck by how different he seems now from the boy she used to skip class with, all those years ago. That boy was quiet, angry and wore his emotions plainly on his face. The Kian in front of her is so much more confident; he stands straight and laughs, so easy and carefree. Age has refined him, whereas she wonders if she has regressed. She had such passion back then, about everything. She gently chews her tongue to gain clarity, to remain firmly in the moment.

Above his desk is a painting of a woman, nude, lying on her front, her arm just covering her breasts, her hair in two space-buns. The subject is looking off into the distance, her eyes soft, as though they are about to flutter shut. Her expression is unguarded, like this is a shot between poses.

Her lips are parted, like she is about to breathe out a sigh. The brushstrokes are both soft and strong in places, the paint heavy, overlapping different shades to make her olive skin, which is textured and slightly pink on the tops of her cheeks. There are pops of colour in unexpected places, blended into natural tones. Surrounding her is a meadow, with bursts of pink, red and orange flowers in the background.

His style has evolved into Impressionism. There is an ethereal quality to these portraits, quite different from his older work on his Instagram, which is bolder and sharp in colour. When she goes to her friends' gallery launches she rarely sees art like this, though she is no real art enthusiast. Their works tends to be abstract or conceptual and she often does not get them, which makes her feel dense, because everyone around her seems to. It is not surprising, looking around now, that Kian is being funded to continue his work at one of the best art universities in the country. 'You're really good,' she says.

'Thanks.' His reply is quick. He does not take compliments well and visibly wants to move away from this topic of conversation. That this is still the case for him – that this hasn't changed over the years – is interesting to her.

'You're a proper artist now, you know, Kian. It's very cool – accept it.' She says this both because she means it and to make him more uncomfortable, so that they can both be uncomfortable, not just her.

He lets out a laugh again. He looks boyish, up close, more how she remembers him from school, his dark eyebrows softly framing his eyes. But now he has well-groomed facial hair, which shapes his face, creating more angles, making

his high cheekbones more pronounced. 'I'm a proper artist, am I?' He shakes his head. 'It feels pretentious to say it aloud, to be honest.'

'Well, you are one, I'm afraid. Pretentious or not.'

She gives him a close-lipped smile, thinking she should go soon, when he asks, 'What was up with that girl talking to you earlier?'

'What girl?'

'The one wearing a corset.'

'Oh,' she says. 'Hana?'

'Yeah, her. The way she talked to you ... I mean, I might be wrong, but I don't know – it was weird. Does she always do that?'

She waves her hand in an *it's nothing* way. 'That's just Hana, that's how she is with everyone when she's in a mood. She's not always like that.' This is true; sometimes Hana is considered and caring. Other times, when she is feeling insecure, she takes it out on the people closest to her. She has difficulty hiding the ugly parts of herself, but at least she is honest.

Kian does not look convinced, which makes Shirin defensive. It is one thing for her to have the occasional negative thought about Hana, but not other people, not when they don't know her like she does.

'Well, you look really good. I like your hair,' he says.

She is still annoyed at him, so she looks at him blankly, even though his face is colouring ever so slightly. He does not backtrack, though, as she expects him to, as she would have done in his position.

In the end she shrugs, despite her now-quickenning heart, which she wishes would shut up and get a life. 'I don't really take notice of what Hana says. I know she doesn't mean it anyway,' she says. The first part of what she says is a lie, but one she wants to be true. Perhaps if she says it enough times it will be. 'You should probably get back to the party. People will be wondering where you are.'

'Is it bad that I don't want to?' He is looking at his hands now, twirling the plain silver band on his right ring-finger.

It is rare to see men wearing jewellery. She is reminded of summers spent in Iran, with her Maman Bozorg taking her to jewellery shops and haggling with vendors to buy her gold. It is something that in England appears extravagant. But in her motherland, jewellery is an investment, like putting your money in stocks. Shirin keeps her jewellery in a box underneath her underwear drawer: thousands of pounds worth in her shabby bedroom. Today she is wearing a gold chain, which is textured like rope and shimmers in the light. Though it is 18-carat gold, it is such a bright gold it appears fake. Her Baba Bozorg gave it to her before he passed away.

'Why? Everyone is here for you,' she says. She understands why she might not want to return, but not Kian, whose party it is.

'It's a bit much in there.' He walks over to the desk, opens the drawer and retrieves a bottle of whisky. He smiles. 'You fancy it?'

The corners of her lips move downwards. 'Probably not.'

'See, you might have clung to the accent, but you've lost your Northern roots,' he jokes, raising one eyebrow.

'I'm trying not to drink,' she says, before pressing her palms against the wall.

'Oh,' he says, no doubt feeling like a dick and that maybe she's an alcoholic. Or that she's practising her religion – their religion. He is not, and she is not. She is on new antidepressants that do not mix well with alcohol.

'I'm just ... I'm trying to be good,' she says, not wanting to go into it.

He puts the bottle back in the drawer.

'Well, sit with me for a bit then?' he says. His hazel eyes are wide and hopeful, and she thinks she will disappoint him, but what comes out of her mouth is, 'Alright then.'

Later they are seated on the floor, their backs against the only wall that is clear of furniture. His shoulder is touching hers and she is acutely aware of it there. Fiona Apple is playing on his record player. They selected *Tidal* from his stack, and 'Criminal' plays now. Her voice is warm, the instrumentals both fuzzy and deliberate. They talk about music and Kian speaks about his favourite artists – so many that Shirin jokes they cannot all be his favourite, that you cannot have that many favourites or else the word is redundant; you must just like them, she says. He disagrees and is almost bashful as he tries to defend his point. He reminds her of a puppy in his enthusiasm now; it is an endearing, familiar quality.

And yet. Being next to Kian brings back long-buried memories. She is pushing them down, biting the inside of her mouth, to focus on that acute pain instead. It almost works, though it is like putting your hand over a leaking tap: small

forgotten moments are at risk of escaping like trickling water, and there is only so long she can hold it for.

'Why do you have vinyl anyway?' she asks. Her voice is light and she surprises herself by how good a façade she can put on around people; how what she is thinking is often so different from what comes out of her mouth.

'Why not? It sounds better, doesn't it?'

'It's different,' she muses. 'Feels like more of an experience.'

He smiles at her. 'Exactly.' He leans over her to turn the volume up. They shut their eyes and sway slightly to the chorus, to the rises in Fiona Apple's singing. Shirin opens her eyes and watches Kian. His eyes are still shut, and he has a flicker of a smile on his lips. His head is bent back, and she thinks he is a man now; the years have made him at ease with himself, though there are glimmers of who he was when she knew him. She tries to erase such thoughts from her mind at the same time the song finishes. His eyes open and she looks away quickly. He turns the volume down.

'How long has it been since we last saw each other?' he asks.

Somewhere in the recesses of her brain she knew this would come up, that it was between them, hanging in the air, cramping the space in the summerhouse.

'I don't know,' she lies. 'It was just before we went into college, so I guess ten years, maybe?'

She is reminded of the days wearing polyester trousers that chafed, stiff white polo shirts and shiny black sweatshirts. Of being seated boy, girl, boy, girl in every class and of all the boys in her year being knobheads, calling her various names,

all nasty with little consequence. Ten years have passed. So much time – and yet she feels herself being pulled back there so viscerally.

‘Wow,’ he says, and then turns to smile at her. It is a sad smile. ‘What have you been doing with yourself then? You got out, like you always wanted to.’

Her throat is dry, but she gulps anyway. ‘I work in publishing now.’

His expression changes at this; the slight sadness in his eyes is taken away and they are bright again, happy for her. He congratulates her on getting her dream job, on living the life she always said she wanted. ‘Not that I ever doubted you would. You were always determined.’

‘I’m assuming you did study Art at A-level then, in the end?’

He nods. ‘I did it at uni too.’

‘Did you? I don’t know how you wangled that with your parents, but I’m very glad you did. I was being serious when I said you’re very talented, Kian. Obviously.’

‘I wouldn’t have had the confidence to do it if it wasn’t for you, you know.’ His voice is quiet and his words make her feel very warm.

They are skirting around the obvious – around everything that is unsaid between them – and she is not sure what is worse: this feeling of being on edge in case it comes up, or just getting it over with. Both are unappealing. She is looking at the desk drawer, where the whisky is, wondering if she should have accepted his offer. This conversation would be easier if she had. She imagines pouring a shot into the bottle’s cap, bringing it to her lips,

the icy liquid spilling onto her dress, ever so slightly. She can taste it, sharp, warm, searing, burning her throat, warming her belly.

Memories of them being called in by their head teacher, of their parents getting involved, of cold words exchanged in the heat of the moment. Everything, and then nothing.

He leans his head back against the wall, his profile appealing, the slight bump on the arch of his nose familiar to her. His complexion is darker than hers, likely because his family are from a different part of Iran than hers.

'It's weird how we were the only non-white people in our year,' he says. 'I've been thinking about that more lately, how messed up that was. For us, anyway.' He shakes his head. He is giving her an opening. But it is okay for him, she thinks, he has had something to drink, whereas she is sober. And she talks about her race enough at work; she is part of too many organisations – labelled 'BAME' or 'POC' or 'under-represented', everything other than Iranian – and she doesn't want to do it now, not even with Kian. Especially not with Kian. She also doesn't want to leave. She wants to stay right here next to him.

She weakly acknowledges what he's said, murmuring something like, 'Yeah, it is weird.'

'I was sorry to hear about your parents, by the way,' he says. There is a slight frown on his face, and his eyebrows draw together once more, in concern or pity. He is so bold, she thinks, to bypass small talk and reach into her, bringing out all the things she would rather not talk about, things she doesn't even speak about with Hana, not really.

'It's a good thing, you don't have to say you're sorry.' Their separation was a long time coming. Her parents always fought – proper shouting matches and, growing up, she would put her headphones in, crank the volume as loud as it would go and stay in her bedroom until it was over. Often, then, she would wish they had left her with her grandparents in Tehran. She wonders if her life would have been simpler, if they had. Maybe she would have felt what it was like to be loved, rather than feeling like a burden her parents were obliged to love.

She wants to ask Kian about his family, about his brother and how he's doing now, but she hasn't the words to broach this subject after so long. She is not as bold as he is.

There is silence, in which they can only hear their breaths. They look at each other and it is like they are speaking without words. She is thinking she wants to kiss him, and she knows he is thinking he would like to kiss her. Like magnets, they move closer unthinkingly and they are soon inches from each other. She can feel his warm breath against her face now. A long-forgotten flutter in her stomach returning. It is so long forgotten that she wants to run away from it, to prevent any buried feelings from the past rising to the surface. Her eyes move from his hazel eyes to his full lips, which are parted.

'Maybe he's in here,' a posh voice outside says.

'Imagine if he's in there, painting at his own party,' another male voice says.

There is laughter.

It is the saving grace she didn't know she needed until it arrived. She moves away and stands up, smoothing her dress down. 'I best be going anyway,' she says quickly, slinging her bag onto her back.

He looks down for a moment, then up again, and there is something in his eyes she cannot quite describe but knows very well. It reminds her of the old Kian, the Kian from 2008 who got into so much trouble for her and who she barely even thanked.

'Right, of course. It was nice to see you, Shirin. Take care.'
'Bye, Kian.'

A Sentence

Then

Kian Rahimi was fifteen years old when he learnt how one moment can change a person's life for ever.

For the longest time he had wanted nothing more than to be like his older brother, Mehdi. He had always looked up to him. Two years his senior, Mehdi was brave in a way Kian never could be. He stood up for what he believed in, had the kind of charisma that is rare – so much so that everyone who knew him wanted to be close to him, so that Mehdi could rub some of his charm onto them and maybe they'd feel lighter, less restricted by their own self-doubt.

It was on the ride home from court, their dad silent in the driver's seat, his hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles were white, their mum crying silent tears as she looked out of the window, that Kian realised he didn't want to be like Mehdi any more. That much confidence – such an abundance of it, at such a young age, as a brown boy in a white city – meant trouble.

He did not want to go to prison, like his brother.

It started small. Sneaking out of the house in the early hours, taking Mum's car (never Dad's) even though he was underage, or smoking weed at the back of school at lunch.

It wasn't any of these things that got him sent away. Comparatively they were minor, though they added up. Soon the police knew Mehdi Rahimi, he was a recognised name, a notorious troublemaker. No one ever asked *why* he wanted to make trouble though. Why *anyone* would want to make trouble.

People are not born inherently bad or rebellious. It comes from somewhere. Kian still wonders, sometimes, whether he could have had the power to stop what happened to Mehdi all those years ago.

Back then, they lived in Kirk Ella, on the wealthier side of Hull, East Yorkshire. Their driveway could fit four cars if they wanted. Their house was detached, three-storey. They were new-money, that much was clear to everyone. They stood out on their street. His dad's impractical convertible sat out front, barely used. It was like his dad forgot they lived in England, in the North, and that the good weather only lasted four months of the year if they were lucky. 'This country,' his parents would begin, 'it's nothing like back home. Always rain, rain, rain.' Kian often wanted to retort, *Well, why did you move us here?* But he never did.

Every Sunday when he played footie with his friends it would pour down and they would play anyway, their feet sliding against the mud. He longed for the sun on his face, felt his mood perceptively lift when it did. He wondered if this longing, this need for sun, was in his blood, and whether his body knew he wasn't from England, not really, not biologically. That Iran, with its scorching summers, was the climate that

his physiology was accustomed to – even though he had only been there a handful of times and was not fluent in his own language.

His dad pulled into their drive that day and they got out of the car. Betty, their opposite neighbour, gave them a sad nod as they returned as a three, and not a four.

His mum, who was often so chatty, always luring her sons into the living room to watch TV and spend quality time with her, said nothing the whole car journey. She went directly to her bedroom and shut the door with a barely audible click.

‘I’m going for a drive,’ his dad said, picking up the key to his convertible from the side table by the door.

‘Now?’ Kian said. ‘Mum’s upset.’

His dad looked at him, sharp-eyed, raising a furry eyebrow. ‘We’re all upset.’

‘Can I come?’ As he said the words he knew they were wrong. But he didn’t want to be alone in this big house, not when Mehdi wasn’t in it and his mum was upset.

His dad shook his head and left. He didn’t even bother to shut the front door properly; it was left ajar.

Two years in prison.

Mehdi’s face had crumpled at the news. His usually smooth face, quietly confident, broken.

‘The sentence can be halved with good behaviour,’ their lawyer told them afterwards. ‘So one year, really. I know it’s not what we wanted, but it could have been much worse.’

Kian imagined his brother in prison, as it’s portrayed on TV, being forced into a gang, or beaten up in the showers or

something. He imagined Mehdi lonely, wanting his family. He felt his eyes prickling, so he slapped himself hard across the face and focused on that pain instead. He tried to think of anything other than his brother being incarcerated for one whole year.

Book Launch

Now

They are handed lukewarm wine in small paper cups. Shirin requests Shloer. It is sickly sweet but mostly resembles Prosecco, which is what she really wants. The room is buzzing with chatter and subdued laughter, and people are spilling out onto the pavement outside. It is a July evening and everyone is clinging to summer, to the light and sun and warmth, to the jubilation of it all, which they will inevitably long for again, come winter. It has been five days since Shirin saw Kian.

Hana guides Shirin now through the crowd to Abigail Underwood. Shirin and Hana were friends with Abigail at university but, since they graduated, slowly they grew apart, as many people do. They are now more like acquaintances who see each other at events, and who like each other's Instagram pictures. They go over to Abigail to congratulate her on the release of her debut novel.

'It's such a gorgeous book,' Hana says to Abigail, clutching said novel, *My Corner Shop*, as though it is something very dear to her. Ten minutes earlier both Shirin and Hana had complained that it *is* spendy at £17.99, and they had wondered whether they could get away with not buying one, whether Abigail would notice and be offended. In the end it was the

guilt that they should support their peers, and small businesses – like this independent bookshop in Peckham – that propelled them to purchase a copy each.

‘Thank you,’ Abigail says. Her eyes are bright and her movements skittish. Despite these telltale signs of nerves, she puts both her arms around Hana and Shirin and says something patronising like, ‘We’re all doing so well since uni. I’m so proud of us.’

Shirin and Hana look past Abigail’s shoulder to each other and exchange A Look. They ask Abigail to sign their books, which she does, writing a different inspirational message in each one. In Shirin’s she says, *I hope this encourages you to follow your dreams*. It is mildly insulting because she *is* following her dreams and believes herself successful in such aims.

People are hovering around Abigail to speak to her, so Hana says she is going to have a fag, and Shirin keenly follows. Outside the air is cool, with a welcome breeze. They stand by the side of the shop, in the small outdoor seating area. Shirin is wearing a pink midi dress and mules. While she enjoys her outfit, she cannot escape the fact that her sense of fashion is influenced by her colleagues at Hoffman Books. They all wear mules in the summer and thick gold jewellery, as she is tonight. Following Hana’s previous comments, she washed out the peach colour in her hair. It is now bleach-blonde, cut into a long bob, and she is in desperate need of a root-bleach, with her dark roots peeking through. She has pinned her fringe away from her face with gold hair-clips and is in two minds about cutting her fringe back shorter or

letting it grow. It is a constant battle every six months, as she inevitably succumbs to the curious lure of the full fringe.

Hana is wearing a kimono crop top and high-waisted black trousers. A thin strip of her stomach is showing and the skin there is smooth and tan. She customised the top herself and makes a point of telling people it's okay when she does it, because she's half Japanese. No one ever asks, but it is information she is keen to share, presumably to shame others for appropriating her culture.

Shirin has been friends with Hana since their first year at university. They met at the student union. Hana was sitting alone at a picnic table in the smoking area, her long dark hair partially covering her face. She looked like a goth, and Shirin had thought that was a cool, admirable look. In fact she still thinks that, though Hana no longer dresses as a goth. Shirin asked if she and the two people she was with could sit there for a bit. Hana let them, and an hour later Shirin's hall-mates had left to dance, while Hana and Shirin were embroiled in conversation about some celebrity – likely Justin, and whether he was back together with Selena. It turned out Hana wasn't at Queen Mary's, but Central Saint Martins. She'd come to the student union with her friend, who did go there. Said friend had got with someone, leaving Hana behind. Shirin thinks it was fate that brought them together. That if Hana's friend hadn't got with someone that night, so much of their lives would be different. For their three years at university they were a duo, they went to every party, every event, together. They were inseparable.

Hana arrived in Shirin's life when she needed her most. When Shirin and Kian had stopped talking, she'd acutely

realised how much she had been holding her breath around her home-town friends, that there were certain subjects she did not broach because it would be uncomfortable, and potentially painful. With Hana it was never like that. Though, despite her early realisation that with Hana she could speak unrestrained and be truly accepted, Shirin did not tell her about the things that happened to her during her school days. In fact, she hasn't told anyone she's met in adulthood about that time, adopting the approach that if you don't speak about something, it never happened.

There are clusters of people around them now, making connections and introductions. Shirin and Hana are not included in this. They lean against the shop window, and Hana lights up. 'I can't believe Abigail wrote a book,' Hana says. 'Who has the time for that?'

Shirin looks at the inside cover, at the blurb there. The *Guardian* has praised it as being a 'Superb future classic', and the *Independent* as 'A shrewd look at being working-class today ... a breathtaking debut.' Shirin reads this aloud, to annoy Hana.

'Is she really working-class, though?' Hana asks. She is not quiet when she says this, and Shirin tells her to *shh*. 'At uni she was all about wearing vintage Burberry that was her mum's, or that Prada backpack that she says she got cheap, but how cheap can a Prada backpack really be?'

'You can wear designer clothes and be working-class,' Shirin says.

Hana turns to her, blows a puff of smoke out of the right corner of her mouth, away from Shirin. 'That makes no sense.'

'It's not black and white,' Shirin says, though she does not quite know the parameters. She does know that what Hana is saying is likely incorrect, with envy clouding her words.

'Maybe I should write a book,' Hana muses. 'About all the fuckboys I've met. I can set it in Japan. That'd get publishers excited, right?'

Shirin snorts. 'Yeah, right. Since when did you want to write a book, anyway?' Hana has always wanted to be a stylist. She studied Fashion Communication at Central Saint Martins, though partway through her course she came to the realisation that she didn't want to be a journalist. She would put off writing essays until the night before, eventually producing something quick and scrappy. She left university with a 2.2, with minimal effort. She is intelligent, but refuses to put work into things she does not care about, which Shirin thinks might be smarter than people who put too much of their time into things that add little joy or value to their lives.

'Well, I have a lot to say,' Hana retorts. Her face is tight now. Shirin does not doubt that Hana has enough stories to fill a novel. Despite them being close friends for so many years and divulging everything about themselves to each other, there are still things Shirin doesn't know about Hana. She has never been to her family house, where she currently lives, in Woolwich – a temporary measure until she finds full-time work. Hana says her family are weird about people visiting. Shirin has never questioned internally what that means, let alone out loud.

'You could write a really great book,' Shirin soothes. 'A novel for the millennial times.' She moves her hand ahead of